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The Marlin Firearms Co. moved operations from New Haven, Connecticut, to Ilion, New York, during the fall of 2010. The relocation was intended to help the company become more efficient, improve quality and in effect modernize – all components generally required for manufacturing companies to survive in today’s economic climate.

As expected, there have been some challenges to get the company up and running to full (or planned) capacity. Some of the experienced employees chose to retire, much of the tooling was replaced with more modern and efficient CNC machinery, which potentially will yield a better product. Programs and blueprints had to be rewritten, as many of the drawings dated back 60-plus years and were not suitable for CNC tooling. Naturally, production has been largely scaled back, which resulted in many of the cataloged items being temporarily discontinued. Examples include most stainless steel lever-guns, all “cowboy” models, the SBL series and others. These models will return as soon as production has the capacity and are not discontinued on a long-term basis.

The most popular variations of leverguns, autoloading and bolt-action rimfire rifles and the excellent Model 39A, which are in the highest demand or have the greatest volume, are still being manufactured at this time and as fast as the plant can produce them. The X7 Series centerfire bolt-action rifle is in production but is now being manufactured in Marlin’s Mayfield, Kentucky, plant.

In visiting the Marlin New Haven plant not long before the move, I was amazed by the old-world tooling, some literally being a century old! Nonetheless, Marlin was building quality forged receivers, parts and cut-rifled barrels. Unfortunately, manufacturing methods were labor intensive and thus expensive. Some of the equipment and tooling was in the process of being updated at that time by the relatively new owner, Freedom Group, the same outfit that owns Remington, Bushmaster Firearms, DPMS, Dakota Arms and many others.

Some will criticize moving Marlin to Ilion, New York, but I would submit that a large-scale change was inevitable, or the company would have eventually become bankrupt, or at least not profitable. Today’s manufacturing in-

Marlin has recently moved operations from New Haven, Connecticut, to Ilion, New York. Production of low-volume models has been temporarily discontinued, but highly popular rifles are in full production. Stainless steel and “cowboy” versions will return as production capacity is increased.
dustry is very competitive, and CNC tooling is essentially mandatory for a company to compete and remain viable.

A rumor came to me in August 2011 in the form of a phone call, and in effect stated that “The Marlin Firearms Company had shut down all production due to quality issues. And there would not be any more lever-action rifles built until they could get quality back up, which may take months or even years.” Other rumors have included discontinuance of all lever-guns, etc.

The above are strictly rumors, as I immediately placed a phone call to my Freedom Group media contact, who assured me that production was neither shut down nor were there plans to shut it down.

In response to the rumors that likewise bounced around the Internet, Marlin Firearms issued the following statement: “Thanks to all our Marlin fans and customers out there for your questions and comments today. There seems to be some incorrect information floating around, so we wanted to assure all of you that Marlin is doing great and continues to produce lever-action, bolt-action and rimfire rifle offerings on a daily basis. We are currently focusing our production efforts on specific product offerings to ensure efficiencies for the immediate future, based on demand for certain models. To learn more about Marlin products, please visit our website: at www.marlinfirearms.com.”

Marlin will certainly have some obstacles to overcome, and we as consumers need to express our support. However, in the same breath, we need to let them know that we still demand and expect the same quality that Marlin has offered since 1871. I believe the company will do just that!

Shooting Lever Guns of the Old West

During the late 1970s and ’80s, I took note of a gun writer named Mike Venturino. He wrote about real guns, usually guns and cartridges that were not a fad, such as Smith & Wesson, Colt and Ruger revolvers, bolt-action rifles often chambered for standard cartridges, Sharps pattern rifles, leverguns, handloading and cast bullets. Then in the middle 1980s, while attending a shooting event held in Wyoming, Mike and I stayed at the same motel. We spent considerable time discussing editors, guns, cartridges and bullet casting. Several things impressed me about him, but above all he was writing because of his love and enjoyment of firearms – and the fact that he shared a genuine appreciation and respect for the Colt SAA revolver, as I do! Now, 25 years later, Venturino is still casting bullets and writing about vintage firearms, with an occasional modern gun thrown in the mix.
Venturino has authored four books, including *Shooting Colt Single Actions*, *Shooting Sixguns of the Old West*, *Shooting Buffalo Rifles of the Old West* and *Shooting Lever Guns of the Old West*, the latter being reviewed here. Having recently read it from cover to cover, this is a classic work that should be in every shooter’s library, and for that matter school and public libraries. It contains 300 pages, and although photos are in black and white, they are of high quality and appropriate for the subject.

Part One of SLGOW, “The Guns,” contains a brief history of Winchester rifles beginning with the 1860 Henry (yes, I know it wasn’t actually a Winchester, but it was a part of Winchester’s development and history) the 1866, 1873, 1876, 1886, 1892, 1894 and 1895 and includes reproductions of select models. Additional chapters include the Marlin Models 1881, 1888, 1889, 1894, 1893 and 1895 in both vintage and modern variations.

Part Two is dedicated to reloading and includes data for vintage “pistol length” rifle cartridges, such as the .25-20, .32 WCF, .38 WCF, .44 WCF and modern revolver calibers, including the .38 Special, .357 Magnum, .44 Magnum and .45 Colt. Additional data is offered for vintage big-bore calibers found in Winchester Models 1876 and 1886 and Marlin Model 1895. Naturally, vintage cartridges for Winchester Models 1894 and 1895 are featured. Data includes cast and jacketed bullets when appropriate, pushed by smokeless and black-powder propellants.

Additional chapters include “Rivals to Winchester and Marlin,” “The Lever Gun as a Fighting Rifle,” “Sights for Old West Lever Guns” and “The Lever Gun for Hunting.”

The primary focus of the book is rifle designs and cartridges prior to 1900 but, as previously indicated, includes reproductions and suitable modern cartridges with the primary intent for the sport of cowboy action shooting.

Of special interest and appreciation are the vintage frontier photos sprinkled throughout the book, many as a courtesy of Herb Peck, Jr.

Some consider the lever action a cowboy rifle, an antique blackpowder shooting iron or even just nostalgic, but it is much more. It remains a viable choice for hunting, personal and home-defense applications, is particularly fun, accurate and available in a variety of cartridges that are suitable for small, large and dangerous game. Mike Venturino’s *Shooting Lever Guns of the Old West* is a worthy study and makes for enjoyable reading. To order call 1-800-899-7810, or send $30.00 plus $7.25 for shipping to Wolfe Publishing Co., 2150 Gulfstream, Ste. A, Prescott AZ 86301-6182.
What is really meant by the term “classic rifle”? Those two words have been applied to hundreds of factory models, along with thousands of custom rifles. Someday soon classic will probably even apply to stainless steel, synthetic-stocked Remington 700s – especially since 2012 will mark the golden anniversary of the 700, and anything golden simply has to be classic.

Shortly before the 700 appeared in 1962, the classic firearms firm of Browning introduced a centerfire bolt action called the High-Power, based on the Mauser action produced by Fabrique Nationale (FN), considered one of the best commercial versions of the uber-classic Model 98. The stock was a modern classic, without the space-age styling then common in everything from station wagons to Weatherbys, though it did feature a sedate Monte Carlo comb. The rifle even came equipped with sturdy, precisely adjustable iron sights, and the original chamberings included the old classic .270 Winchester, .30-06 and .300 and .375 H&H Magnums, along with the new classic .243 Winchester, .308 Winchester and .338 and .458 Winchester Magnums.

Some sources claim the High-Power appeared in 1959, while others say 1960, but in 1961 it was still new enough to be reviewed twice in the 1962 edition of Gun Digest. (Gun Digest appears the year before the cover date, just as November magazines appear in October.)

John Amber, who edited Gun Digest from its first issue in 1944 until 1979, test-fired a .30-06 High-Power for his column “U.S. Rifles and Shotguns.” It might seem odd for a foreign-made rifle to be called American, but Browning was an American importing firm. It also had a solid relationship with FN going back to the days of John Moses Browning, who eventually died at FN headquarters in Liege, Belgium, at age 71. Today Browning is owned by FN Herstal, the descendant of Fabrique Nationale.

Amber mounted a 2¾-10x Weatherby scope and reported the weight of the rifle as 7½ pounds with scope, mount and sling. This is pretty light for walnut-stocked rifles even today, but
not all High-Powers were lightweights. He tested the rifle with 180-grain Remington Core-Lokts and Winchester Silvertips, 220-grain Winchester softpoints and a handload featuring 180-grain Nosler Partitions and 56.0 grains of IMR-4350, firing five-shot groups, rather than the three-shot groups favored by twenty-first-century hunters so they can brag about their .5-inch rifles.

Groups with the 180-grain factory loads ran 1.25 to 1.5 inches, a level of accuracy that normally translates into sub-inch, three-shot groups. The 220s didn’t shoot so well, grouping from 1.5 to 3.0 inches, but the 180-grain Nosler handload averaged a flat inch for several groups. With some of today’s super-accurate bullets, such as the Nosler Ballistic Tip, Amber’s test rifle would definitely have put three shots into the magic .5 inch.

The annual “TESTFIRE” report from Rifle’s own Ken Waters also included a
Browning High-Power

Browning High-Power chambered in .300 H&H. He called it “the finest finished and appearing standard factory rifle I’ve ever had the pleasure of testing.” Ken didn’t report the exact weight of the test rifle but did state that Browning’s listed weight for the magnum High-Powers was 8 pounds. He mounted a 6x Lyman All-American scope and, like Amber, shot five-shot groups.

The most accurate load was Winchester’s 220-grain Silvertip factory ammunition that averaged .5 inch! I’ve owned and fired a bunch of modern synthetic-stocked custom rifles that wouldn’t do any better – and some not as well. Ken’s handloads with 180- and 220-grain Sierras averaged .75 and .94 inch, respectively. Of all the loads tried, the worst five-shot group was 1.75 inches. Ken concluded the report with the sentence: “A good rifle, and one we’d like to add to our gunrack.”

He did add the Browning to his collection, mentioning it briefly in his “Pet Loads” feature on the .300 H&H in the second issue of Handloader (July 1967). The weight was given as 8.75 pounds, which must have been unscoped, since the Browning was also one of two rifles mentioned in his second .300 H&H “Pet Loads” feature in the September 1984 (No. 111) issue of Handloader, where Ken said it weighed just under 10 pounds with a 1.5-4.5x Weaver. The other 1984 test rifle was a Holland & Holland Best Grade a friend had built for Ken. (We should all have such good friends!) Again the Browning shot very well, with several loads averaging an inch or less for five, five-shot groups.

Both Amber and Waters emphasized that neither of the test rifles was modified in any way, so obviously the rifles were extremely accurate right from the factory, as well as good-looking. Yet the High-Power line only lasted until the mid-1970s.

The conventional thinking is that the infamous “salt wood” fiasco killed the Browning High-Power. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a couple of wood suppliers in California and Missouri started curing freshly sawn walnut by packing the stock blanks in rock salt. This dried the wood much faster than kiln or air-drying but also permeated each blank with salt. Obviously, nobody in either wood company ever took basic biology in high school, where they would have learned about the phenomenon called osmosis. (Or at least high schools taught osmosis in Montana high schools in 1970; for all I know it may since have been replaced by “Intriguing iPhone Apps.”)

Some sources claim the High-Power appeared in 1959.
My unabridged Webster’s defines osmosis as “the tendency of a fluid (usually water) to pass through a semipermeable membrane where the solvent concentration is higher, thus equalizing the concentration on either side of the membrane.” The walls of wood cells are semipermeable membranes, meaning they allow liquids to pass back and forth, the reason wood swells when wet and shrinks when dry. When fresh-sawn wood is packed in salt, some of the water inside the wood is drawn out – but the water remaining in the wood also sucks in salt, “equalizing the concentration on either side of the membrane.”

This salt-cured wood was then sold to various firearms firms, including Weatherby and Winchester, but Browning used more than any other company. Browning was known for highly figured walnut on many models, and in the 1960s, there was a shortage of fancy walnut. The finer wood available needed to be cured quickly, thus the salt “solution.” The salt-cured wood rusted any steel it contacted, and the problem almost bankrupted Browning.

Salt wood was most common on Superposed shotguns and High-Power rifles, especially the two higher grades of the rifle, Medallion (with some engraving and “select figured walnut”) and Olympian (with lots of engraving and the “finest figured walnut”). It was less common on the plainest grade, called the Safari.

In 1963 Browning introduced a lighter version of the High-Power, built on Sako barreled actions for smaller cartridges such as the .222 Remington and .22-250, also available in all three grades. (This was two years before the .22-250 became a Remington factory round, and the Browning decision to chamber a factory rifle for a wildcat caused a minor stir in the firearms business – though the same thing had been done in reverse over 30 years before, when Winchester started making .22 Hornet ammunition before any factory rifle was chambered for the Hornet.)

The salt wood started showing up about 1966. At first Browning tried to seal the wood on the affected firearms, but that didn’t work, and eventually had to replace the stocks entirely, along with any severely rusted steel. Apparently a few salt stocks occurred right up to the end of High-Power production in 1974. (Today Browning is an entirely different company, so it has quit doing free repair and replacement on “salt guns.”) Luckily, most salt guns were discovered years ago, though every once in awhile one still turns up.
Apparently an effective sealant never has been found, even among modern epoxies.

Other factors also affected the long-term viability of the Browning High-Power, one being cost. The 1962 *Gun Digest* listed it as the “Browning Mauser High Power Rifle,” with a price of $164.50. This was the plain model that soon became the Safari grade. In the same issue the “standard” Winchester Model 70, in one of the last years of pre-64 production, was priced at $139. Medallion and Olympian grade High-Powers first appeared in the 1963 *Gun Digest*, priced at $295 and $495 – and the price of the Safari grade had been jacked up to $175. The last pre-64 Model 70s were still $139, and Weatherby Mark V rifles (then considered really expensive by most Americans) were priced similarly to the Medallion and Olympian High-Powers, with prices ranging from $285 to $495.

To put these prices in perspective, in 1960 the average income of an American household was about $6,000, so the price of an Olympian-grade High-Power was a month’s income, the equivalent of $3,800 in 2011. Additionally, a severe recession hit America in 1960-61, right when the Browning rifle first appeared.

Another factor was the introduction of the Remington 700. The ADL model was initially priced at $114.95, and even the fancier BDL grade (hinged floorplate, impressed fleur-de-lis checkering and white-line spacers between the black buttplate, grip cap and forend tip) was $139.95. Remington also mounted a very successful advertising campaign about the “three rings of steel” surrounding the case head of a chambered cartridge, implying that no old-fashioned controlled-round feed action was nearly as safe. Rifles with “obsolete” actions, of course, included the pre-64 Model 70 and the Browning High-Power. In 1967 Browning changed most of the FN-actioned High-Powers to push-
The first Browning High-Power I can remember was purchased by one of the younger brothers of my first wife in 1974, a Medallion model chambered in 7mm Remington Magnum, then still enjoying its run as the most popular big game cartridge introduced since World War II. My brother-in-law was among the true believers, telling his grandfather as he handed him the new rifle that, “It’ll knock a moose on its butt at a thousand yards.” I don’t recall how well the rifle shot but do remember hanging it from a Zebco De-Liar fishing scale. The weight with a Lyman 3-9x scope, wide “cobra” sling and a magazine full of ammunition was around 11 pounds.

Like many rifle loonies, I admire classic rifles and always kind of wanted a Browning High-Power. But the few higher-grade rifles made with salt-free walnut cost more than I wanted to pay, so I kept an eye out for a Safari grade without any indication of rust. Obviously, it would be risky to buy a High-Power over the Internet, so my casual search took place in gun shows, pawn shops and sporting goods stores that dealt in used rifles.

It finally happened last year, when a 7mm Remington Magnum with what Browning collectors call the short extractor showed up on the consignment rack at Capital Sports & Western Wear in Helena, Montana. I didn’t really care if it was push-feed, since I’ve yet to be charged by any deer or elk, the animals I might hunt with a 7mm Remington Magnum. The High-Power is in very good shape for a rifle made in 1969, as the serial number indicated, and included a 3-7x Pecar scope in Burris Signature mounts. (Pecars were good German scopes and relatively popular among knowledgeable shooters for many years.) The only modification to the rifle was the replacement of the factory recoil pad with a new Pachmayr Decelerator. There wasn’t
The 7mm Remington Magnum is still considered plenty of cartridge for such medium-sized game as elk, sable and wildebeest, while not being “too much” for 200- to 300-pound animals like mule deer and nyala.

...any rust showing along the margins of the stock, and the price was right.

Back home the barreled action was removed from the stock, and there was still no rust. Through a Hawkeye borescope, the barrel looked as if it had never been fired and appeared hand-lapped. The very crisp trigger tested exactly 3 pounds. Like all the magnum-chambered High-Powers, the rifle has two recoil lugs, the second mounted on the barrel 4 inches ahead of the action, and the stock also has two through-bolts, one at each end of the magazine box.

Having learned long ago not to shoot unproven rifles, since it’s impossible to know whether any accuracy problems come from the scope or rifle, the Pecar was replaced with a proven 6x36 Leupold. With scope the rifle weighed 9.75 pounds, not even a middleweight by today’s standards, but also not unsuitable for some hunting, and it proved very shootable over a benchrest. A dozen handloads with 150-grain Ballistic Tips and H-4831 were thrown together, and after a couple of preliminary rounds at 25 yards, the first three-shot group at 100 yards measured .68 inch. After some load-tweaking, the rifle grouped very close to the twenty-first century .5 inch.

The Browning High-Power is just as good-looking and accurate today as it was when John Amber and Ken Waters test-fired a pair 50 years ago. If the salt-wood fiasco had never occurred, if America hadn’t gone into a bad recession in 1960, and if Remington had held off the makeover of its homely synthetic stocks. All we can really do today, however, is look hard for rifles without any trace of rust. If we find one, it will be one of the finest classic factory rifles ever made.

The rifle’s first group at 100 yards measured .68 inch. A high percentage of High-Powers were chambered in 7mm Remington Magnum, the hottest-selling “new” round for most of the years the rifle was made.

721/722 rifles for a few more years, we might still be able to purchase brand-new Browning High-Powers, though doubtless some would have