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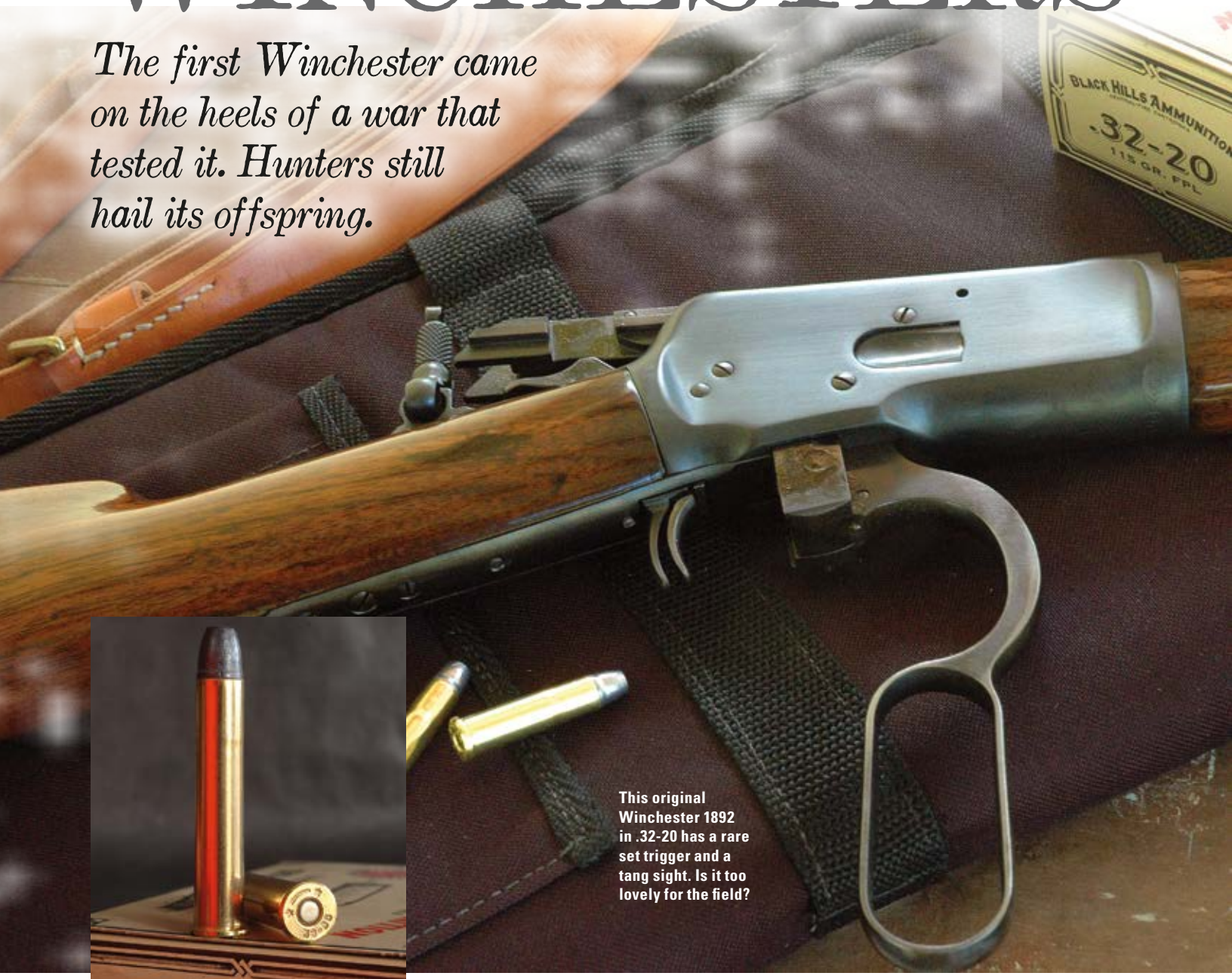
B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

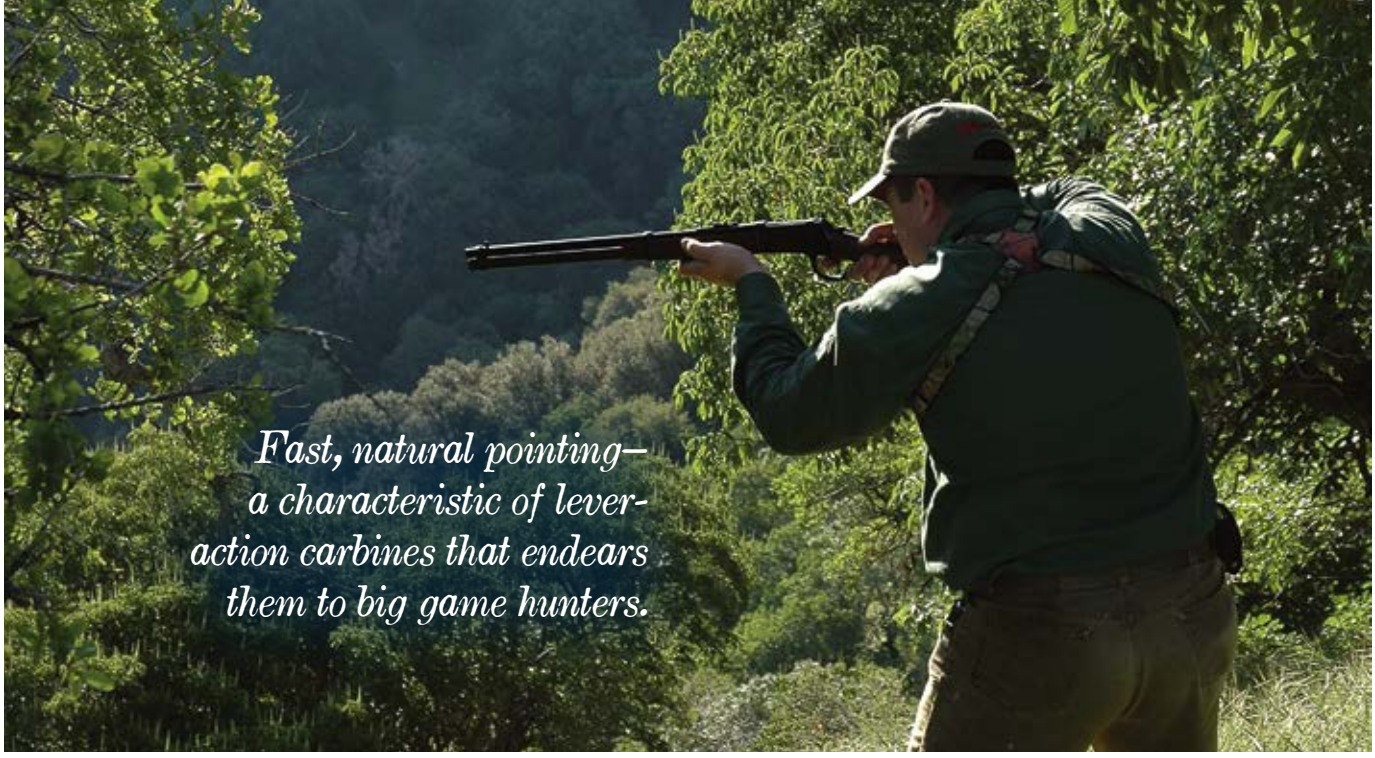
150 Years of WINCHESTERS

The first Winchester came on the heels of a war that tested it. Hunters still hail its offspring.



This original Winchester 1892 in .32-20 has a rare set trigger and a tang sight. Is it too lovely for the field?

The .38-55, charter round in Winchester's 1894, gave way in deer camps to the .30-30 and .32 Special.



Fast, natural pointing—a characteristic of lever-action carbines that endears them to big game hunters.

Had the buck broken away, I'd not have fired. But the alders were too thick even for a blacktail to exit fast. He rocketed toward me, then sunfished, bound for the river. I triggered the carbine twice to no avail, shortened the lead and fired twice more. Recoil bounced the bead on his rear rib as he vanished in willows. I found him right away. The last .30-30 bullets had driven through his chest.

In my youth, you could have bought that Winchester Model 94 for $82; a Marlin 336 for the same money. Savage's 99 cost $100 at that time. While many hunters had gone to scoped bolt-actions, iron-sighted lever rifles remained popular in deer camps. Not every sportsman could spill $135 for a Winchester Model 70.

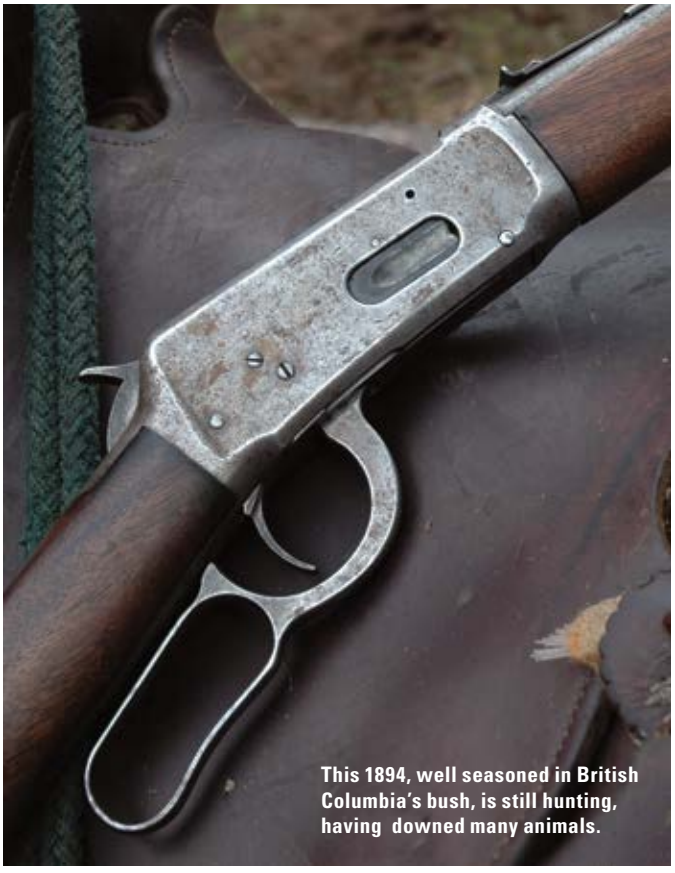
During the next 50 years, the complexity of lever rifles plus requisite hand fitting and assembly hiked production costs. CNC machining that sped-up shaping of close-tolerance parts also benefited bolt rifles, which are easier to stock and require little handwork. Now bushels of bolt guns list for less than the plain-jane saddle guns once so affordable. Savage's 99 have expired. Winchester's current 94 cost $1,200. The closure of Marlin's plant pained legions of fans that predicted, accurately, that 336s built by trolls with no lever-rifle skills would never match their forebears.

Walter Hunt had no way to see this coming. In 1848, this inventor (of a lock-stitch needle and the safety pin) brooded over his balky new rifle. The "Volitional Repeater" fed

Wayne used a 1920s-era 1886 Winchester in .45-70 to down this bull. The cartridge dates to 1873.

The Volcanic rifle (top) failed at market. The Henry succeeded and spawned the Winchester 1866.

John Browning's single shot (Winchester 1885) had vertical sliding lugs later adapted to lever rifles.



This 1894, well seasoned in British Columbia's bush, is still hunting, having downed many animals.

hollow-based bullets called "rocket balls" from a tube under the barrel. A loop behind the trigger cycled the action, which fed primers separately. Sparks from the primer pierced a paper covering at the bullet base, igniting a small charge in the bullet's cavity. In 1849, Hunt received a patent.

Hunt's mechanism caught the eye of New York entrepreneur George Arrowsmith, who engaged Lewis Jennings to make the complex rifle reliable. Arrowsmith soon abandoned the project, selling rights to financier Courtland Palmer for $100,000. When sales of Hunt-Jennings rifles stalled, Palmer stopped producing them. A handful of New York investors stepped in, hiring Horace Smith, Daniel Wesson, and young engineer B. Tyler Henry to build a marketable rifle for their nascent Volcanic Repeating Arms Company. Bankruptcy, however, truncated the project. In 1857, one of the investors bought all company assets for $40,000. New Haven shirt-maker Oliver Fisher Winchester—who'd initially owned 80 share of common stock at $25 a share—now counted on Henry to improve the Hunt-Jennings rifle. In 1860, Henry earned a patent for a quirky, under-powered, 15-shot, 44-caliber rifle prone to leak gas.

"... 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?"

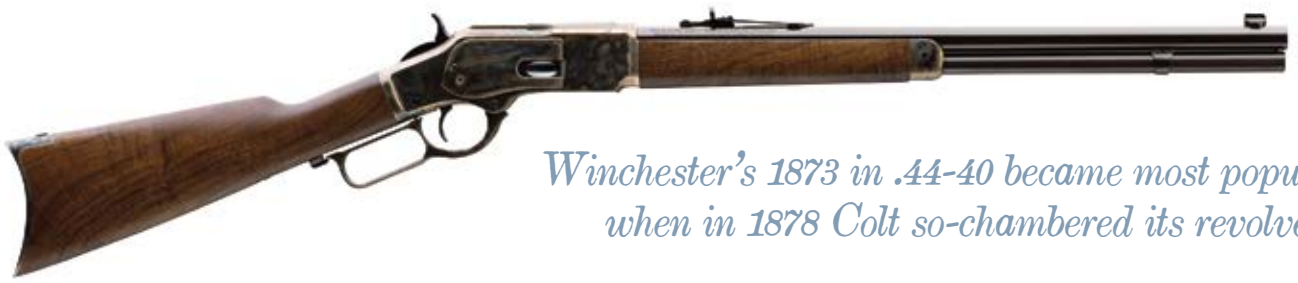
This might once have been written of the horse, and later the atomic bomb. But Oliver Winchester's words, in an appeal to the U.S. government, described his lever-action rifle. Though it saw limited use in our Civil War, its 15 quick shots got the attention of the Confederacy.

A Henry repeater almost surely saved Union Captain Wilson of the 12th Kentucky Cavalry when, as he sat at dinner with his family, seven Confederate guerillas burst in. He pleaded with them to "take me outside." They consented. At the door, Wilson raced for the corncrib. He came up shooting, killing five guerillas with five shots. The others ran for their horses, one losing fingers to a sixth bullet as he grabbed the saddle horn. Wilson dropped him with his seventh shot, the remaining man with his eighth.

During the Atlanta campaign of 1864, a Confederate soldier told his captors: "One of your men, in retreating [faced us four soldiers and fired] simultaneously with us. One of our group fell dead... The rest of us proceeded to load when he fired twice in quick succession, killing two more of my comrades. I dropped [the cap in my fingers]... Sir, there is no use in the South fighting men armed as yours..."

A huge improvement over Rocket Balls, the Henry's.44 rimfire loads were still anemic. Thrust by 26 grains black powder to 1,025 fps, the 216-grain bullets packed less energy than you'll coax from a short .357 handgun! Current .30-30 ammo hits harder at 350 yards than the .44 Henry did at the muzzle!

After B. Tyler Henry left the company, Nelson King overhauled the rifle's fragile magazine and added a receiver port for loading; and so emerged the Model 1866, also fitted with a wooden forend. It was the first rifle marked by the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Its .44 rimfire cartridge, based on that of the Henry, featured lighter 200-grain .44 bullets and a stiffer, 28-grain powder charge. In



Winchester's 1873 in .44-40 became most popular when in 1878 Colt so-chambered its revolvers.

1867, Winchester hawked the rifle as "stronger, yet lighter; the magazine is closed and strongly protected; it is more simple in operation [but] the whole 15 cartridges can be fired in 15 seconds...or in double-quick time...at a rate of 120 shots per minute..." The rifle then held 17 rounds, the carbine 12.

The Model 1866, built on full schedule beginning in 1867 after Winchester moved to Bridgeport, put the Henry in mothballs. For six years, the firm focused on its new lever rifle, shipping 100,000 during that period. The Model 1873 that followed was an improved 1866 and fired Winchester's first centerfire cartridge. The .44-40 burned 40 grains of black powder, launching a 200-grain bullet at 1,200 fps. In 1878, Colt offered its 1873 Single Action Army revolver in .44-40. Both firearms were hits. You could load either from your belt, with no danger of mix-ups. Supplying the West with ammo became easier; and finding ammo became easier as the .44-40 gained traction. Hardly a "stopping" round, it still impressed hunters. William F. Cody wrote in 1875: "For general hunting or Indian fighting I pronounce your improved Winchester ['73] the boss..." On a hunt in the Black Hills he met an aggressive bear and relayed about the incident: "Before he could reach me I had eleven bullets in him... more lead than he could comfortably digest..."

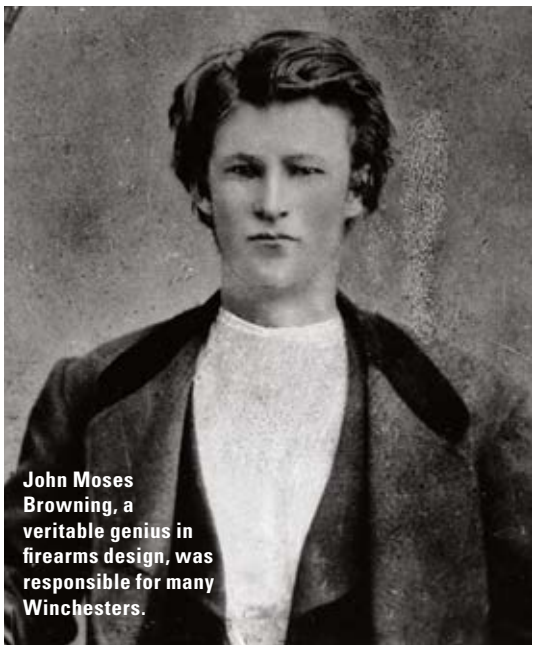
Favored by bandits and lawmen—including Texas Rangers and the RCMP—Winchester 1873s rode in the scabbards of Army scouts and the wagon boxes of sheep herders. Long service in lawless environs, stateside and abroad, drew this observation: "The .44-40 has killed more people, good and bad, than any other commercial cartridge." At one time, that was probably true.

Winchester followed the 1873 with a similar rifle for larger cartridges. Chambered to the .45-75 WCF, the iron-framed 1876 endured for a decade. It was Winchester's last lever-action deriving from the Hunt and Henry. A better design appeared unexpectedly after a Winchester salesman brought a second-hand rifle to Thomas Bennett, company president, and Oliver Winchester's son-in-law. Bennett traced the single-shot to the "biggest gun shop between Omaha and the Pacific," staffed by four brothers barely out of their teens. The oldest was John Moses Browning.

Brought up in a frontier gun-shop, Browning had fashioned a crude gun at age 11. His brilliance must have been evident to the shrewd Bennett, who paid $8,000 for rights to the rifle John had designed for hunters. No blueprints; he'd built the accurate, reliable dropping-block with hardly any machinery. "His designs are so simple," marveled a colleague, "he measures in inches, not thousandths."

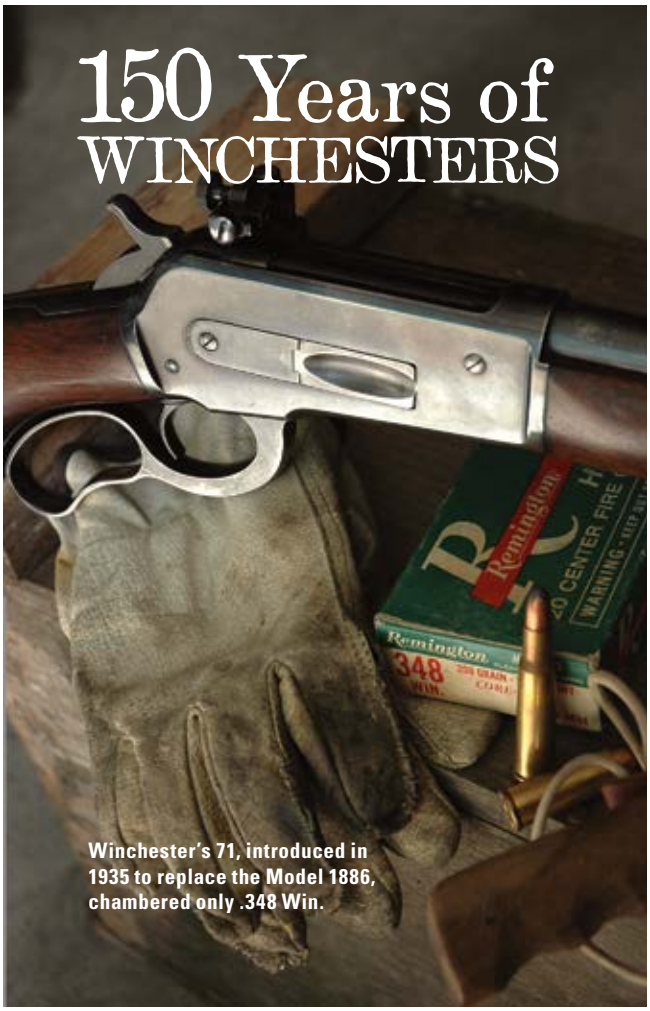
Bennett introduced the Browning rifle as Winchester's Model 1885, and then urged the Utah genius to focus on lever-driven repeaters. For 17 years, John Browning would work exclusively for

Ron Ens admires a Winchester 71, last of the Browning-inspired lever-actions, dropped in the 1950s.

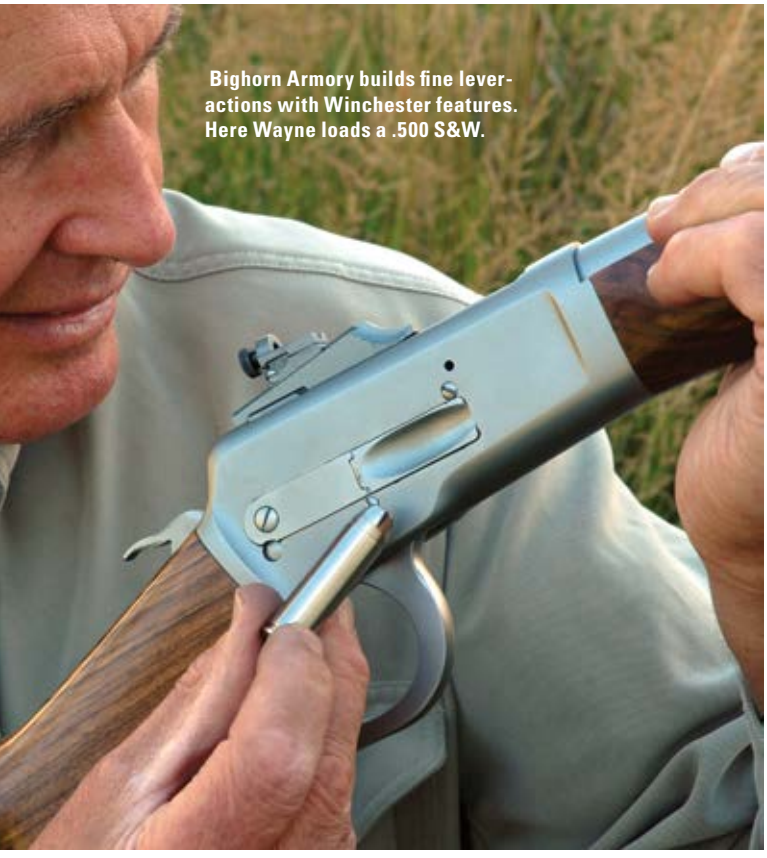


John Moses Browning, a veritable genius in firearms design, was responsible for many Winchesters.

150 Years of WINCHESTERS



Winchester's 71, introduced in 1935 to replace the Model 1886, chambered only .348 Win.



Bighorn Armory builds fine lever-actions with Winchester features. Here Wayne loads a .500 S&W.

Winchester, contributing 44 designs. Bennett bought them all, some just to keep from the competition. John Browning adapted his vertical-lug lock-up to lever-actions. The first, replacing the 1876, was the strong, powerful Model 1886. It netted John $50,000—"more money than you could find in Ogden," he said. Bored most notably for the .45-70 Government, the 1886 appeared in other chambers as well. The .33 Winchester joined them in 1902, pushing a 200-grain bullet to 2,200 fps. Winchester kept the .33 in its line until 1936 when the .348 Model 71 supplanted the '86. The .348 sent 200-grain bullets at 2,530 fps and was offered only in the 71. That lovely rifle dropped from the catalog in 1957.

Delighted with the 1886, Thomas Bennett offered John Browning $10,000 for a short-action rifle if he finished in three months, or $15,000 if he finished in two. John replied, "The price is $20,000. You'll have it in 30 days. If I'm late, it's free." The Model 1892 arrived early. In .25-20, .32-20, .38-40, and .44-40, it listed at $18 and sold to the walls, overseas as well as in the U.S. It remained in the line until 1941.

Winchester's iconic Model 1894 appeared in .32-40 and .38-55, but within a year added the .30 WCF or .30-30, our first smokeless sporting cartridge. Its original load, a 160-grain bullet at 1,970 fps, gave way to a 170-grain soft-point at 2,200 fps. Including Models 55 and 64, the 1894 lasted 112 years. That run ended in March, 2006, with the shuttering of Winchester's New Haven plant. The rifle later returned and is now available in four configurations: Carbine, Short Rifle, Sporter, and Take-Down; in .38-55, 30-30 and .450 Marlin. The '94 is Winchester's best-selling lever gun, with more than six million produced!

A radically different lever-action followed the 1894. The Model 1895 featured a massive bolt and receiver. Its top-fed box magazine held pointed bullets safely. It came in .30-40 Krag, .38-72, and .40-72; and then in 1898, it came in .303 British as well. Winchester added its .35 in 1903, a year before the .405. The .30 Government 03 joined the 1895's roster in 1905; the .30-06 in 1908. T.R's 1895 "did admirably with lions, giraffes, elands..." he wrote of his .405 in Africa. With due reverence for its fine machining and box magazine, I find the 1895 a brutal rifle. Its sharp comb slams me in the chops. The two-piece lever bites my fingers.

As in 1866 when Winchester defined itself with the lever-action 1866, it now hawks the Model 70 bolt-action as its flagship. No new Winchester centerfire levers have appeared since the hammerless Model 88 (1955-1973). The company still catalogs limited-production "historical" entries, built in loose rotation by Miroku: the 1873, 1886, 1892, 1894, 1895, and Model 71.

Most of the cartridges chambered in these rifles are still available and useful! They're also fun to fire. In this age of ear-splitting magnums whose flights span zip codes, I've taken elk handily with the .30-30 and .32 Special. I've taken elk and bison with the .45-70. Iron sights keep these rifles nimble and ensure that when I fire, the animal is truly within killing range. When I slide an 1894 into a scabbard or slip through lodgepoles with a Model 71, a slice of Winchester history goes with me.

Lean walnut and trim, solid steel. A hammer, a loop and a tube. Such is Winchester's signature, no matter the shape or substance of rifles to come. ■