

WAYNE C.
VAN ZWOLL

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
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The .270:

Its slim bullets killed all out of proportion to their weight, charming hunters and changing an industry.



Recently, the Jack O'Connor Center in Lewiston, Idaho, commissioned a limited run of Winchester 70s patterned on the Biesen-stocked Featherweights the famous gun writer used on hunts around the world.

America's Cartridge

“Whoopee!” said Zefarino. “That’s the kind of rifle I like, one that has power. One shot and the buck doesn’t move. How do you call it?”

“The .270,” I said.

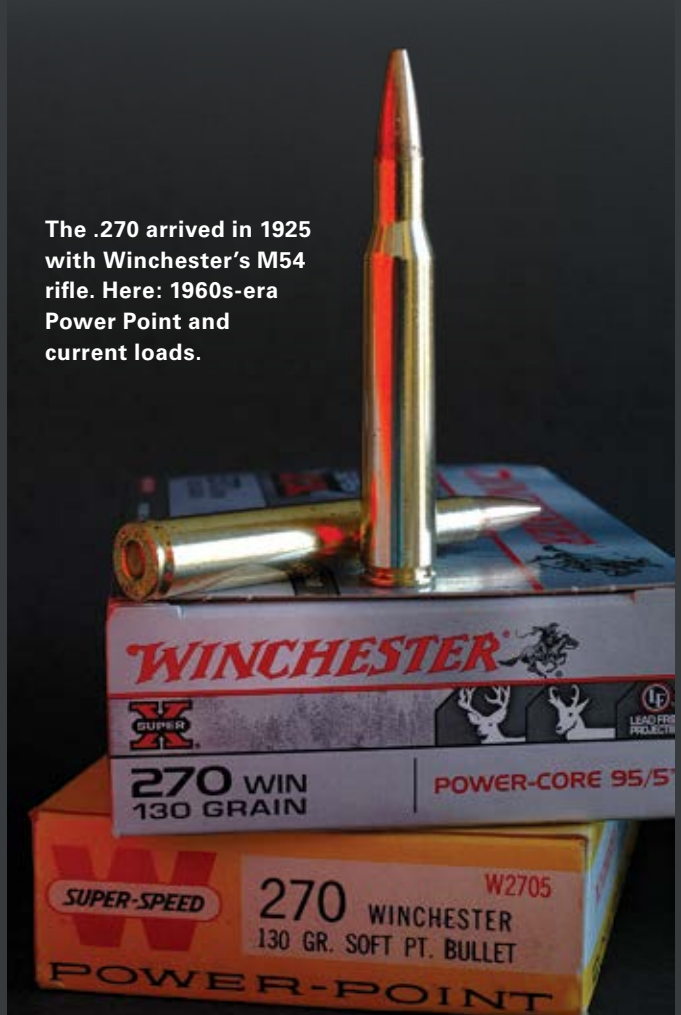
So wrote Jack O’Connor after son Jerry had shot a Sonoran whitetail, which “turned clear over in the air and hit like a bag of potatoes.”

Unabashedly fond of the .270 Winchester, O’Connor is often credited with its success at market. His long tenure as *Outdoor Life*’s shooting editor gave his opinions great currency. But the .270 had a lot going for it from the start.

A .277 bullet may have seemed an odd choice in 1925. A more logical option for Winchester was a .284 (7mm). The 7x57 Mauser, in 1892, one of the world’s first smokeless rounds, had throngs of fans. In the British Isles it became the .275 Rigby. Germany’s 7x64 Brenneke, circa 1917, had more muscle, if not a military pedigree. Hollands’ .275 Magnums (flanged and belted) fired .284 bullets. The .280 Jeffery, .280 Ross and .280 Flanged Nitro Express were exceptions, with .287 bullets.

Perhaps Winchester wanted a distinctive new number. Or, in the wake of the Great War, remove itself from Teutonic sevens.

The .270 arrived in 1925 with Winchester’s M54 rifle. Here: 1960s-era Power Point and current loads.



Speculation aside, the .270 was a brilliant combination of tradition and innovation. The case had the .473-diameter head of the .30-06, the same 17 ½ degree shoulder angle. Length: just .005 greater. Any rifle accommodating the .30-06 fed .270 cartridges. Designed for stout bolt actions, the .270 was stoked to higher pressures than many contemporaries, including the '06. At an advertised 3,140 fps, the .270's 130-grain bullets left the muzzle faster than 87-grain missiles from a .250 Savage, and reached 300 yards still clocking 2,320! A 150-grain bullet appeared in 1933; a thin-jacketed 100-grain four years later.

This flat-shooting round arrived at the perfect time. Awed by the power and reach of the .30-06, hunters were swapping lever-actions for bolt rifles. Optical sights were showing up in more deer camps, affording precise aim far beyond the range of traditional cartridges like the

.30-30. Then too, automobiles were bringing more hunters afield, diminishing the need for flat-sided, iron-sighted "saddle guns."

Still, not all deer hunters traded their carbines for .270s. A few whined that its fast spitzers ruined too much venison—a complaint with some cause. Early .270 bullets were prone to fragment at near-Mach 3 speeds (though some failed to open and zipped through like solids). When Winchester responded with a 150-grain load throttled to 2,675 fps, the market responded as it might to a shotshell with popcorn pellets. The meat-saver ammo vanished. Better bullets followed.

For elk and moose hunters of the 1920s, the .270's missile seemed alarmingly small. The .30-30 had been introduced just three decades earlier as a small-bore, high-velocity cartridge! Big animals had in black-powder days absorbed hits from bullets twice as heavy. Now there

was this pipsqueak .270.... Even the press gave it a lukewarm reception. Not until its third year did *American Rifleman* run a .270 feature.

But doubts vanished as bullets evolved and hunters of stature used it successfully. Jack O'Connor bought his first .270, a Winchester 54, in 1925. His first scoped rifle was also a .270. On his maiden trip to Alberta's Rockies, he took a .270 for sheep and deer, a .30-06 for moose. But the .270 felled the moose too—one of a dozen bulls O'Connor would kill with this cartridge.

The .270's fortunes were bound to those of two Winchester rifles. In 1924, after fumbling for 30 years with sub-par bolt-action designs, Winchester hit upon the Model 54. It had the Springfield's coned breech, Charles Newton's ejector, a Mauser extractor, a stock patterned after custom Sedgelys. Its nickel-steel barrel on a cyanide-hardened receiver bottled 54,000 psi from the

hot new .270 round. The 54 sold well. But the 1920s savaged the gun industry. Early in 1929, Winchester collapsed. In December 1931, Franklin Olin's Western Cartridge Company bought all Winchester assets. Franklin's son John took the reins. The next decade would bring 23 new Winchester firearms.

John Olin kept the 54 alive. In 1934 Winchester committed to improvements from T.C. Johnson and his crew, who had designed it. As many riflemen were still eating in soup kitchens, there was no rush to build the resulting Model 70. Winchester shipped the initial run of 2,238 rifles early in 1937.

The 70's barrel and receiver looked like the 54's. But the trigger was adjustable, with a separate bolt stop. A side-swing, three-position safety soon replaced the first two-detent top lever. A plunger in the milled-steel guard secured a hinged floorplate.

Each M70 receiver



With 17 foot-pounds of recoil, the .270 is easy on the shooter. Here: Wayne with an O'Connor-inspired 70.

began life as a 7½-pound Feather-chrome-moly billet; 75 machinings later it weighed 19¼ ounces. Heat treating brought it to 47C, Rockwell. Barrels, drop-forged like most small parts, were hand-straightened with 15-pound hammers, lathe-turned, deep-hole drilled and straightened again. Bores were reamed and hook-rifled by a single cutter making multiple passes. Stocks of American walnut were roughed from 2x36-inch blanks, and then contoured eight at a time on a duplicator. Final shaping and inletting were done by hand. A lacquer finish followed staining just before hand checkering.

The first Model 70s listed for \$61.25 in .22 Hornet, .220 Swift, .250-3000 Savage, .257 Roberts, .270, 7x57 and .30-06, also the .300 and .375 H&H Magnums. The .300 Savage followed as a chambering but not in catalogs. The .35 Remington appeared briefly. During the '50s Winchester added the .243, .308 and .358

(and its 6 ½-pound Featherweight rifle). Belted magnums—.458, .338, .264 and .300—followed, from 1956 to '63. Pre-64 M70s comprised 29 basic styles, 48 sub-styles.

But a loyal fan base and market dominance couldn't rescue the Model 70 from rising labor costs. In 1960 Winchester accountants ordered an overhaul. Engineers completed 50 changes by 1963, none of which pleased shooters. Scrambling to stem defections to Remington's 700, the company got some of the faithful back in 1980, as it re-instated Mauser's controlled-feed extractor and revamped the stock.

Predictably, the .270 has prospered in the Model 70. Of the 581,471 M70s built before the rifle's 1963 overhaul, 208,218 were .30-06s; 122,323 were .270s. No other chambering came close. Remington picked up the cartridge for its new Model 721 in 1948, and as a charter offering for the 700 in '62. Savage has had the .270



Jack O'Connor with his guide after taking a Dall's sheep.

in its Model 110 family since it appeared in 1958. Myriad rifles worldwide have been bored for the .270. Besides bolt guns, Remington and Browning have cataloged autoloaders, Ruger and Browning dropping-block single-shots. Add Remington slide-actions and Browning lever-actions. Most .270 barrels have a rifling pitch of 1-in-10. Husqvarna chose 1-in-9½, Mannlicher-Schoenauer 1-in-9.

Jack O'Connor proved an able crusader for the cartridge, using it on "everything from javelina to Alaska-Yu-

kon moose." He wrote that one year he'd fired 10,000 rounds! Hand loading 130-grain bullets, he liked "62 grains of No. 4831 in W-W cases with the CCI Magnum primer...." He seated Nosler's 150-grain Partitions ahead of 58.5 grains.

Gunmaker Al Biesen built Jack's first custom rifle and two .270s that became favorites. "Number 1" was a 1953 M70. Biesen turned down the 24-inch barrel and shortened it to 22 (this before Winchester had a Featherweight). He added a 4x Stith Kollmorgen in Tilden mounts. In 1954, Jack killed a Wyoming elk with this rifle; later, a Dall's ram in the Yukon. He used it in Africa and India too.

In 1959 Erb Hardware in Lewiston sold Jack a Featherweight 70 in .270. "Make this

The .270 was a brilliant combination of tradition and innovation.



In 1948 the .270 appeared as a charter chambering in Remington's 721, with the .30-06, .300 H&H.



ABOVE: This early Model 70 bolt face shows its stout Mauser extractor and slot for the mechanical ejector. **BELOW:** “The best hunting-rifle trigger ever,” said gun guru Don Allen of the original M70’s. Wayne agrees.



one up like the first,” Jack told Al. With its Leupold Mountaineer 4x in Buehler mounts, “Number 2” shot so well it became Jack’s go-to rifle. It served him abroad and in British Columbia took three Stone’s sheep.

I knew Al Biesen well. “Shortly after O’Connor started writing in 1937,” Al told me, “I offered to build him a rifle. He sent a Titus barrel and a Springfield action. I put them together and stocked the rifle. He didn’t like it, so I made him a .30-06 on Mauser metal.... I moved to Spokane in 1948, just after Jack wrote his first article about me. I bought my house for \$8,000, later sold it for \$10,000, bought it back for \$6,000, then moved it....” Biesen raised six children on the income from his basement bench.

Jack O’Connor retired from *Outdoor Life* in 1972. Six years later, he died at sea of natural causes. Alvin Biesen, larger than life building rifles or officiating at prone matches in Spokane, passed in 2016.

The .270 endures, though gaggles of small- and

mid-bore magnums have appeared in its wake. In surveys of elk hunters I conducted during the 1990s, it consistently placed third in popularity behind the .30-06 and 7mm Remington Magnum. It has put many entries into Boone and Crockett records. A decade after Remington’s big seven appeared, Colorado hunter Anton Purkat trailed an elk into a Chaffee County canyon. The bull burst from cover, and Anton triggered his .270. He was home in time for church—with antlers that scored over 380 inches!

My .270s haven’t killed elk that big. But they’ve downed them with certainty. Once, swinging my Model 70 to get ahead of a young Oregon bull racing down a grassy slope, I loosed a 150-grain Partition. At full throttle, the elk somersaulted, scrambled to its feet, then pitched on its nose.

A beautiful Utah bull I’d followed with a client for hours caught his .270 Hornady bullet through the chest. The elk reared like a horse, then toppled backward, planting its antlers to lie stone-still belly up.

Dale Leonard, one of few Colorado hunters to put both mule deer and elk in B&C records, carried a .270. On a snowy day in 1961, easing along near ridge-top, he spied an enormous elk peering back from under low-hanging branches just 50 yards away! One shot sufficed. Fifteen years later, hunting deer on a cold morning, Dale got no shot at the wide-racked animal that jumped from its bed and sped over a ridge. His second chance came that afternoon as two bucks dashed off, then paused. The biggest deer dropped to the blast of his .270. Its antlers spanned 32 inches and scored 200 points!

Having gathered lesser bone with the .270, I can’t think of a better deer cartridge. An M70 whose many scars, fencepost wood and tacked-on recoil pad pulled the price within my reach at a gun show long ago, remains a favorite—and not just for its buttery bolt travel. If I can quarter a buck’s chest with that 3x Lyman, the result is certain. On a frosty morning above timber in Oregon’s Wallowas, I spied antlers far down slope. Snugging the sling, I sat, nudged the wire a hand’s width high and dropped a 130 Speer into the vitals. That Winchester is an old friend. When I hunt deer with other rifles, I always wonder why.

The .270 is surely best known for its exploits on the sheep mountain. Hunters famous and obscure have found this an ideal cartridge for North America’s rams. “I was well aware that I might never [make] a bighorn hunt again,” Richard Browne noted after drawing a Montana tag in 1968. So he committed all his energies to the quest. His rifle: a Remington 721 in .270. One December afternoon, in clouded peaks above the Clark Fork, he let himself down an icy cliff “by hanging onto the top of a limber Douglas-fir.”



From left, the .270 Winchester was followed in 1943 by the .270 Weatherby, much later by the WSM.

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Rocks clattered behind him. He whirled in time to see a huge ram race up a rockslide. The animal topped out at 80 yards. "I sighted below his spine, and the .270 roared. The ram lurched [and] tumbled head over heels.... I dropped my rifle and ran ahead with the crazy idea of trying to stop that plunging body. Then I came to my senses... my bighorn rolled past me and bounced over a rise...." But the magnificent horns were saved when a fallen tree stopped the animal. They taped 43 and 45 inches, for a B&C score of 192!

My first bighorn fell to a lovely Henriksen-stocked Mauser with a .270 barrel. It wore a 6x Pecar, a German scope now all but forgotten. When the animal appeared in rocks far below, I bellied down on a ledge, and given the steep angle, resisted the urge to hold high. My 150-grain Partition punched the lungs.

The .270 Winchester's reputation afield owes much to its mild recoil and the reasonable price of ammo. Both encourage frequent shooting, which improves marksmanship. Mid-level loads in an 8-pound rifle hit you with about 17 foot-pounds of energy. The .30-06 averages 19 foot-pounds, as do the .270 Weatherby and .270 WSM, the only other popular hunting rounds using .277 bullets. You endure 25 foot-pounds behind a .300 Winchester Magnum. A .223 delivers just 3 foot-pounds, a .243 10. The 1909 *British Textbook of Small Arms* proposed 15 foot-pounds as the most recoil that should be imposed on infantrymen. While the cost of cartridges rises as inexorably as that of government, the .270's sales volume and efficient design keep a lid on price. In 1955, when Winchester's Featherweight M70 was still new (at \$120.95), factory-fresh .270 cartridges listed for \$3.70 a box. Yes, you

could save shekels hand loading; a pound of DuPont 4350 powder cost \$2.

By then, Winchester was pioneering a path to better bullets for frisky cartridges. It had fielded the "pointed soft-point expanding" missiles for the .270, with substantial jackets of gilding metal (90 percent copper, 10 percent zinc) to nix break-up. Tin-coating, to reduce metal fouling, gave them a silver hue. In a few years the tin was dropped—as was tin in DuPont powders like No. 15 ½ (the "½" for the tin). DuPont IMR or Improved Military Rifle powders that followed left none of the gummy residue caused by the tin.

Superb pointed .270 game bullets—130, 140 and 150 grains—now abound. In this age of the long shot, round-nose 160s have gone the way of the dodo. My Oehler chronograph shows some factory loads send 130s at the blistering speed of 3,300 fps! Thank new powders (and elevated pressure lids). I still get accurate, game-killing hand loads with war-surplus H4831.

Is the .270 inherently accurate? Hard to say. But many loads have shot well for me in many rifles. Not long ago I had a chance to fire a Model 54 Winchester built during the Depression. Its stock had been chopped, the bolt shank and safety altered for scope use. Wood and metal were scuffed and scratched. No cherry, this! But it cycled silkily, and three Winchester Power Points drilled a triangle just an inch across. The 54 listed for \$59.75 when discontinued in 1936.

True, the .270 is seldom voted best all-around cartridge for North American game. What's wrong with voters these days?

"It shoots a good ball," I said,— "a very fast ball."

"Like the lightning!" said Zefarino. ■



"I can't think of a better mule deer cartridge."
This Dakota buck fell to a Winchester factory load.



The modest cost and light recoil of .270 ammo encourage frequent practice from field positions!