

GRANDPA'S GUN

Each time I took the old rifle into the mountains, I carried more than just a firearm.

BY BOB LOVE

Grandpa paid \$18 for the Winchester Model 94 .30-.30 in 1926, and hunted whitetails with it in southwestern Pennsylvania until he died in 1954, before I was a year old. It hung on some barn nails in the rafters of Grandma's attic, along with his squirrel gun—a .22—and a double-barreled 12-gauge he used for rabbits and grouse. My brother Tom and I were fascinated with the guns, and spent a lot of time studying them, without touching. We weren't allowed to handle firearms unsupervised. The guns were a tangible connection to our grandpa, whom we knew only through stories and photographs. We noticed he had carved seven notches in the forearm of the Winchester. Neither Dad nor our uncles knew what the marks meant. Grandpa killed a deer nearly every year he hunted with that lever-action rifle, they told me, so maybe the notches signified bigger bucks.

Grandpa killed a buck with the rifle the first year he hunted with it, in 1926, and had the head mounted on a walnut board above an oval mirror. The buck's rack was oddly shaped: One antler was normal while the other was flat and slightly palmated, as though the deer had slept on it when the antler was soft and in velvet. My parents stored the mount in their basement when Grandma moved out of her house, and I brought it to Montana when I eventually settled down. It hangs on the wall of our front room next to two photographs of Grandpa with his rifle and the buck, one taken in the woods and the other in town with the buck draped over a car's front fender.

I brought the Model 94 west with me in 1971 when I finished high school, and shot a mule deer with it in some mountains near Bozeman. The following summer, my Uncle Frank gave me his Winchester Model 70 Featherweight .270, outfitted with an adjustable scope, that he'd bought in the mid-1950s. "This will work better than that

.30-.30 in the country you're hunting now," he told me. When I took it to George Dieruf, a cranky old gunsmith in Bozeman, and asked him to help me develop some handloads for it, he grumbled, "That's an awful nice gun for a damn kid." George was right; it was an outrageous gift for a teenager, sort of a firearms version of pearls before swine. Uncle Frank was also right; it was the ideal rifle for western hunting, lightweight and flat-shooting, with a bolt action that allowed for a scope mount. I was too young to fully appreciate what a fine gun that Model 70 was, but I knew enough to take care of it. I've hunted with that rifle now for 40 years, and have killed more game with it than Frank could have imagined, in places he would have loved to hunt.

I didn't use Grandpa's gun much once I got the Model 70, especially when I started hunting mountain mule deer. Though muleys often hang out in the timber, they live in big country that can require longer shots. With the scoped .270 I could easily kill a deer at 200 yards and also thread a bullet through a doghair lodgepole thicket if necessary. In Montana, it is simply a more efficient tool than the .30-.30, which loses accuracy past about 150 yards and is really ideal for under 100 yards. This was an important consideration when I was raising a family and didn't have much time to hunt. Now that the kids are grown, filling the freezer isn't as critical as it once was, so I use the .30-.30 more often. With that shorter-shooting gun I have to stalk the deer, or rattle them in, preferably within 75 yards.

One Thanksgiving morning several years ago, I decided to take Grandpa's rifle for a walk in the mountains. The Thanksgiving hunt is a tradition I was raised with and maintain to this day. In western Montana this time of year, the bucks are in full rut; if we've had



PHOTO PROVIDED BY AUTHOR

PENNSYLVANIA WHITETAIL The author's grandfather, in 1926, holds his new .30-.30 and a buck with a flattened and palmated right antler.

heavy snows the muleys are bunched up on their winter ranges. Accompanying me was my son, Orion. He'd killed a buck earlier in the season, so he was acting as spotter, rattler, and, with luck, dragger. As we drove up the road toward our muley hunting territory, Orion said, "If you get one, I'll drag it out for you. I owe you for all those bucks you dragged out for me." I wasn't about to argue. I'd helped him haul several massive deer out of the backcountry when he was still too small to get them out on his own.

We parked the pickup and began hiking up the mountain, through the alder slides and into the timber. The faint routes we followed were only game trails, but they were familiar. I'd started hunting here 30 years ago, when Orion was a baby. Now he and his sister, Keeley, are grown, both healthy and strong, thanks in part to the meat this place has provided over the years.

As Orion and I climbed, we stopped frequently to catch our breath and cool down. He lightened my load by carrying the binoculars and the rattling horns, and glassed and rattled each time we stopped. The wind was in our favor, blowing mostly downslope, sometimes tinged with deer scent. Though a black cloud bank on the horizon signaled an approaching storm, the sky was clear for the time being. Deer would be up and feeding before they bedded down in sheltered thickets.

After a while, Orion's rattling finally brought in a buck, but it hung up too far for a shot with the .30-.30. An hour later we heard another buck snort and listened as it crashed through the lodgepole. We never saw the deer, but its tracks indicated it had approached to within 20 yards.

As we climbed, we approached a broad basin at the head of the draw. The country was more open, with bunchgrass parks and scattered Doug firs. It was the perfect place to find deer late in the morning, feeding before a storm. We stopped on a bench, shrugged out of our packs, and chewed on some jerky I'd made from a buck I'd shot there a year before.

The weather was raw, but we were comfortable, hunkered in the lee of some large firs. Orion rattled for about 20 minutes, but nothing appeared, so we decided to move on. Then, as I stepped out from the fir grove, I saw a buck coming up out of the draw toward us, not running, but moving fast, like he was looking for a fight. Apparently the rattling had worked. When I stepped behind a tree to get into shooting position, the buck spotted me and stopped, about 75 yards away. I leaned up against the fir and cocked the hammer on the .30-.30. The buck was facing me, brush obscuring his brisket with only his upper neck exposed. I hesitated, hoping for a closer, broadside shot. But the buck was suspicious and began weaving his head around, trying to catch our scent. I sensed he was going to bolt, so I

Bob Love lives and works in the woods north of Columbia Falls.

fired. I was sure I hit him, but the buck didn't go down. He lurched down the hill into a fir thicket and staggered up out of the draw below us, about 40 yards away. Again, he only offered me a neck shot, but this time he was broadside. The crack of the .30-.30 was muted by the wind, but we could hear sticks cracking and scree clattering as the buck slid down the draw.

We followed the skid trail and found the buck piled up under a fir windfall. The first shot had been off by a few inches, just grazing his neck, but the second had been instantly fatal. The buck was fat, and I guessed he would dress out at about 230 pounds. The rack was dark and heavy—a standard four-point for this place, with about a 24-inch spread. Orion built a fire while I field-dressed the deer. By the time I finished, the fire was roaring. We sat by it, eating lunch. Gray jays flew in and started picking at fat scraps from the carcass.

The draw below us was laced with windfalls, which would make it tough to haul the deer out. I offered to at least carry the head, but Orion insisted on making good on his promise and lashed it to his day pack. I sauntered down the mountain with Grandpa's gun, enjoying the scenery, while Orion thrashed through the windfalls behind me, dragging the buck. I had convinced him to let me carry the deer heart, which rested in my pack, warm and heavy against my back. My own heart was light. The meat these mountains had provided would sustain us in the coming year, until next Thanksgiving, when I hoped to return.

The next day at home, while cleaning and oiling the .30-.30, I thought about how using his gun was like going hunting with Grandpa.

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Although he'd never hunted anywhere but the Appalachians, the gun was imbued with his spirit. In that sense, he had been with me all that time I'd been hunting muleys in the northern Rockies.

Orion stopped by just as I was slipping the .30-.30 into its case. He asked if he could take it on a late-season elk hunt near the Sun River. I gave it to him, along with 20 rounds of ammunition, and he went off to get his camp gear together. Orion told me later he saw some elk on that hunt, and though he couldn't get within range to use the .30-.30, he'd had fun trying. And I think his great-grandpa had fun helping him. 🐾