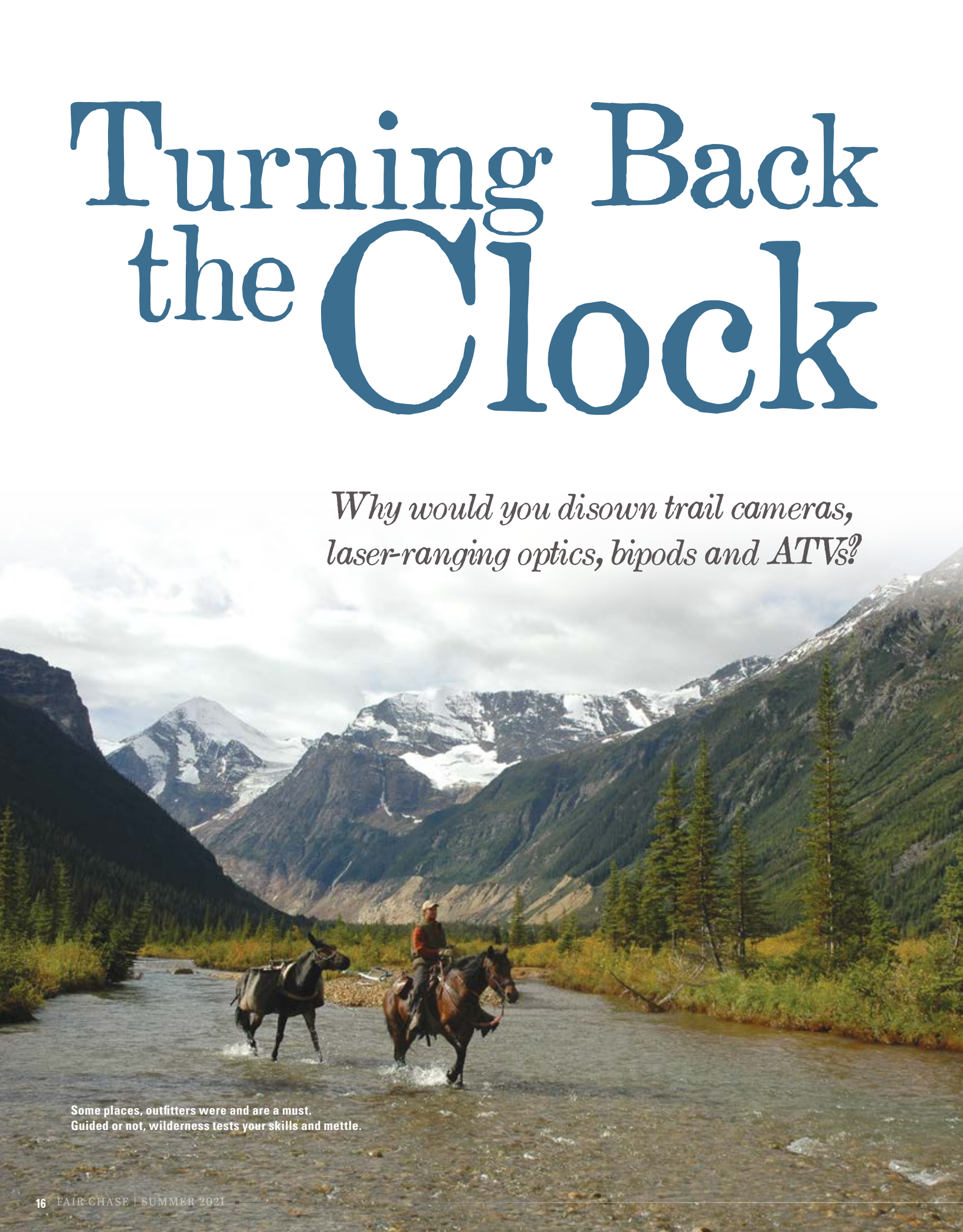
Turning Back the Clock

Why would you disown trail cameras, laser-ranging optics, bipods and ATVs?



Some places, outfitters were and are a must.
Guided or not, wilderness tests your skills and mettle.

WAYNE C. VAN ZWOLL

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

"The bull must have heard me, as he crossed the creek and went out on the other side, stopping in a big open place to look back....I placed the bead of the Model '86 close behind the shoulder for a high lung shot and squeezed the trigger.... [Hearing the hit, then] dropping down under the smoke, I saw him throw up his head and run around the shoulder of the hill.... There was time to give him a couple more, but being certain of my aim I did not try to shoot again. On crossing the creek [I discovered] frothy blood on the off side...." So wrote Elmer Keith of shooting an elk with a 500-grain .45-70 bullet driven by 70 grains FG powder. Digging the bullet out of a clay bank, he waited a few minutes, then trailed the animal, finding it dead in "a log-choked bottom" well below the trail "where he must have died traveling."

That tale has patina absent in hunting stories now. Besides the black-powder load, there's Keith's abbreviation of his Winchester. In 1951, the 1886 was only 15 years out of production. Many hunters still knew it as the '86 and used it afield. Collector status would come later. Keith favored it over the box-fed 1895, noting: "With the Model '95 in any caliber, if you push a cartridge down in the magazine without being sure the rim of the cartridge is forward of the one below it, you will hopelessly jam the rifle. With the '86 you can push cartridges in through the loading gate by feel alone...."

He didn't mention his sights. No need, unless he'd equipped the big lever-action with an aperture rear sight. Like most Depression-era elk hunters, Keith was accustomed to using the open sights provided. The top-ejecting 1886 didn't easily accept optics.

Finding and retrieving a bullet that had passed through an animal not yet recovered was evidently no more unusual for Keith than watching a stricken elk run off without sending more bullets after it. He'd not only called the shot, but heard the strike and read the animal's reaction. He was confident in the load and knew pressing this elk would serve no purpose. He apparently found the animal right away, though it had rolled some distance off the forest trail into a tangle of windfall below. He retrieved it alone: "I later had a time getting horses down to him and out with the quarters and head."

In this era of trail cameras and heated blinds, a mature buck killed still-hunting is an exceptional prize.

That 1951 account was published "many years" after the hunt. But Keith's rifles, loads and field habits were slow to change. Not because they were more effective than more contemporary options, but because they defined hunting as he chose to practice it.

By then Roy Weatherby was hawking his fast-stepping magnums for big game. Jack O'Connor's clever wordsmithing and ready acceptance of the new *and* the traditional appealed to legions of hunters—even as his embrace of the .270 put him

Catch-as-catch-can shots in cover reward hunters using the nimble rifles, heavy bullets of the '50s.

at odds with Keith, who advised thicker bullets at modest speeds. Both scribes profited from their positions, as did their publishers.

A decade later, scoped bolt rifles were well established. The Winchester Model 70 had appeared in 1937 without provision for scope mounts. Drilled and tapped after the war, it was joined in 1948 by the 721/722 Remington, on the heels of Leupold's first nitrogen-purged, fog-free scope and the debut of the Weaver K4, destined to become one of the most popular hunting sights ever. In 1956, Winchester started spooling out magnum cartridges based on the .300 H&H but with 2.50-inch hulls suited for use in actions developed around the .30-06.

John Amber's 1962 *Gun Digest* carried two articles about Remington's Model 700 rifle and 7mm Magnum cartridge, both new that year. Bob Hagel snared a couple of early 700s. After the requisite range tests, he scoped one rifle with a 4x Bushnell and took both 150- and 175-grain factory loads hunting in his home state of Idaho. Spotting a bighorn ram from afar, Hagel trudged three miles over demanding terrain to reach a bench 80 yards above the animal. He fired as it quartered to him. At the report, "the ram folded up, rolled down against a log and lay still."

Next Hagel hunted for a mountain goat along the Continental Divide on the Montana line. Fickle wind nixed his chance at a big billy. Declining shots at goats that might pulp themselves in a tumble, he wound up shooting a nanny "at 150 yards, almost straight up." The goat flinched at the hit, then climbed, "white tufts of hair ... floating down from her back. She would not go far, but I dared not let her make the cliff above. [A second] 150-grain Core-Lokt smashed home ...." She fell backward over a ledge and slid down a snowy chute, coming to rest, undamaged, in shale below.

An elk was next, Hagel switching to 175-grain round nose Core-Lokt bullets. A big cow appeared in "small spruce timber at slightly over 100 yards...I whistled and she stopped, quartering a little away...[At the strike] she shook from nose to tail..." He came upon her dead within 45 yards. A mule deer buck was quartering slightly about 75 steps off when Hagel fired a 150-grain Core-Lokt from the new rifle. "At the shot he collapsed, rolled down the hill, threshed around a little and was done."

Bob (Robert Franklin) Hagel was by then hailed as an authority among the shooting and hunting fraternity. Born in Montana in 1916, he'd moved with his parents to Gibbonsville, Idaho, in the '30s, took up handloading there and later wrote of rifles and loads for big game. Hagel wildcatted frothy 7mms well before Remington's appeared. With his contemporary Warren Page (*Field & Stream* shooting editor from 1947 to 1971), he favored the 7mm Mashburn Super Magnum,

ABOVE: The Core-Lokt, developed in the 1930s when round-nose bullets reached far enough, is still lethal.

An "old-fashioned" round-nose 180-grain Core-Lokt from Wayne's mild .300 Savage handily took a big elk. Perfect upset! Remington's only .300 Savage load now sends a pointed 150-grain C-L (right).

based on the .300 H&H trimmed to 2.635 and arguably the best of Art Mashburn's three hot 7s. Page, who died at 67 in 1977, hunted with it world-wide, hurling 175-grain bullets at 3,050 fps. Bob Hagel would live to see the era of belted magnums give way to bigger rimless rounds with ever longer legs. He passed in 2005.

Oddly enough, while these and other published hunters had ready access to the latest in rifles and fast-stepping cartridges, such hardware didn't much affect their hunting. They still probed the thickets and climbed the steeps on foot, used scopes of modest power (4x for Hagel and Page) and crept close to shoot. Initiating the 7mm Remington Magnum, Hagel's average shot distance for four animals barely exceeded 100 steps. Elmer Keith might well have downed those beasts with his iron-sighted .45-70!

Soon the Model 700 rifle in 7mm Magnum was making Remington lots of money. Testimonials from the likes of Wyoming outfitter Les Bowman left the impression the new 7 shot as flat and hit as hard as a .300 Magnum, but without punishing recoil. Surveys I conducted during the 1990s among members of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation showed the 7mm Magnum as popular as the .30-06 in elk camps. But if reports are to be believed, the distances at which elk were killed changed little over that decade.

About then the prospect of a Dall's ram and an Alaska-Yukon moose put me in a hammerlock. A fit of profligacy soon had me scrunched, with duffel and rifle, in the back of a Super Cub. To ensure this hunt wouldn't devolve into a sniping exercise or collecting expedition, I'd chosen an iron-sighted 1903 Springfield over rifles with longer reach and glass eyes. I had refurbished the tired Fajen wood, tweaking its shape so the aperture came instantly to eye. In those days, I could still see a blade front sight.

"You're nuts!" said a pal, also economically challenged. "You'll never get there again! Take your magnum! And a scope! What if your only shot comes at 350 yards?" A long poke indeed.

"Nonsense," said I, the shadow of a smile under my Gary Cooper squint. "Alaska isn't *that* big." But I thought: "Good grief; what if!"

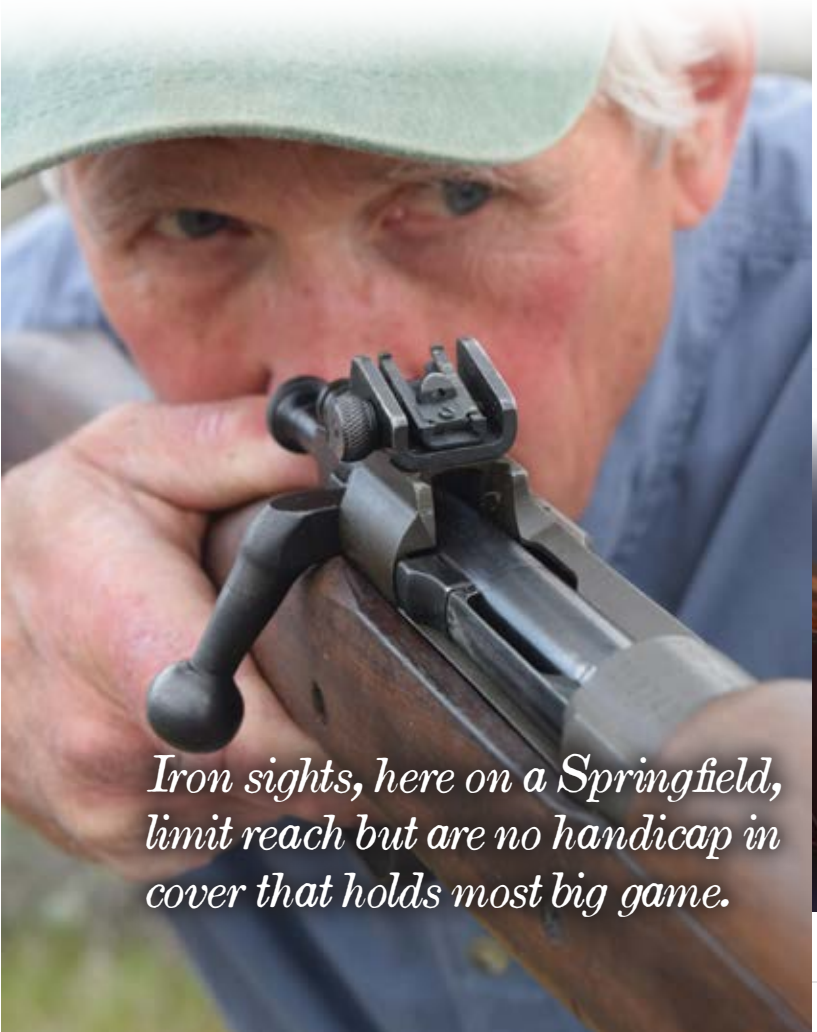
Camp was a tent on a treeless plain threaded by glacier melt. The airplane climbed steeply away. Food seemed in short supply. It had proven popular the previous week, explained my guide, when a friend had dropped by and shot a 37-inch ram. "But we'll try to find you a sheep."

Next day's ascent tired him and his packer. I was in pretty good shape, if hungry. Clouds bellied low. We'd left the tundra when white dots appeared at their hazy hem. "At least one ram," said my guide, coming to life. Behind a stony spine, we hurried almost straight toward the animals. Peeking over it as we neared the sheep, we found clouds had enveloped them. We eased toward a rock pinnacle to wait for skies to lift. Suddenly, a half-dozen young rams burst from behind the pinnacle, clattering over the rubble. I'd dropped to a sit, and my Springfield was ready when a seventh appeared, late. Tips over the bridge of his nose! I horsed the bead onto a rear rib, in line with the off-shoulder as he galloped off. He faltered at the shot, collapsed as I bolted in another round.

Moose camp, with other company, appeared beneath the Piper's wings at the curve of a sun-shot stream. We bumped onto a gravel bar near the tents. Again, a local had shot an exceptional animal here the week before. But moose were abundant, and a few days later I spied a bull with a cow, browsing in head-high foliage. Alas, the wind swung during my sneak. They lined out at a trot. Sprinting ahead for a quartering poke should they stop, I pulled up as the bull suddenly turned. He crossed a willow flat at 120 yards, his shoulder in and out of the red and yellow bush. Then, charitably, he paused. My sight found a forward rib. The *whuck!* was audible. After a stumble, the bull found his feet and was again brief brown hyphens in crowded scarlet text. But as I looked frantically for a shot alley, he piled up.

The lure of rifles dating to the 1950s and '60s—and earlier—has much to do with nostalgia. My family didn't hunt. Schooled in the pages of hunting and shooting magazines, I bumbled about the woods with borrowed .22s until a $30 SMLE made me a big game hunter. Local big game didn't get that memo for several seasons.

Arguably, the best hunting in the western U.S. came hard on the heels of WW II—when hunters were blessed with a stunning array of rifles. Savage's 99 and Winchester's Model 71 (from $96



Iron sights, here on a Springfield, limit reach but are no handicap in cover that holds most big game.

Heavy round-nose bullets sell poorly in this era of The Long Shot. Where game lives, they're deadly.

and $105 in 1951) offered more punch for lever-action buffs than did Marlin's 336 (from $61), but all were the best of their type, then or since. Winchester's Model 70 (from $110) was becoming "the rifleman's rifle." The 1950s would produce, in the workshops of gifted craftsmen, the "classic" sporter, its lithe, conservative profile a template for future talent. A crop of compelling high-velocity cartridges, .222 Remington to .340 Weatherby, appeared. Prices for hunting scopes, recently fog-free and with constantly centered reticles, had stalled between $38 (for Weaver's K2.5 in 1951) and $80 (for B&L's Balvar variable).

While hunting prospects now don't match Hagel's 1962 in-state take of deer, elk, sheep and goat, a hunt with a rifle of that era, afoot and with a compass instead of a cell phone, isn't hard to arrange.

So inspired, a few of us traditionalists met recently on the Wyoming desert to pester pronghorns with iron-sighted rifles pre-dating the Great War.

Like mule deer, pronghorns were apparently common in much of the Louisiana Purchase before pioneers shot them for meat. Following the Homestead Act of 1862, settlers pulled wind-braking timber from prairie draws, then plowed the earth bare. Feeding their families and markets, they all but extirpated pronghorns over most of their native range. In 1879 John Wesley Powell determined that to sustain itself, a pioneer family needed at least 2,560 acres. Congress allocated 160. Overgrazing ensued. Savage winters in 1886 and '87 rested the range by killing 80 percent of its cattle. But wildlife perished too, and more cattle came. Decades later, Depression and the Dust Bowl bled the prairie of settlement again. Wildlife struggled through the drought. After WW II, wildlife conservation agencies throttled pronghorn take. Herds responded.

A red sun sponged shadow from the sage as I crawled to a rise to glass white bellies 300 yards off. A chip shot for modern rifles, it was three times my effective range with the Savage 1899 in .25-35. The buck nosed a doe. *He'll take her from the others.* And he did, like a cutting horse. They angled my way. Lizard-low, chin-to-sand in the heel-high grass, I let them pass at perhaps 100 steps. Throttling back, both cantered 'round in a long arc. The blade quivered in the aperture. *Slow down!* And he did. My finger took the final ounce. The 110-grain bullet landed audibly; the buck sprinted and fell.

My companions, armed with early Winchesters and a Marlin, were likewise constrained by loads of modest reach, from the .30-30 to a .38-56 and a .40-60 firing cast bullets. All killed pronghorn bucks. That hunt ages well in memory. The history represented by our rifles, and the sneaks that failed to bring us close enough to kill, were key elements.

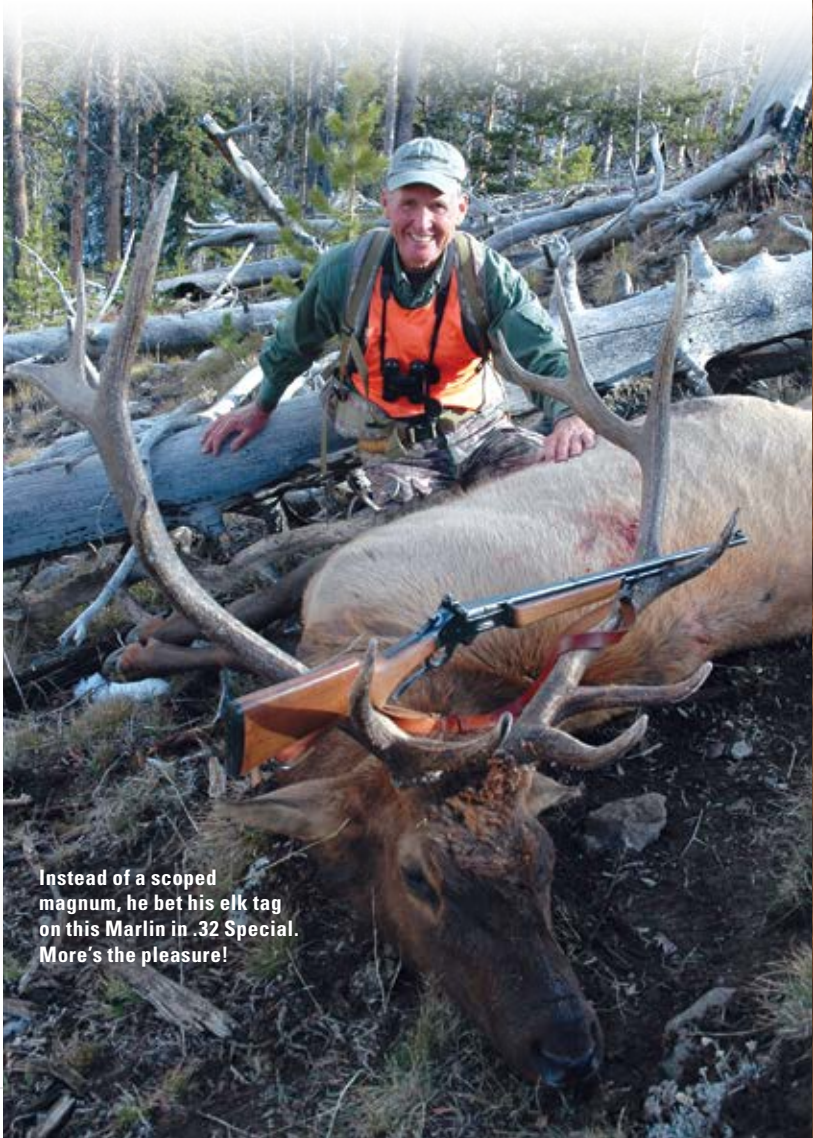
Saddle rifles pre-dating the Great War come dear now. But ordinary bolt-actions with history, like the Springfield that followed me to Alaska, won't crater your budget. Indeed, a mid-century sporter with vintage scope and load puts bounce in *my* step. Not long ago a Herter's U9 on a BSA action turned up at a pawn shop. I'd once pined for such a rifle. Still-hunting Dakota badlands with this U9, I was back in the '60s. A whitetail buck exiting a cedar draw paused just long enough, then sprinted and fell, heart minced.

Last fall a Model 99 Savage in .300 beckoned. A 1950s rifle. A centenarian cartridge. I scrounged a Weaver K4 of like vintage and a box of 180-grain round-nose loads, now discontinued. Having blanked in license lotteries, I bought an OTC tag for Colorado's second elk season. Travis Reed at Western Sky Outfitters supplied horses and a packer to reach a Spartan camp at 9,600 feet, well above trails furrowed by ATVs. Four days in, I was feeling my legs. The 99's steel and walnut put it over 8 ½ pounds, trailside. But this was *hunting*, in steeps as spectacular now as when the .300 Savage was a top-selling elk round.

My last afternoon, as Clayton and I eased along a canyon rim, he spotted an elk in conifers below the sharp pitch at our feet, a slope with almost no cover. We reeled in a few yards, put binos to work, saw more cows. Then an aspen shook. I slid closer on hands and hip as the cows filed through a slot. Antlers winked in shadow, smashing the aspen flat. He threaded the gap faster than had the cows. Too fast.

The forest could have gulped that elk—an ending I'd have to accept. But even hunters with rifles from the '50s occasionally get a break. The bull emerged in a slip of grass on timber's hem, his shoulder behind a fir. The crosshair danced to my pulse. Then he took a step. The round-nose Core-Lokt lumbered off as, briefly, the beast swung in a turn that would take it out of my life.

The sight picture, the impact, the great antlers sagging would stay sharp in memory had my rifle not been a 1950s Model 99 in .300 Savage, with an old K4. But I'd have had less to prize before the shot. ■



Instead of a scoped magnum, he bet his elk tag on this Marlin in .32 Special. More's the pleasure!