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Photos Courtesy of Author

Lure *of the* Lever



It was 1883, seven years after gold greed in the Black Hills sent Custer to the Little Bighorn, and Wild Bill Hickok played his last card game in Deadwood. A young New Yorker born into money made his way to Dakota Territory. Theodore Roosevelt's enthusiasm and grit would stand in for weak eyesight and physique; but the West was still wild. The Earps and Clantons nursed grudges from their brawl at the OK Corral. Geronimo pillaged unchecked. John M. Browning, 28, had yet to build a repeating rifle.

In dress that by his own later admission made him out "a regular cowboy dandy," TR marveled at the country and its creatures, at the ways of men who carved a living from open range. He killed a bison with an 1874 Sharps in .45-90. Before returning East, he invested in the Maltese Cross Ranch.

February 1884 tested Roosevelt. Two days after giving birth to a daughter, his wife Alice died of Bright's disease. The same day, typhoid took his mother. TR boarded a westbound train, reaching the Maltese Cross four days later. Keen to work his way to sunnier times, TR added to his Dakota stake with the Elkhorn Ranch across the Little Missouri. His energy earned him the respect of his cowhands.

Winchester's 1892 (top) and Marlin's solid-top 1894 were both superb short-action lever rifles..

*Young Roosevelt heard the call.
Shove iron in your scabbard,
Pilgrim! And smug that cinch!*

Versatile, handy and rugged, Winchester's 1894 would become the best-selling lever rifle ever.

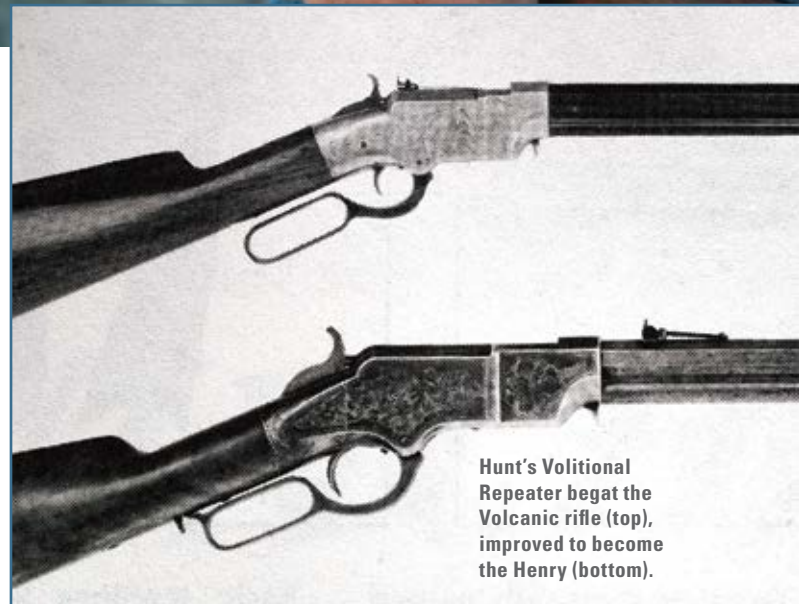
In 1886 a blizzard of cataclysmic scale swept the northern prairie, claiming by some estimates 90 percent of its livestock. It finished many cattlemen when open-range ranching was already imperiled by fences and feedlots. The frontier that had drawn Roosevelt yielded him back to the bustle of New York.

He would return often, to hunt. "The Winchester, stocked and sighted to suit myself, is by all odds the best weapon I ever had, and I now use it almost exclusively," he would write, "having killed every kind of game with it... [It] is deadly, accurate and handy...stands very rough usage and is unapproachable for the rapidity of its fire."

By the time Roosevelt had written 39 books—six on hunting—"Winchester" was shorthand for a lever-action rifle. From the Model 1866 that first bore the Winchester name, to the 1895 that accompanied TR and his son Kermit on safari, lever rifles defined the brand that also applied to many other firearms.

The lineage dates to 1848, a decade before TR's birth. Stephen Taylor had patented a hollow-base bullet, powder inside ignited by an external cap. New York inventor Walter Hunt followed with a similar "Rocket Ball." What distinguished Hunt's rifle was a pillbox device that advanced metallic primers. A ring lever made for quick cycling; but the mechanism was prone to malfunction. Lacking funds to refine or promote his "Volitional Repeater," Hunt sold patent rights to fellow New Yorker George Arrowsmith, who hired talented young engineer Lewis Jennings to improve the rifle.

In 1849 Arrowsmith peddled the Hunt rifle, with Jennings' patents, for \$100,000 to hardware and railroad investor Courtland Palmer. Palmer engaged Horace Smith and Daniel Wesson to develop for it a metallic cartridge. Smith and Wesson gave the Rocket Ball a copper base with internal fulminate priming. In 1854, Palmer committed \$10,000 toward a part-



Hunt's Volitional Repeater begat the Volcanic rifle (top), improved to become the Henry (bottom).

nership with his employees.

A year later, 40 investors bought out Smith, Wesson and Palmer to form the Volcanic Repeating Arms Company. The group's Oliver Winchester became company director and moved Volcanic to New Haven, Connecticut. When sluggish sales sent the firm into receivership in 1857, Winchester bought all assets for \$40,000, reorganized them as the New Haven Arms Company and hired Benjamin Tyler Henry. In 1860 Henry

received a patent for a repeating rifle in .44 rimfire.

"...Where is the military genius [to] modify the science of war as to best develop the capacities of this terrible engine—the exclusive use of which would enable any government... to rule the world?" So Oliver Winchester urged the army to adopt the 15-shot Henry rifle. Few were issued. But the Henry would become, to Confederates, "that damn Yankee rifle you loaded on Sunday and fired all week."

The brass-frame Henry would spawn Winchester's Model 1866, with receiver-side loading gate and wooden forend. It was shackled by the Henry's anemic .44 rimfire cartridge, whose 28 grains of black powder nudged a 216-grain bullet along at 1,025 fps. The 1866's successor, the Model 1873, chambered the

.44-40, or .44 WCF, Winchester's first centerfire cartridge. Its 40-grain charge of black powder drove a 200-grain bullet at nearly 1,200 fps. When Winchester '73s sold to the walls, Colt chambered its single-action revolver in .44-40. Beginning in 1878, shooters could use one load for rifle and pistol! Winchester and Colt reaped huge profits. Popular on both sides of the law and in Indian country, the .44-40 was said by century's end to have claimed more lives, human and animal, than any other cartridge.

While well-tended Winchesters were reliable, neglect could cause malfunctions. New Hampshire native William Wright had gone west in 1883, honing his woodsman's skills in the northern Rockies, where he later guided hunters. His study of grizzlies would culminate in a book in 1909. But his first grizzly kill was almost his last.

Hunting elk along an alpine creek one evening, he was surprised by a bear that lumbered by at 40 steps. He let fly. But the beast didn't fall; it charged. His rifle's extractor failed. Wright leaped into the freezing creek, submerging to his chin under the bank's lip. When at last bone-biting chill

drove him ashore, he crawled to his rifle and pried the spent .44 case free. The bear lay dead 20 feet away.

Winchester's Model 1876 shared features of the 1873, but its big action cycled the .45-75 WCF. By all accounts, it was Roosevelt's first Winchester, bought when he was 22. A rifle enthusiast, TR had the means to indulge his tastes. He liked figured, checkered walnut and engraved, case-colored receivers, half-octagonal barrels and half-magazines, shotgun butts and, for his small hands, pistol-grip wrists. His '76 had a crescent cheek-piece and Freund sights. It was embellished by famed engraver John Ulrich.

"I don't know how to shoot well, but I know how to shoot often!" Roosevelt made no pretense; he needed eyeglasses and liked lever rifles largely because they could be cycled from the shoulder!

Winchester's Model 1876 lasted but a decade. The action was heavy but too weak for the potent cartridges offered in single-shots like Remington's Rolling Block and the 1874 Sharps. When company president Thomas Bennett saw a used rifle built by an obscure maker in Utah, he sensed opportunity. The six-day train trip brought him to "the biggest gun shop between Omaha and the Pacific"—staffed by four brothers barely out of their teens! Undeterred, Bennett wanted all rights to the rifle.

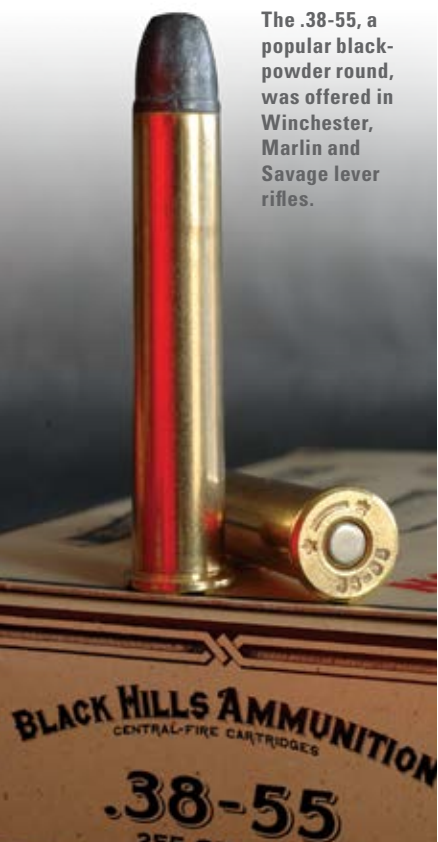
"Ten thousand dollars," said John Browning. A fortune in 1883. Without blinking Bennett offered eight. So began a 17-year relationship that would give Winchester more than 40 firearm designs, 11 from 1884 to 1886! Even before the company produced Browning's single-shot as its Model 1885, Bennett had in mind a lever-action to replace the '76. Browning delivered

one with the 1885's vertically sliding lugs. As the ink dried on John's \$50,000 check, Bennett offered him \$10,000 for a short-action version "if I get it in three months." Browning wanted \$20,000. "But you'll have it in 30 days or it's free." He delivered. Winchester bought every design Browning drew up, even those it shelved, to keep his genius in-house.

In .44-40, .38-40, .32-20 and .25-20, the Model 1892 held up to 17 rounds and weighed as little as 5½ pounds. It was wildly popular. More than a million would ship before the '92's last listing in 1941. The Model 1894 followed. It chambered mid-length cartridges, notably the .30 WCF or .30-30, our first smokeless hunting cartridge. The 1894 and 94 in various guises stayed in production until March, 2006, when the New Haven plant closed. Reintroduced, the 94 remains the most popular lever rifle ever!

Theodore Roosevelt used a Model 1894 in .30-30 on western hunts, and kept "a little .30" with a Maxim silencer to shoot pests at his Sagamore Hill home. He also sent a 94 to Holt Collier, born a slave. Collier had distinguished himself as the only black soldier from Mississippi in the Confederate Army. He first saw action at age 14 and fought in several campaigns. After the war he worked as a hunter and a dog handler. On a 1902 hunt conducted for Roosevelt, Collier roped a bear that had sought refuge in a lake. He drew the bear to shore so TR could shoot it. Roosevelt refused. In Cliff Berryman's Washington Post cartoon, the animal became "Teddy's bear." Teddy bears resulted.

Redemption came five years later in Louisiana's canebrakes, when Collier handled the hounds on another hunt for TR. "Mr. Clive," Collier urged his boss, "you take the Cunnel and bum around with



The .38-55, a popular black-powder round, was offered in Winchester, Marlin and Savage lever rifles.



Winchester's president Thomas Bennett paid John Browning \$50,000 to develop its Model 1886.

him in the woods like you an' me always does, an' don't put him on no stand. He ain't no baby." Roosevelt surely appreciated that endorsement! The hunt gave him what would be his last bear, with a 20-yard shot. The .30-30 TR sent Collier in thanks was by one account a "near-duplicate" of the rifle he used, albeit the same reporter wrote the kill was from a .45-70.

By the turn of the century, one in every four sporting arms sold stateside was a Winchester. But John Marlin and Arthur Savage also earned patents for lever rifles. John Mahlon Marlin was 18 in 1853, when he apprenticed as an unpaid machinist in Connecticut. Marlin designed the top-ejecting Model 1881 in .40-60 and .45-70. It begat the short-action 1888 by L.L. Hepburn, and the 1889, which spit empties to the side. Hepburn's 1893 took longer cartridges: the .32-40, .38-55, .25-36, .30-30 and .32 Special. Marlin solid-top receivers would find increasing favor as scopes became popular after the Model 1893 gave way to the 36 and, in 1948, the 336. But even early on, the 1893 competed ably with Winchester's 1894.

The .32 Special is so like the .30-30, physically and ballistically; Winchester and

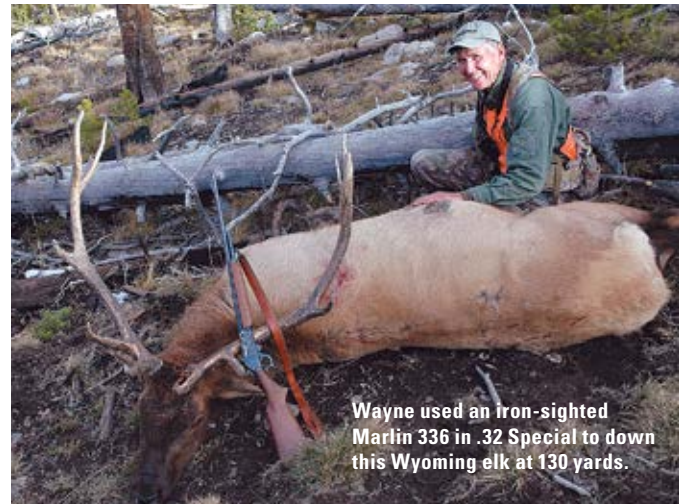
Marlin have weaned their lever-actions from it. But many animals have fallen to the Special—including the biggest non-typical mule deer ever shot. In November, 1926, Ed Broder and his hunting partner had reached a remote camp near Chip Lake, Alberta, by Model T, then horse-drawn sleigh. With little light left on their arrival, Broder hurried along a big deer track in the snow. That buck's antlers taped over 355 inches!

Arthur Savage's hammerless repeating rifle earned him patents in 1892, when he was just 35. The first lever-action with a coil mainspring, it also had a buttstock held by a through-bolt. In U.S. Ordnance trials, the Savage No. 1 was upstaged by the Krag-Jorgensen bolt-action. So Mr. Savage reconfigured his rifle for hunters and formed the Savage Arms Company in Utica, New York in 1894. His Model 1895 and subsequent Model 1899 fired the .303 Savage cartridge, much like the .30-30 but with a heavier bullet. Roosevelt's passion for Winchesters didn't stop him from declaring his 1899 one of the best-built rifles he'd ever owned! W.T. Hornaday hailed Savage's "incomparable .303 rifles" after shooting a moose "at a distance of 350 yards."

China missionary Harry Caldwell used a .303 Savage on tigers. One man-killing cat approached a tethered goat from an unexpected direction. In his haste to change positions, Caldwell tripped, sprawling "in the face of the crouching tiger." The beast whirled and vanished. Relieved to be alive but disgusted with himself, Caldwell picked up his rifle and hurled a stone spitefully into the hillside bush. It triggered an explosion, as if "I had tossed a hand grenade." A "huge tiger [came] boiling down the slope.... At the crack of my rifle he bounded high into the air, he turned completely over and bounced against the earth ...almost to our feet."

Deer hunters were less imperiled; but the .303 Savage rewarded them too. Edison Pilmore had his in hand when, during Colorado's 1949 season, he spied two exceptional mule deer making for cover. His shot felled the biggest. Its antlers would tape nearly 204 inches, best ever in the typical class at the time. At B&C's 1953 ceremonies, they not only took first honors but earned the coveted Sagamore Hill Award. Sadly, Mr. Pilmore had passed away a year earlier—the timing reminiscent of another death.

In 1914, with a .25-20 lever-action, 22-year-old James Jordan shot an outsized whitetail buck near Danbury, Wisconsin. The antlers went



Wayne used an iron-sighted Marlin 336 in .32 Special to down this Wyoming elk at 130 yards.



ABOVE: In 1920 Savage's 1899 became the 99. Top rifle is an early 99 rifle, the bottom is a late carbine with tang safety. LEFT: The World's Record non-typical mule deer, scoring 355-2/8 points, was taken by Ed Broder in 1926. He was shooting a .32 Special.

to a taxidermist who offered his work for \$5. Then they vanished. In 1959 they sold for \$2 at a second-hand store. Jordan saw them and claimed them. But the provenance was unclear. While B&C recognized them as a world's record in 1965, not until 1978 were they officially listed as having been taken by Jordan. He had died two months earlier.

Engineers at Winchester, Marlin and Savage worked to satisfy demand for more powerful rifles. Winchester's 1886 in .45-70 and, later, .33 Winchester nudged development of the 1895 Marlin in those chamberings. Then John Browning fashioned a lever-action with a magazine in its belly. The Winchester Model 1895's vertical-stack magazine differed from the Savage spool. Also unlike Savage rifles, the 1895 Winchester stayed with an external hammer. It chambered the .303 British and .30-40 Krag, later the .30-06 and the .35 and .405 Winchester.

Theodore Roosevelt latched onto this new Winchester right away, taking an 1895 .30-40 Carbine with him to Cuba, where, during the ascent of San Juan Hill he loaned it to a soldier who'd lost his rifle. He took five Model 1895s on his 1909-10 safari: one in .30-06 and four in .405, one of those fitted with a Maxim silencer. "The Winchester .405 is, at least for me personally, the medicine for lions." While the 1895 exhibits the fine machining and finish common to firearms of that day, it's a heavy rifle. Critics say "it's also vengeful, with a sharp, low comb that jabs you viciously in the chops. Cycling this rifle can be like sticking your hand in a corn-picker.

The machinery is massive and noisy. It bites your fingers."

By the way, TR's safari armament—15 crates of rifles, ammunition and spare parts—included a Marlin 1893 rifle in .25-36. Like the .25-35 Winchester, which can be fired in .25-36 rifles, this round is no match for heavy African plains game. Perhaps Roosevelt thought a .25 perfect for small antelope.

Rotary and vertical-stack magazines that safely held pointed bullets brought fast, flat-shooting cartridges to lever-action rifles. Charles Newton developed the .22 Hi-Power for Savage and, in 1912, the .250/3000 that hurled 87-grain bullets at 3,000 fps. The tube magazines of traditional lever rifles would limit their use of such ammunition until Hornady's development of pointed but

soft-tipped FTX bullets in LeverEvolution loads decades later. Meanwhile, bluff-nosed missiles proved effective at normal hunting ranges. The .33 Winchester of 1902 followed the likes of the .45-90 in the Model 1886. Its successor, the more potent .348, came in 1936, when Winchester pastured the 1886 and announced the Model 71. Harold Johnson of Cooper's Landing, Alaska, necked the .348 case to accept .458 bullets and drove 400-grain soft-points 2,000 fps. As tossing

the lever of a Winchester '73 pulls you into the saddle on a pioneer trail, so a 71 Alaskan nudges you in shin-high boots toward alder jungles hiding bears big as chest freezers.

Lever-action rifles pre-dating the Second World War are windows into the past. Beyond that, they challenge us to hunt, to test our woodsmanship, then marksmanship against big beasts at iron-sight range. Wrap your hand about its slim steel waist, and a lever rifle puts the frontier again in your path. ■

Lever-action in hand, you've a grip on history, tradition, the wilderness before glass-eyed bolt guns.



Winchester's box-magazine 1895 was among Roosevelt's favorite rifles. He took five to Africa, one a .30-06 like the Browning/Winchester reproduction here. The others were .405s.

