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LEVER ACTIONS IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ALASKA



A GUIDE'S NOTES

by Phil Shoemaker

When the topic of lever-action rifles is brought up, the response you'll get from most modern hunters, especially those who spend the majority of their lives in cities and towns, is that they are outdated, inaccurate, underpowered and in most cases incompatible with flat-shooting, spitzer bullets. On top of that, you couldn't mount an oversized, overpriced, 50mm tactical, variable-powered scope, complete with multiple tall turrets, on one even if you tried.

What you can do though is pick

up a loaded levergun, wrap your hand around the slim, smooth receiver and head out for a day, a week or a month with absolute confidence that you are adequately armed for any contingency you are likely to encounter in this hemisphere. Their unique combination of portability and usability imbues them with ergonomics seldom found in more "modern" rifles.

Like most modern hunters, I also tend to think along the lines of fine bolt-action rifles when I contemplate hunting rifles, but



The .30-30 carbine, like this Model 94 Winchester and Model 99 Savage, remains popular with Alaskan hunters and trappers.

when Editor Dave Scovill asked me to do this piece, I started looking around our log cabin in Central, Alaska, and noticed there are at least as many lever-action rifles hanging within reach as there are bolt guns. In fact there are lever rifles hanging over doors or standing in corners within easy reach in a surprisingly large number of cabins here in Central. The reason is that for most purposes, where shots will be less than 200 yards, there is nothing any better.

Many of these rifles are providing service to a second, and in some cases even a third, genera-



Lever rifles from the Shoemaker homestead include the Winchester Model 71 .475 Turnbull and the Winchester Model 94-22 (top) and (left to right): Marlin .44 Magnum, Model 99 .300 Savage, Model 94 .30-30, Model 99 .30-30, Model 1899 .303, Browning .45-70, Model 99 .30-30 and the Model 94 .30-30.

tion of shooters. Stan Gelvin, whose family was prominent in John McPhee's book titled *Coming into the Country*, has a number of old, useful lever actions, including a very early Model 1886 Winchester that was built in 1886, as well as his father Ed's favorite .250-3000 Savage Model 99.

Although Marlin rifles are currently the most popular, Winchester and Savage lever rifles held more prominent positions throughout Alaskan history and were widely used on both sides of the law. Charles Hendrickson, the outlaw better known as the "Blue Parka Man," carried a Savage Model 1899, and last fall while I was perusing the Fairbanks gun show, I found a saddle ring Winchester Model 95 .30 U.S. Army (aka .30-40 Krag) carbine with the markings of the Alaska Territorial guards.

References to lever-action rifles abound when one begins reading older books and stories. From the fanciful tales of Russell Annabel to the more verifiable stories of legendary guides like Andrew Berg, Allen Hasselborg, Slim Moore, Bill Pinnell and Morris Talifson, you will find constant references to reliable Winchester lever rifles. Professional hunter and federal predator agent Frank Glaser's favorite market hunting rifle was his Savage .250-3000. Bush pilot Bob Reeve, like so many other serious bear hunters of his day, used a .405 Model 95 Winchester when he went after the massive brown bears of the Alaska Peninsula.

Dave Scovill, who is quite competent with a lever rifle, also used a Model 95 .405 when I guided him for spring brown bear on the Alaska Peninsula. He left the rifle with me for a season. I had absolute confidence in it. The load I eventually settled on was 58 grains of IMR-4895 with a 300-grain Woodleigh softnosed bullet at 2,200 fps.

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definite attributes of leverguns, but so is their ability to rapidly dispense prodigious amounts of lead in short periods of time. Rifle builder Doug Turnbull gave an impressive display of rapid fire last fall with his original Win-



It would be hard to find a better rifle for the serious bear hunter than this Model 86 takedown .475 Turnbull.

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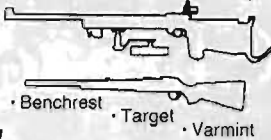
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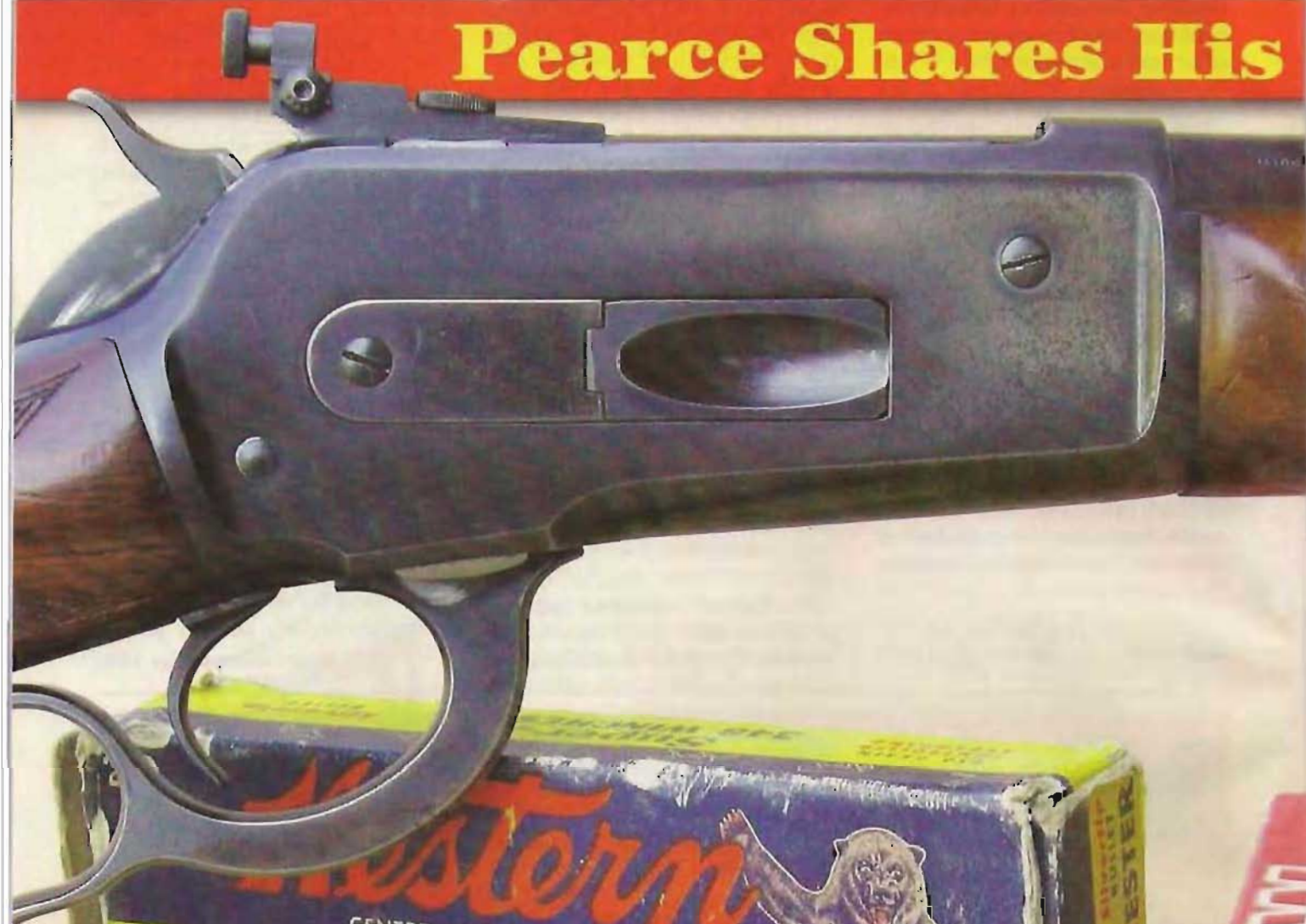
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chester 1886 rifle that he rechambered for his proprietary and powerful .475 Turnbull. I carry my Browning Model 86 .45-70 while guiding fishermen during the summer for the same reason.

Seven instantly available rounds of Buffalo Bore's hard-cast, flat-nosed 430-grain ammunition at 2,100 fps gives one a comfortable feeling. I imagine son Taj's Winchester Model 71 .475 Turnbull is equally comforting as, like Doug, he is quite facile with a lever. He carried a .300 Savage Model 99 loaded with Nosler 165-grain Partitions, pushed along at 2,400 fps by 38 grains of Varget, for years while guiding sheep, caribou and grizzly bear hunters in the Brooks Range.

Lever-action rifles can best be described as a hunter's tool that, like hammers, knives, axes, cross-cut saws and single-action revolvers, were perfected years ago. In places where such tools are found, they are as useful as ever. ★

Pearce Shares His



LOADS FOR LEVER

Favorites



GUN CARTRIDGES

Brian Pearce

When we consider the broad range of center-fire cartridges designed specifically for or adapted to leverguns, the numbers are staggering. For instance, count the cartridges that Winchester chambered in its Models 1873, 1876, 1886, 1892, 1894, 1895, 53, 55, 64, 65, 71 and 88. Throw into the mix those offered by Savage for its Models 1895 and 1899 and Marlin Models 1881, 1888, 1889, 1893, 93, 36, 1936, 336, 1894, 1895 (both old and new) and 62.

Starline cases have the longest life and are more uniform.

We could also discuss high-pressure cartridges that have been housed in modern leverguns, such as the Browning BLR and others. To give any kind of justice to each would literally require a book. Therefore we must limit it to personal favorites, many of which are also the favorites of average shooters and hunters.

.25-20 WCF

The .25-20 WCF was introduced in the middle 1890s by Winchester for its Model 1892 lever-action rifle and quickly picked up by Marlin for its Model 1894 (with a number of other manufacturers offering it in pump, bolt and single-shot action types). Early factory loads used around 17 grains of black powder to drive an 86-grain lead bullet around 1,376 fps. When smokeless powders appeared, jacketed bullets reached as high as 2,200 fps, but today an 86-grain bullet is advertised at 1,460 fps.



When handloading the .30-30 Winchester for deer, Brian prefers the Speer 150-grain flat softpoint Hot-Cors or Sierra 150-grain flatnoses. Both will expand reliably at 200 plus yards and generally exit on broadside shots.



In factory .30-30 Winchester loads, Brian generally favors the Remington 150-grain Core-Lokt for hunting deer, while Federal Premium loads with the 170-grain Nosler-Partition get the nod for larger game.

Favorite handloads for the .25-20 WCF include 8.0 grains of Hodgdon H-110 behind the Remington 86-grain jacketed softpoint (JSP) for around 1,375 fps. For modern (strong) rifles, try

Marlin and Remington teamed up to introduce the .444 Marlin in 1964.

the Speer 75-grain flatnose (FN) behind 14.2 grains of Accurate 1680 with a Winchester Small Rifle primer for 2,185 fps. Pressures are around 30,000 CUP and are for strong rifles only.

THE .32 WCF (AKA .32-20 WINCHESTER)

This is an excellent little cartridge that dates back to around 1883 and was designed for the Winchester Model 1873 rifle. Today's factory loads from Winchester and Remington advertise a 100-grain lead bullet at 1,210 fps. To assemble handloads that produce similar pressure and ve-

locity, try Lyman cast bullet 311008 weighing 116 grains pushed by 3.5 grains of Winchester 231. I hunt regularly with the .32-20 with a standard load using the Speer 100-grain jacketed hollowpoint (JHP) pushed by 13.5 grains of Hodgdon H-110 and ignited with a Remington 7½ primer. Velocity is around 2,100 fps, and pressure is less than 30,000 CUP (only recommended for strong firearms). That load

has made a good accounting when used on bobcat, javelina, raccoons, coyote, deer, turkey and a variety of other game. Starline cases (factory direct: 1-800-280-6660) are strongly advised, with a firm but gentle roll crimp applied.

THE .38 WCF (AKA .38-40 WINCHESTER)

Around 1879 Winchester necked the .44 WCF case down to .40 cal-

Some of Brian's favorite .45-70 factory loads include Cor-Bon 405-grain PEN Solid, Buffalo Bore 405-grain softpoint and Remington's traditional 405-grain softpoint.



LEVERGUN LOADS



The .45-70 is well-suited to using either jacketed or cast bullets. Belt Mountain offers a superb 400-grain Punch Solid (right) for use in the .45-70, which Brian considers ideal for heavy and dangerous game, including elephant.

iber to create the .38 WCF that pushed a 180-grain lead bullet around 1,324 fps. There were a number of high-velocity loads that began to appear around 1905, some reaching more than 2,000 fps using 145-grain jacketed bullets. In consideration for the older guns, Winchester and Remington have limited factory loads to drive a 180-grain jacketed softpoint around 1,160 fps.

I avoid pushing the cartridge with heavy handloads but prefer to essentially duplicate current factory loads. Using a 190-grain cast bullet from Redding mould 401 ahead of 8.5 grains of Alliant Unique yields a muzzle velocity of around 1,300 fps. If I am too lazy to cast, the 180-grain round-nose flatpoint (RNFP) bullet, as offered by Oregon Trail Bullets, is used behind the same powder charge.

Below, when hunting elk, moose and bear with the .348 WCF, Brian prefers 250-grain bullets from Barnes and Hawk. Right, the .25-20 WCF is a great small game and pest cartridge. Brian favors the 75-grain Speer softpoint with an appropriate charge of Accurate 1680.

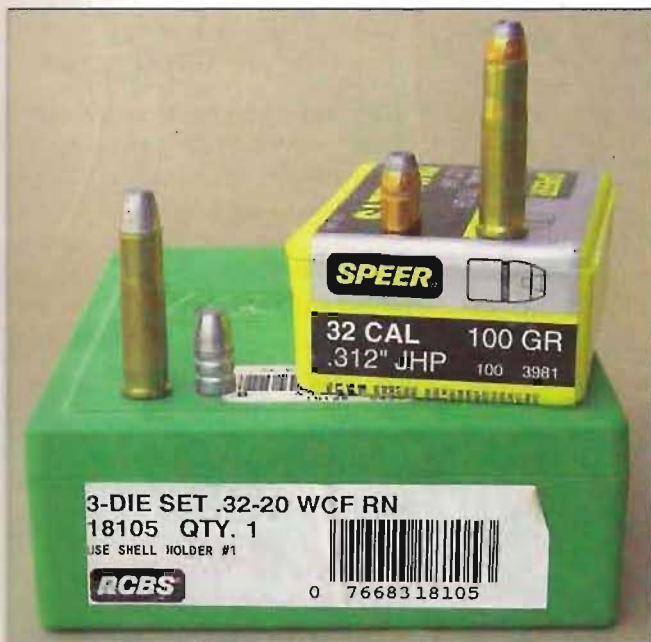


THE .44 WCF (AKA .44-40 WINCHESTER)

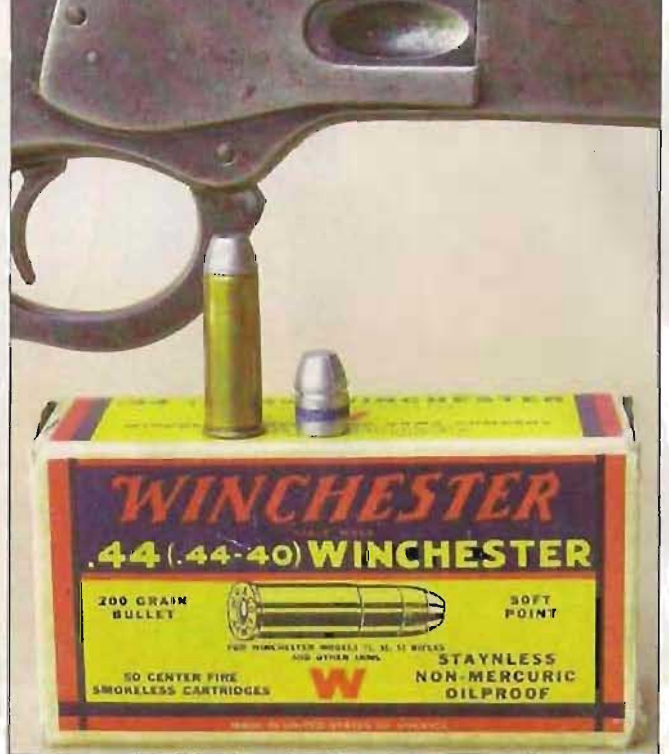
This old cartridge first appeared in 1873 and was designed specifically for the Winchester Model 1873 rifle but was soon chambered in the Colt Single Action Army – a combination that became widely popular. Period ammunition consisted of a 200-grain lead bullet charged with around 40 grains of black powder for a muzzle speed of 1,300 fps; today's smokeless loads advertise a 200-grain JSP at 1,190 fps.

The .45-70 is one of those cartridges that has been repeatedly proven on large game over the past 136 years!

My standard .44 WCF handload consists of a 200-grain cast bullet from RCBS mould 44-200-FN driven with either 6.3 grains of Hodgdon Titegroup or 7.1 grains of Winchester 231 with a CCI 300 primer. Each will produce around 1,250 fps from a rifle, or just over 900 fps from a Colt SAA with a 7½-inch barrel. Starline cases have the longest life and are more uniform with fewer being lost due to denting or damage at the mouth.



Brian obtained his first .32-20 Winchester in 1975; it accounted for Arizona deer and javelina. A favorite nowadays is the Speer 100-grain JHP driven with Hodgdon H-110.



Brian uses cast bullets from RCBS mould 44-200-FN when handloading the .44 WCF.

THE .30 WCF

(AKA .30-30 WINCHESTER)

The .30 WCF needs no introduction but was designed for the Winchester Model 1894 by John Browning and first appeared in that rifle in 1895 with nickel-steel barrels. From the get-go, it was a smokeless powder cartridge and drove a 160-grain jacketed bullet around 1,970 fps. Over the years those ballistics have been improved by ammunition companies, and today it is commonly advertised with a 150-grain bullet at 2,390 fps or a 170-grainer at 2,200 fps (from 24-inch barrels).

I have taken a fair number of deer with the .30-30 and generally prefer 150-grain bullets, as they seem to expand more reliably (due primarily to their greater velocities), especially in

soft tissue. And they offer a flatter trajectory, making hits out to around 200 yards or so easier. The Winchester 150-grain Silver-tip and Remington Core-Lokt factory loads are top performers.



Above, Brian has had good success with both jacketed and cast bullets in the .444 Marlin. His favorite deer load, however, contains the Speer 270-grain Gold Dot softpoint. Right, the .357 Magnum, .44 Magnum and .45 Colt are revolver cartridges that are well-suited to lever-action rifles.

Favorite loads consist of either the Speer 150-grain (Hot-Cor) Flat Soft Point or the Sierra 150-grain FN pushed with 34.5 grains of Hodgdon Varget or 31.5 grains of Hodgdon H-322 for 2,200 fps from a 20-inch tube (identical to factory loads). Another worthy



LEVERGUN LOADS

load is 36.0 grains of Hodgdon H-335 for 2,300 fps.

If elk or moose are on the menu, the Barnes 150-grain Triple-Shock (TSX) teamed with 34.0 grains of Hodgdon Varget for 2,250 fps or the 170-grain Nosler Partition with 32.5 grains of Hodgdon H-335 for over 2,100 fps (20-inch barrel) are top choices.

.30-40 KRAG (AKA .30 U.S. ARMY)

This cartridge served our military beginning in 1892 (until the .30-03 and .30-06 changeover a few years later) and was probably the first U.S. cartridge loaded with smokeless powder. Winchester offered it in its Model 1895 levergun, where it became popular with hunters, and I have used it on deer, elk and even in Alaska. In consideration for the relatively weak Krag rifle action (with a single locking lug), factory loads are held well below 40,000 CUP. My standard load does not exceed that figure but is generating slightly greater pressures than factory fodder and should be limited to Model 1895s.

The Sierra 180-grain SPT Pro-Hunter is excellent on deer-sized game, while the Nosler 180-grain Partition gets the nod for black bear and elk. Using 46.0 grains of Winchester 760 with a WLR primer produces around 2,460 fps.

.348 WCF

I have spent a fair amount of time hunting deer and elk with a Winchester Model 71 and the .348 WCF cartridge and have respect and appreciation for both. I have seen a number of rifles beaten to death and still "working" on moose, bears, caribou, etc. in the remote corners of Canada and Alaska.

Advertised ballistics included a 150-grain bullet at nearly 2,900 fps, a 200 grainer at 2,520 fps and a 250 at 2,320 fps (but in reality was around 2,230 fps) with only the 200-grain load surviving

today. To duplicate that load, use the Hornady 200-grain FP with 61.0 grains of IMR-4350 for 2,559 fps from a 24-inch barrel. A few years back, Barnes offered a .348-inch, 200-grain X-Bullet that could be pushed 2,597 fps using 60.0 grains of IMR-4350 and was an excellent load for larger game, but unfortunately it is discontinued. Barnes still offers its Original 250-grain flatnose, which is likewise suitable for elk, moose or large bears. Using 57.0 grains of Hodgdon H-4350sc will produce over 2,250 fps and is within SAAMI pressure limits. The excellent 250-grain Hawk is also a worthy bullet and can be used with the above powder charge.

.38-55

WINCHESTER/BALLARD

The .38-55 Ballard and later .38-55 Winchester were popular target and hunting cartridges during

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This Dave Clay (DRC) custom Marlin Model 1894 .44 Magnum is fast handling and accurate, making it suitable for defense and hunting applications.

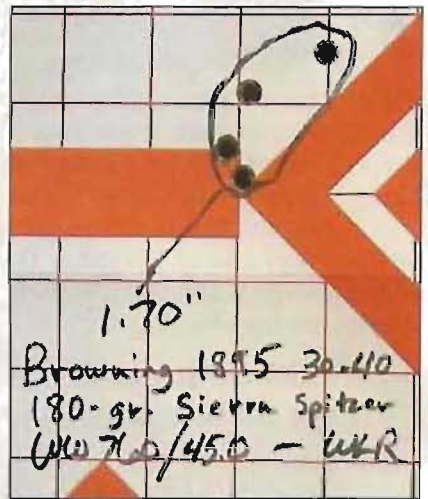
the black-powder era from the 1870s and well into the twentieth century, and it was one of the two cartridges introduced with the new Winchester Model 1894 rifle. Current Winchester factory loads advertise a 255-grain JSP at 1,320 fps (but actually produce 1,162 fps). It should be noted that chamber and bore dimensions

have varied considerably since the 1870s. If using an older rifle, it is suggested to slug the bore before selecting a jacketed bullet or sizing cast bullets.

The loads outlined here were developed in a modern Marlin 336CB Cowboy with a 24-inch octagonal barrel with Ballard-style rifling. Using the 255-grain Winchester bullet (.377 inch) with 27.0 grains of Hodgdon H-4198, velocity is 1,812 fps and produces around 30,000 CUP. Switching to 250-grain cast bullets from Lyman mould 375248 and sized to .379 inch, 19.0 grains of IMR-4198 gave slightly over 1,400 fps and is accurate.

.444 MARLIN

Marlin and Remington teamed up to introduce the .444 Marlin in 1964, which was essentially a .30-06 case with a rim, a slight taper and necked to accept .429-inch bullets. As heavyweight .44 Magnum bullets were developed with improved jackets, it changed the outlook of the cartridge. Some claimed that the one-in-38-inch twist would not stabilize heavier bullets, but I have tried two rifles with many bullets ranging in weight from 240 to 335 grains (cast and jacketed), and some of the best accu-



The .30-40 Krag in Winchester and Browning Model 1895s is an excellent hunting cartridge.

racy was obtained with 300-grain versions.

A favorite handload that drops deer as though struck by lightning is the Speer 270-grain Gold Dot ahead of 54.0 grains of Hodgdon H-322 for 2,307 fps (24-inch barrel). When hunting larger game (such as elk or moose), try the Speer 300-grain Plated SP driven with 52.0 grains of H-322 for 2,201 fps.

.45-70

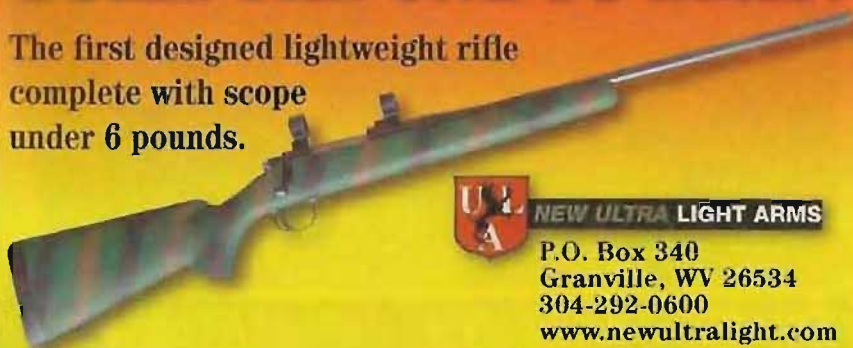
(AKA .45-70 GOVERNMENT)

The .45-70 is one of those cartridges that has been repeatedly proven on large game over the past 136 years! I first began using it in the 1970s in the newly introduced Marlin Model 1895 and still consider it a mainstay in my inventory. It has been carried in Alaska among the great bears, accounted for a number of black bears and been used to drop elk on difficult shots in Idaho's dark timber. It has taken disagreeable (on the hook) range bulls headed for slaughter that weighed well beyond 2,000 pounds with a single shot. It has also been used in Africa on Cape buffalo and a variety of plains game. As long as the right bullet is chosen for the job at hand, it works very well.

It would certainly make my job easier if I would just list a single favorite load and be done with it,

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LEVERGUN LOADS

but since many different bullet/powder combinations are used, depending on how the rifle will be used, I cannot do that! When it comes to factory fodder, the various 300-grain JHPs at around 1,850 to 1,900 fps are best when used on deer-sized game, while 400- to 430-grain bullets are better suited to larger species. Buffalo Bore Ammunition offers a 405-grain softpoint load at around 2,000 fps that is devastating on game up to the size of elk and

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moose and is even suitable for the great bears of the north. Cor-Bon Ammunition offers a 405-grain PENETRATOR solid at 1,800 fps that drives arrow-straight and deep, making it suitable for taking heavy, dangerous game.

When it comes to cast bullet handloads, I rely on 415-grain bullets from RCBS mould 45-405-FN that features a gas check and was designed specifically for leverguns. For a comparatively low-recoiling, pleasant-to-shoot load, 31.0 grains of Hodgdon H-4198 will produce 1,323 fps from a 22-inch barrel. If hunting with this bullet, wherein a flatter trajectory is desired, then it gets pushed to 2,000 fps using 52.0 grains of Hodgdon H-322, but forget the "low-recoil" idea. When I get too busy to cast my own bullets, I have had good results with the Cast Performance 420-grain WLNGC loaded over 50.0 grains of the same powder for around 1,950 fps.

Switching to jacketed bullets, I rely on either the Speer 400-grain JSP or Remington 405-grain SP. Both have been used on big game, proving devastating on deer, black bear, elk and a variety of African plains game. Around 53.0 to 54.0 grains of Hodgdon H-322 (depending on lot number) will push either bullet to just over 2,000 fps from a 22-inch barrel. This load is compressed with the powder serving to support the base of the bullet and prevent it from being pushed into the case when subjected to recoil and magazine tube spring pressure. For a light-recoiling more casual load, the 400-grain Speer can be pushed 1,400 fps using 46.0 grains of Hodgdon Varget.

When using the .45-70 on large, dangerous game, wherein the best possible solid is desired, the Belt Mountain 400-grain Punch Solid can be loaded with 53.0 grains of Hodgdon H-322 for 1,967 fps.

WARNING: Several of the above .45-70 loads are developing pressures ranging from 35,000 to 43,000 psi and should only be used

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in *modern* Marlin Model 1895s and *modern* Winchester Model 1886s or guns of similar strength.

.357 MAGNUM

The .357 Magnum was introduced in 1935 as a joint effort between Winchester and Smith & Wesson and has become one of our most popular revolver cartridges, but it also makes an excellent levergun round. Putting aside the appeal of having a rifle and handgun that share the same cartridge, it can stand on its own as a legitimate rifle round. It takes deer cleanly, is an excellent home protection/personal defense carbine (for those with skill), it's fun to shoot, offering mild recoil, and is economical.

Favorite factory loads include the Speer 158-grain Gold Dot HP (1,812 fps from a 20-inch barrel) and Hornady 158-grain XTP-HP (1,855 fps). Buffalo Bore offers a 158-grain JHP load that achieves 2,084 fps (18½-inch barrel). Favorite handloads likewise include the Speer 158-grain Gold Dot HP or Hornady 158-grain XTP-HP loaded over 16.6 grains of Hodgdon H-110 for around 1,800 to 1,850 fps. By switching to a Federal 200 primer and 20.0 grains of Hodgdon Lil'Gun (with 158-grain bullets), velocity can be increased to over 2,100 fps from a 20-inch barrel and is within SAAMI pressure limits.

.44 MAGNUM

Like the .357 Magnum, the .44 Magnum has become popular in leverguns, as it shares all the handy features of its little brother but offers substantially greater power. For a general purpose deer or defense load, use either the Hornady 240-grain XTP-HP or Speer 240-grain Gold Dot HP ahead of 24.0 grains of Hodgdon H-110 for around 1,800 fps. For moose medicine, try a 320-grain LBT LFN gas check bullet pushed by 21.5 to 22.0 grains of Hodgdon H-110 and capped with a Federal 155 primer for around 1,700 fps. ★

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