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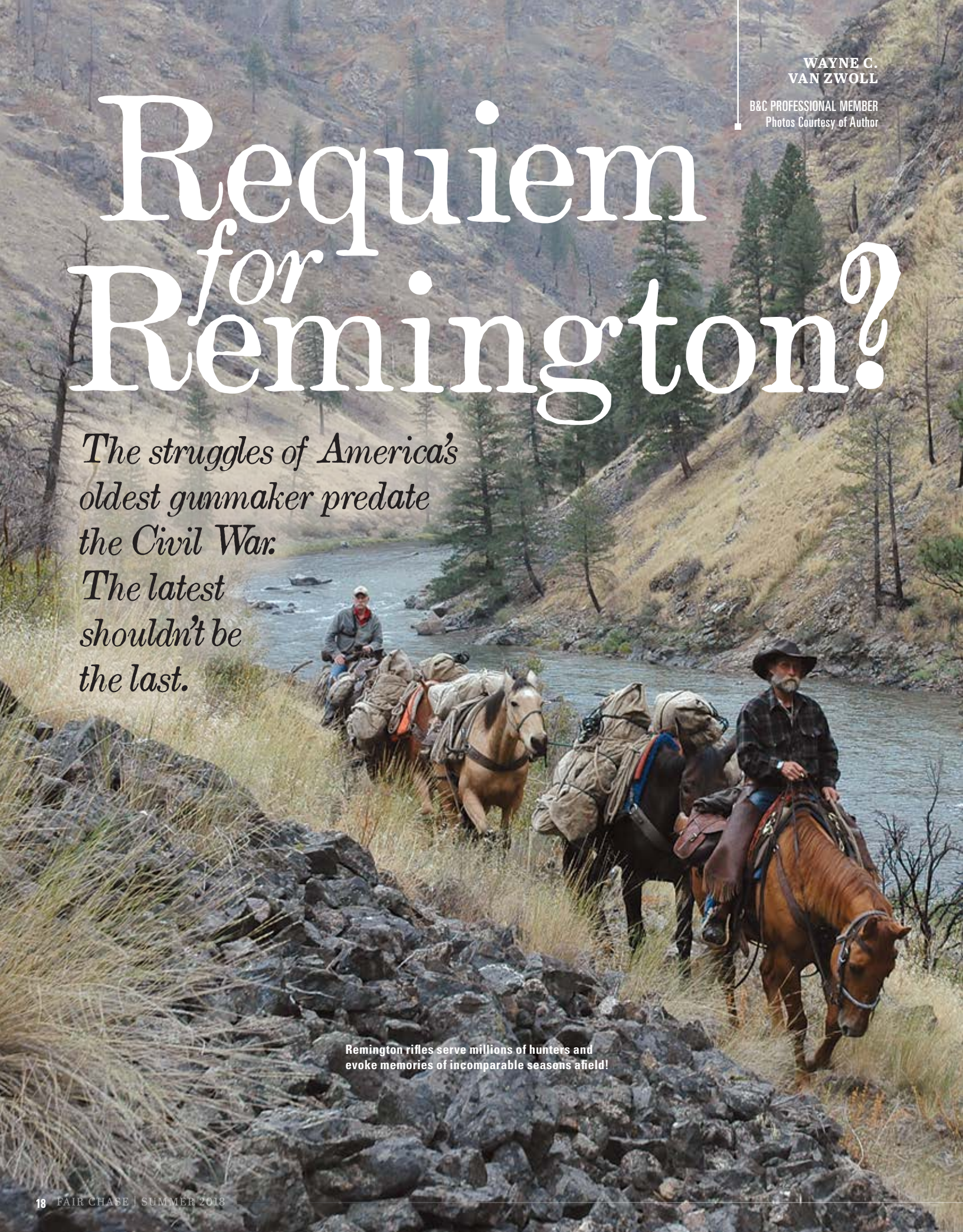
Requiem for Remington?

The struggles of America's oldest gunmaker predate the Civil War. The latest shouldn't be the last.



Remington rifles serve millions of hunters and evoke memories of incomparable seasons afield!

Probe the history of any company, and you'll find adversity. In the firearms industry, you needn't dig far. Gunmakers have profited hugely from retail sales and government contracts—then lost as much to market vagaries and the tides of war. At this writing, Remington has filed for bankruptcy. It's not the final act of a 200-year-old firm, but a first step to reorganization. Remington has taken that step before.

Full disclosure: My first shotgun was a Remington 870. My best elk to date fell to a Remington Model Seven, my biggest mule deer to a Remington 700. A rebarreled Remington 37 won a state prone title for me. So yes, I'm partial to the brand. And optimistic about its future!

Richard Remington, born in 1500, would serve as a clergyman in his native England. A son, also named Richard, sired a third Richard Remington. He would become Rector of Lockington, Yorkshire. In a fit of originality, he named *his* son John, who further broke with tradition by sailing to America in 1637 with his wife and children. Generations later, in upstate New York, Eliphalet Remington bought 50 acres for $275 and paid laborers $7.50 an acre to log it so he could build a house. Securing another 266 acres, he added a dam on Staley Creek, then a forge. His son, Eliphalet II ("Lite"), grew up there and married Abigail Paddock. In August of 1816, Lite built a rifle in the forge. Jethro Wood of Cayuga County had yet to invent the all-metal plow.

TOP: Wayne took this pronghorn at about 300 yards with a .243 built by GreyBull Rifles on a 700 action. ABOVE: Wayne shot this bull with a Remington Model Seven in .308. He bought his first Remington in 1967.

ABOVE: The Civil War brought prosperity to Remington, but Eliphalet II died, age 70, before Appomattox. BELOW: Hiram Berdan's famous Sharpshooters served the Union. Remington adopted his centerfire primer.

The Rolling Block sold well in Europe after the Civil War. Remington rifles are still popular abroad!

When Lite's rifle fired the second-highest score at a local match, the winner asked for one like it. Scouring the countryside for metal to smelt, Remington built more rifles. The frontier gobbled them up. Hugh Orr had produced the nation's first factory firearms in a Massachusetts foundry in 1748, but only U.S. arsenals at Springfield and Harper's Ferry were mass-producing muskets in 1816.

When the 363-mile Erie Canal was finished late in 1825, the cost of moving a ton of goods from New York to Buffalo dropped from $100 to $12. In January, 1828, Lite bought 100 acres on the Mohawk River for $28 an acre. Remington Arms still occupies that land, now in Ilion. The canal brought Lite to distant markets. Pulled by relays of horses, Erie Canal packets offered a 300-mile trip, Albany to Buffalo, for $14.33—meals included!

Meanwhile, Eliphalet began building a new home for Lite's young family, when on June 22, 1828, he fell from a wagon and under an iron wheel. Five days later he died. But that road would demand more of the Remingtons. On August 12, 1841, Abigail took daughter Maria for a carriage ride. Maria opened her parasol; it popped like a shot. The spirited horse lunged across a stream, smashing the carriage against an oak. Abigail was killed.

The tragedy devastated Lite Remington. Still, his gun-making enterprise prospered. With his sons, he bought the N.P. Ames Company, including the services of William Jenks, who'd developed a breech-loading carbine. An improved model in 1858 fed waxed cardboard cartridges. But the brilliant Jenks was killed a year later, when he fell from a hay wagon on his farm near Washington, D.C.

The Civil War brought E. Remington & Sons $30 million in orders. The company would produce up to 1,000 rifles a day for Union forces! But Lite Remington didn't see war's end. After the first battle of Bull Run, he succumbed at age 70 to what was probably appendicitis. The Remington factory steamed on under sons Philo, Samuel and Eliphalet III. Then, in 1865, its heavily-mortgaged machines fell silent. The workers at Ilion's plant were suddenly victims of peace.

Remington scrambled to woo the civilian market with a new rifle. Joseph Rider's refinements of the Leonard Geiger split-breech design had been rushed, and his rifle had fared poorly in trials against the Peabody, Henry and Sharps. But by 1866 Rider had corrected the flaws. Enter the Rolling Block Rifle.

Straightforward in concept, the Rolling Block boasted sturdy parts. To load, the shooter drew the hammer to full cock, thumbed back the breech-block, inserted a cartridge, then pushed the block forward. The pivoting block interlocked with the hammer at the instant of firing. All but foolproof, this mechanism was so quick to load, a practiced shooter could fire 20 shots a minute! It was stout, too. In a test, a Rolling Block was loaded with 750 grains of powder and 40 balls, nearly to the muzzle of its 40-inch barrel. Upon firing, "nothing extraordinary occurred."

In 1866 the new rifle proved the salvation of 30 cowboys under Nelson Story as they trailed 3,000 cattle through Wyoming. With Rolling Blocks, the men repulsed an Indian attack near Fort Laramie and then were ordered to halt at Fort Kearney. After two weeks, Story, tired of the delay, quietly decamped. Hostile Sioux, led by Red Cloud and Crazy Horse, swooped from the hills. The

drovers met them with withering fire, their barrels becoming too hot to touch. Denied the expected pause in the rain of bullets, the Indians retreated. They found when they stopped to look back that the Remingtons were lethal at great range!

Twice more before they reached Montana, Story and his cowboys blunted Indian attacks. Low on ammo at trail's end, they had lost only one man. A few weeks later, Captain J.W. Fetterman and soldiers from Fort Kearney, armed with lesser rifles, were ambushed and wiped out by the Sioux.

Rolling Blocks served buffalo hunters too. "Brazos" Bob McRae reported 54 kills with as many shots at one stand with his .44-90 Remington and a Malcolm scope. But long-range competition sealed the rifle's celebrity. In 1874 Remington's L.L. Hepburn began fashioning a firearm to beat the Irish after their recent win at Wimbledon. They had challenged "any American team" to another contest. Each team would comprise six men, firing three "rounds" at 800, 900 and 1,000 yards, 15 shots per round. A newly formed National Rifle Association, with the cities of New York and Brooklyn, each committed $5,000 to build a range for the match on Long Island's Creed's Farm, provided by the state of New York.

In March, Remington unveiled its new target rifle, a .44-90 launching 550-grain conical bullets. In September a favored Irish team lost to the Americans and their Remington and Sharps rifles. Matches in 1875 and 1876 were won decisively by the U.S. team. A "Creedmoor" Rolling Block, with heavy barrel, tang sight, set trigger and checkered stock started at $100, six times the price of a standard model!

By the 1870s, the Remington Arms factory covered 15 acres. Production peaked at 1,530 rifles a day as monthly payroll reached $140,000. In that day a restaurant dinner cost 25 cents.

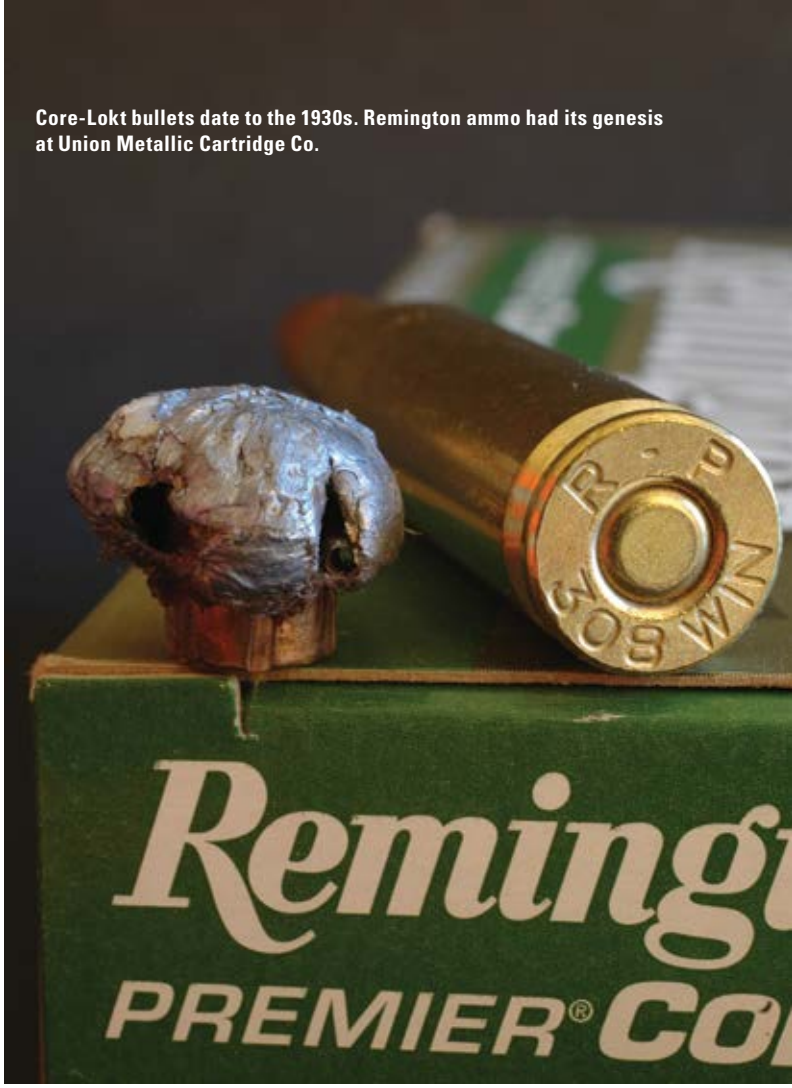
Despite the Rolling Block's success in the American West and in Europe, Remington struggled to pay its bills. It diversified with agricultural tools and sewing machines. In 1872, young company executive Henry Benedict urged Philo Remington to buy rights to a new device called the typewriter. He did. But at $125, the new machine sold poorly. In 1886, to solve its cash flow problems, Remington would sell its typewriter business to Benedict for $186,000. The cost of this move would run high in the millions!

Through the 1870s Remington slid inexorably toward bankruptcy. Salvation from within proved elusive. While a rifle by James Lee was later built by Remington, Lee got manufacturing rights back after 1886, when creditors had the company by the throat. (The British gleaned from Lee's design features for the Short Magazine Lee Enfield, a battle rifle that would see action in two world wars.)

Meanwhile, a bright, ambitious entrepreneur was building an empire not far from Ilion.

After the Civil War, Marcellus Hartley bought a Connecticut plant that loaded rimfire cartridges for the Spencer rifle and another ammo factory in Massachusetts. In 1867, with four partners, he formed the Union Metallic Cartridge Company (U.M.C).

Among orders received by a young U.M.C. was from the French Army, after defeats by Germany at Metz and Sedan. Holding Paris with despairing troops in 1870, Premier Leon Gambetta asked William Reynolds, who represented Hartley's New York business enterprises in



Core-Lokt bullets date to the 1930s. Remington ammo had its genesis at Union Metallic Cartridge Co.

LEFT: Marcellus Hartley bought ammo plants, formed U.M.C., and later, with Winchester, bought Remington!

BELOW: Features of a Remington rifle by James Lee appeared in the British Short Magazine Lee Enfield shown here.

France, for "100,000 rifles and 18 million cartridges!" He then produced a draft on Lloyd's for payment in full—a staggering sum!

Reynolds, a practical man, replied, "But Paris is surrounded! I can't leave!"

Gambetta had a plan. In a balloon made of silk gowns pieced by French seamstresses and paid for with $1,250 in gold, Reynolds lifted off, ducking German bullets. He landed intact near Ville Roy.

U.M.C. bled money at first. Then it hired A.C. Hobbs. This gifted mechanic had once accepted a challenge from the British Government to open a lock devised for the Bank of England. After 51 hours he succeeded! Hartley put Hobbs in charge of manufacturing. About then, Colonel Hiram Berdan, renowned for his sharpshooters during the Civil War, broached an idea for stronger cartridges. Instead of blowing priming compound into a folded rim, Berdan suggested a percussion cap centered in the case head. Two flash-holes either side of a fixed anvil would channel the spark. The single-flash-hole primer developed by Edward Boxer would arrive at roughly the same time in England.

While Hobbs worked furiously to hike production rates of the new cases, Hartley hunted military contracts. He signed one for 10 million cartridges to Turkey, another with the Russians for 2 million. In 1867 U.M.C. had one small plant run by 30 employees. Four years later it was boxing 400,000 cartridges a day! By 1912, U.M.C. would earn $15 million in gross receipts, 30 times Remington's revenues!

LEFT: The 721/722 rifles (1948) were economical but stout, "three rings of steel" around the cartridge head.

BELOW: Accuracy like this makes Remington 700 barreled actions a top choice among custom riflemakers.

Early in 1888, Marcellus Hartley and Oliver Winchester's son-in-law, Thomas Bennett, bought E. Remington & Sons for $200,000. Hartley recruited smart inventors to help revive the firearms giant. The first military contract in this era was for the bolt-action Remington-Lee 1885 Navy Box Magazine Rifle. It would not last.

On the heels of Winchester's 1873 rifle, Remington ramped up work on repeaters. New Jersey inventor John Keene delivered a tube-fed bolt-action in .45-70. But the Army rejected this expensive rifle shortly before Remington fell into receivership in 1886.

In 1906 Remington came out with its Model 8 autoloader, following with the slide-action Model 14 in 1912. Both chambered the .25, .30 and .32 Remington, rimless versions of best-selling deer rounds (.25-35, .30-30 and .32 Special) in Winchester lever actions. Remington added a .35. All would appear in the company's 81 auto and 141 pump, beginning in 1935. With no rimmed counterpart, the powerful .35 Remington was the only one available later in the Model 30 and Winchester 70 bolt rifles.

In 1912 the Remington U.M.C. label appeared, though the two companies wouldn't become one corporation for another four years. During that time, Remington helped arm American and Allied troops.

The Remington Model 30 came along in 1921, with an action much like that of the 1917 Enfield, which Remington had built on contract during the Great War. Heavy and expensive, the 30 sold poorly. In 1926 it was replaced by the 30 Express, with a cock-on-opening bolt and a better trigger. Its slender stock and 22-inch barrel reduced weight to 7 ¼ pounds. The 30 Express was dropped in 1940 and succeeded the next year by the short-lived 720 High Power Rifle, designed by Oliver Loomis and A.H. Lowe. Its focus drawn immediately to the war effort, Remington would build 707,629 03A3 Springfields. These included 28,365 1903A4s with Weaver 330C 2 ½x scopes, the first sniper rifles mass-produced in the U.S. Also, it would ship 10.7 million rounds of .30-06 ball ammo and 2.4 million 50-caliber rounds.

After armistice, Remington developed an economical bolt-action. The 721/722 series appeared in 1948. A washer-style recoil lug was sandwiched between its tubular receiver and a barrel shoulder. A clip extractor and plunger ejector enabled Remington to maintain "three rings of steel" around the case head while keeping a lid on expenses. The bolt handle and twin-lug bolt head were brazed in place. The bottom metal was of stamped steel. Designers Homer Young and Merle "Mike" Walker (a Benchrest competitor) held the rifle to high accuracy standards. Despite debut prices of $74.95 for the short-action 722 in .257 Roberts and .300 Savage, and $79.95 for the 721 in .270 and .30-06, these Remingtons got rave reviews. In the March 1948 issue of *American Rifleman*, the 721 was hailed by Julian S. Hatcher as the strongest bolt rifle available. In 1949 the .300 H&H Magnum joined the 721 roster, at $89.95. Other chamberings followed. High-grade A and B rifles were replaced in 1955 with ADLs and BDLs, designations carried over to the later 700. In late 1961, the 721/722 series was dropped, but so sound was the design, benchrest shooters continued to build rifles on 722 metal.

Remington designers Wayne Leek and Charlie Campbell produced a hand-

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some follow-up to the 721/722 with the Model 725. Introduced in 1958, it had the 721/722 receiver but with checkered walnut, a hinged floorplate, and hooded front and adjustable open rear sights.

The decision to replace the 720 with the 721/722 preceded by four years the introduction of those rifles. At the same time, Remington planned an overhaul of its Models 81 self-loader and 141 pump. The term "Gamemaster," already applied to the 141, was retained when the 760 appeared in 1952. A rotating, multiple-lug bolt with recessed face and a box magazine suited this rifle to the frisky .270 and .30-06. Early 760s also came in .300 Savage and .257 Roberts. In 1955 the 740 auto replaced the 81. Designed by L.R. Crittendon and William Gail, Jr., it shared the 760s profile and lock-up and came in .30-06. While the 760 would thrive until 1980, the 740 was upstaged in 1960 by the 742, which lasted another 20 years.

The bolt-action Model 700 appeared as Remington's flagship big game rifle in 1962—on an action derived from the 721/722. The tang was slimmed, the bolt knob swept and checkered. Cast bottom metal replaced stamped. The stock was spruced up. Mike Walker gave the 700 quick lock time, snug barrel and chamber dimensions. The ADL in .222, .222 Magnum, .243, 6mm, .270, .280, .308 and .30-06 listed for $114.95. It had a blind magazine, pressed "point" checkering. The BDL, with hinged floorplate, fleur-de-lis grip patterns and white spacers, cost $139.95. Both came with iron sights. Concurrent introduction of Remington's new 7mm Magnum cartridge hiked rifle sales. Safari-style 700s, with braked 26-inch barrels in .375 H&H and .458 Winchester ($310) were, in fact, leftover 725 Kodiaks. The 20-inch barrels initially paired with standard chamberings were replaced by 22-inch in 1964.

Beginning in 1966, Remington manufactured 700s for military and police forces. Custom Shop foreman Paul Gogol designed a sniper rifle on a 40X action. It won a Marine Corps contract. Substituting the 700 action, Remington built 995 of these M-40 sniper rifles, fitting many with Redfield 3-9x scopes. In 7.62 NATO (.308), the M-40 served in Viet Nam. A decade later, Remington would produce for the Army 2,510 M700 SWS (Sniper Weapon System) rifles with long actions and Kevlar-reinforced synthetic stocks. Under Leupold M3A 10x scopes they shot into 1.3-inch AMR (average mean radius) at 200 yards!

The 700 sporting rifle series got its first facelift in 1969. Four years later, Remington introduced a left-bolt, left-stock 700, in .270, .30-06 and 7mm Magnum. Myriad versions of the 700 have followed.

Remington has fielded other bolt rifles. Model 600 and 660 carbines had dogleg bolt handles like the XP-100 pistol from which they derived. Slow sellers, the rifles hung on from 1964 to 1971. The 788 was an economical but sturdy rear-locking gun made from 1967 to 1983. Remington's short-action Model Seven, introduced in 1983, has thrived. The 78 (really a 700 in plain dress) has not. Manufactured from 1984 to 1989, it had a hardwood stock. The 673 Guide Rifle, built from 2003 to 2006, chambered the 6.5 and .350 Remington Magnum in a 660-Magnum-style rifle with a Model Seven action. Another jewel: the Model 798 on Zastava Mauser metal, announced in 2006. Safari Grade .375s and .458s boasted handsome laminated stocks. The 798 succumbed quickly to a policy by Cerberus to market only Remington actions.

By most measures, Remington's fortunes have flagged during its tenure as a vassal of Cerberus Capital. Still, the gunmaker endures. It has faced other financial hurdles and will no doubt clear this one. Meanwhile, it remains a vital part of the industry it helped launch 200 years ago. While its firearms and cartridges serve millions of hunters each year, they also evoke for as many outdoorsmen and women fond memories of their youth, of seasons afield with families and mentors, of precious times that won't return. Remington's contributions to war efforts, and its support of hunting and wildlife conservation over many decades, represent value far above that of its products. In donations and partnerships, endorsements and sponsorships, Remington has raised many millions of dollars to fuel organizations like the Boone and Crockett Club, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Wildlife Management Institute—groups working on behalf of responsible hunters and the wildlife they support. Yes, Remington has a steep road ahead, but no steeper than the path that has brought it this far. ■

Long a part of North America's hunting tradition, Remington actively supports conservation groups.