

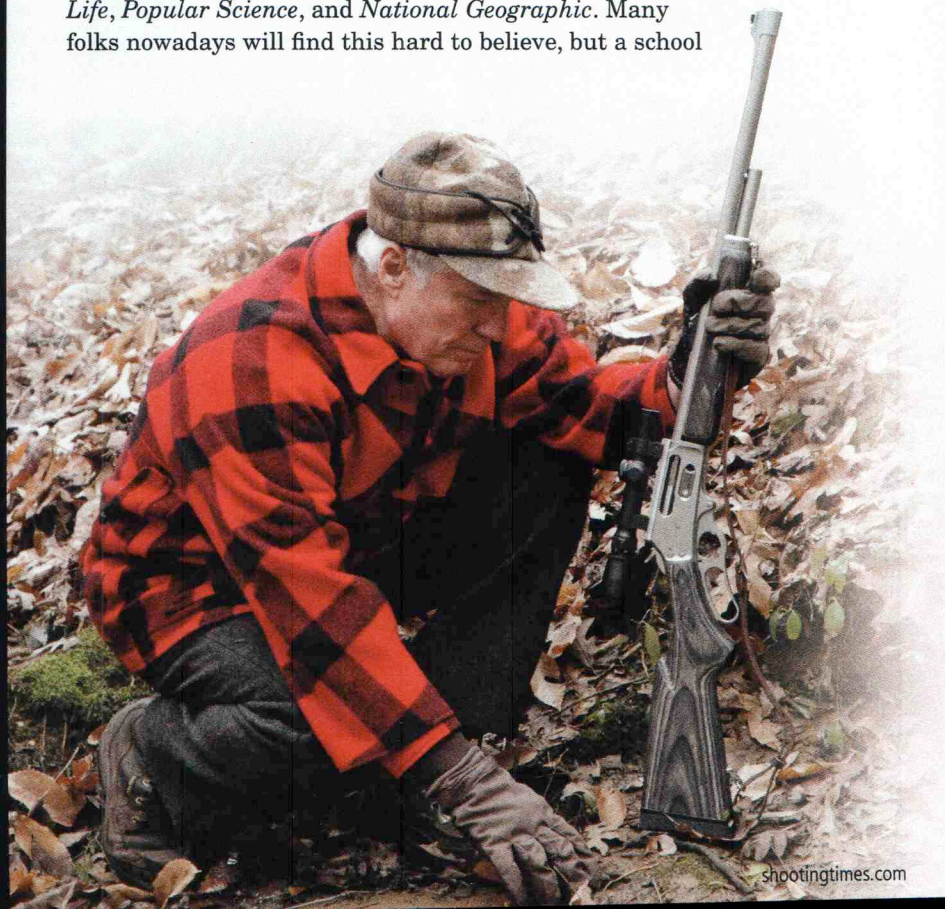
.50-Caliber Dream Come True


By Layne Simpson, Executive Field Editor

Even longtime gun writers have dreams that take awhile to fulfill. Building an Alaskan lever-action classic has finally come true for our Executive Field Editor.

I love the state of Alaska, and had I known what I know now at a much younger age, what you are about to read would most likely have been written there rather than here. Even though I have never lived in that great land, I have been fortunate to hunt there on numerous occasions. But long before my first Alaskan hunt, I read everything I could get my hands on about the state, and it all started when I was in the 8th grade in school.

Back in those days about everybody who was anybody in my little hometown hunted, and those who did not either had no objection to it or if they did, they kept quiet for fear of being run out of town. The library at the school I attended received copies of various magazines, such as *Life*, *Popular Science*, and *National Geographic*. Many folks nowadays will find this hard to believe, but a school





library used by kids also received and displayed *Outdoor Life* and *Field & Stream*, and both contained wonderful stories about people who headed to the woods to hunt deer, bear, elk, and other animals for sport. Back then they even published photos of dead animals! Like all the other kids, I knew exactly when each magazine was to arrive each month, so it was always a race to see who got there first. We literally devoured everything in each and every one of them.

One of the stories I read told about Harold Johnson, a gunsmith who had a shop in Cooper Landing, Alaska. Lever-action rifles like the Winchester 86 in .45-70 and the Winchester 71 in .348 were quite popular among hunting guides there, so Johnson necked up the .348 Winchester case to .45 caliber, blew it out to a bit greater capacity than that of the .458 Winchester Magnum, and called it the .450 Alaskan. It was designed specifically for use in rebarreled Model 71 rifles, as well as the smokeless-powder version of the Winchester 1886. Sometime later Johnson traded for a Model 86 in .50-110 Winchester with a rusted-out barrel. A barrel for that cartridge has the same .510-inch groove diameter as one in .50 BMG, and soon after buying one of those barrels on the military surplus market, he whittled it down and fitted it to the Model 86 action. But rather than chamber it to .50-110 Winchester, Johnson opened up the neck of the .450 Alaskan case to .50 caliber and chambered the barrel for it. The cartridge eventually became known as the .50 Alaskan.

While reading that particular article, I vowed to not only someday hunt in the Great Land of the Aleut, but to own a rifle chambered for Harold Johnson's .50-caliber

cartridge. Years later part of my dream came true when I bagged my first Alaska-Yukon moose, but I kept putting off the rifle in .50 Alaskan.

I did so mainly because of the scarcity of .510-inch jacketed bullets, not to mention their cost didn't exactly encourage a lot of practice shooting. Then not long back, J.D. Jones of SSK Industries told me about Michael McCourry and the line of .50-caliber cartridges he has developed on cases ranging in capacity from the WSMs to the Ultra Mags. Most are for bolt-action rifles, and he has one for the AR-15. But the cartridge that really got my attention is called the .50 B&M Alaskan, and it was developed for use in not only Model 71 rifles from Winchester and Browning, but for the Marlin New Model 1895 as well. What really got me hooked is McCourry's cartridge uses .500-inch bullets, which just happens to be the diameter of bullets made for the .500 S&W Magnum. For more on his cartridges go to B&M Rifles &

Cartridges at www.b-mriflesandcartridges.com.

Now you know why I am now shooting the rifle I long ago vowed to have.

The Rifle

SSK Industries in Wintersville, Ohio, was first to convert Marlin 1895s and Browning 71s to .50 B&M Alaskan, and that—along with the fact that through the years I have hunted with a lot of the company's custom revolvers and T/C Contenders—made my decision quite easy.

It rains a lot in Alaska, so I shipped to SSK a Marlin Model 1895 MLXR with laminated wood stock and barreled action of stainless steel. I then placed an order for a .50-caliber stainless-steel barrel blank with 1:20-inch rifling twist from McGowen Precision Barrels of Kalispell, Montana. I also specified that the blank be long enough to finish out at 22 inches. Muzzle diameter of the finished barrel ended up at 0.795 inch, compared to 0.725 inch for the .45-70 barrel it replaced.

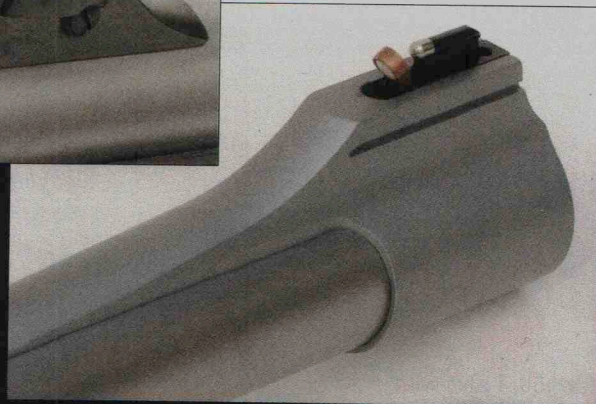


Because things can go bad in a flash when hunting in Alaska, the author wanted back-up iron sights in addition to the Weaver V3 scope. He chose front and rear sights by N.E.C.G. The No.

61 fully adjustable rear sight is rugged and attractive and has an angled leaf with a wide V that's perfect for fast sight acquisition. The No. 661 Banded Ramp is available with several different sights, including this S-4 with its 3/32-inch fixed silver bead and pop-up "night sight" white bead measuring 1/64 inch.

The Sights

Alaska is hard on riflescopes, and while I wanted one on my



THE .50 B&M ALASKAN

The .50 B&M Alaskan case is formed by slightly necking down the .50 Alaskan case available from Starline. One trip through an RCBS or Hornady full-length resizing die does it. As shown in the accompanying chart, a number of powders work quite well. A standard primer, such as the Federal 210M I used, does a good job of lighting the fire.

During the past decade or so I have shot so many accurate Marlin lever actions I am no longer surprised to see one carve out groups some bolt guns refuse to duplicate. My new Alaskan classic runs par for the course. A close-range trouble-stopper is best tested at fairly close range, so I punched a lot of paper at 50 yards. As you can see in the chart, three-shot average accuracy at that distance was less than an inch with half of the bullets tried. The 500-grain Hornady seated atop H4198 averaged close to half an inch. That's prairie dog shooting accuracy at close range from a rifle powerful enough to drop any animal on earth with a single shot.

As for which bullets are best for what, a .50-caliber cartridge is certainly not required for bumping off a skinny little deer, but if it is the only thing you happen to have in your hands when a big buck appears, the Hornady 300-grain FTX at 2,400 fps is just about dead on point of aim at 200 yards when zeroed 3 inches high at 100. For black bear over bait or a big boar hog up close and personal, I'm thinking the Swift 325-grain A-Frame, Speer 350-grain DeepCurl, or Sierra 400-grain JSP may be just the ticket.

Which leaves the really big stuff like bears the size of cement mixers and moose as big as freight cars. For that I would have to go with either of two medicines. One is the 395-grain hollow nose turned from copper by Cutting Edge Bullets. The other is the Hornady 500-grain FP-XTP, which churns up just over 4,200 ft-lbs of energy at the muzzle and 3,600 ft-lbs at 50 yards. North Fork Technology will soon be introducing a 450-grain bonded-core bullet, and I have some of the new 500-grain bonded-core bullets coming from Woodleigh.

I am especially impressed with the .50 B&M Alaskan when it is loaded with the heavier bullets. A 500-grain bullet exits the 22-inch barrel of my Marlin at 1,950 fps. Winchester's 500-grain loading of the .458 Win. Mag. averages 1,932 fps from the 22-inch barrel of my Winchester Model 70. Enough said on that.

All of which serves to remind me that I have a brand-new reason for heading to Alaska, just as I dreamed of someday going back in the 8th grade.

—Layne Simpson



new .50, I also wanted iron sights in case something bad on a hunt got worse. The sights had to be of trouble-free design yet tough enough to withstand a lot of punishment.

They also had to look nice. Off to Brownells went my order for Masterpiece sights made by N.E.C.G, the No. 61 Adjustable at the rear and the No. 661 Banded

Ramp up front. For the latter I chose the S-4 sight, which in addition to a fixed 3/32-inch silver bead has a larger 11/64-inch white bead that can be hinged up in front of the smaller bead for use when light is bad or folded down when it is not needed. It is an idea that goes all the way back to the early 1900s and was an option offered on sporting rifles by English makers. The British called it a night sight, and the white folding bead was made from the tusk of a warthog because it does not turn yellow with age the way elephant ivory is prone to do.

A rifle in .50 B&M Alaskan shoots flat enough for work out to 150 yards or so, but is seen at its best when used as a close-range stopper—like when you and a thousand pounds of grizzly are separated by only a few feet of alders too dense to see through. For close-range work a scope must be of low magnification with an extremely wide field of view. Being tough enough to hold zero and capable of being cold and wet for days on end without fogging inside are equally important. After comparing a number of scopes, I settled on an old classic for my new classic rifle, the Weaver V3 in 1-3X with a field of view of 22 feet at 25 yards.

Choosing a scope mount took less time. For longer than I will admit I have been shooting T/C Contender pistols chambered for hard-kickers, such as the .45-70 and .375 JDJ, and never have I had a T'SOB base installed by SSK fail. It is a whole lot tougher than any gun wearing it or any shooter shooting it. So, it was T'SOB for my half-inch Marlin rifle. For rings I needed something capable of handling a bit of recoil without a whimper, and since I also wanted the open sights to be quick and easily accessible, a pair of Maxima quick-detach rings from Warne proved to be the answer.

Finishing Touches

I did the remainder of the work. The buttstock came from the

factory with an excellent Pachmayr Decelerator recoil pad, so the only change to the outside was to glue in the quick-detach sling-swivel post to keep it from turning in the field. The inletting of the stock required a bit more attention. Rather than the stock fitting tightly against the rear of the receiver as it must for best accuracy, there was about a 0.010-inch gap on both sides. No good. After filling the gap between stock and receiver with Acraglas from Brownells, I slightly enlarged the hole in the stock for the vertical stock bolt to make sure there was no contact between the two.

The lever on my custom Model 1895 in .45-70 operates like grease on glass, and the bolt glides from and to like it's riding on ball bearings. In comparison, the action of my new .50-caliber Model 1895 was as rough as the proverbial cob. So after operating the action several hundred times, I disassembled it. Using honing stones and fine emery cloth, I worked on the ejector (and its track in the side of the bolt), the carrier (and its rocker), and the hammer rod. I also slicked



In addition to installing the open sights, T'SOB scope mount, and McGowan barrel, SSK Industries made several modifications to the author's Marlin action, including lengthening the loading port and tweaking several internal parts for reliable cartridge feeding.



Finishing touches the author made to his dream .50-caliber lever action included properly bedding the buttstock and slicking up internal action parts with honing stones and lapping compound.

.50 B&M ALASKAN LOADS

Bullet	Powder		Velocity (fps)		50-Yard Accuracy (Inches)
	(Type)	(Gr.)	18" Bbl.	22" Bbl.	
Hornady 300-gr. FTX*	IMR-4198	67.0	2359	2428	1.08
Swift 325-gr. A-Frame	Reloder 7	66.0	----	2251	0.73
Speer 350-gr. DeepCurl	Reloder 7	65.0	----	2059	0.94
Cutting Edge 395-gr. HP	Reloder 7	64.0	2015	2122	0.81
Barnes 400-gr. Buster	IMR-4198	59.0	2041	2057	1.44
Sierra 400-gr. JSP-SM	H4198	63.0	2086	2113	1.49
Cutting Edge 425-gr. CS	Reloder 7	62.0	1952	2080	1.62
Hornady 500-gr. FP-XTP	H4198	56.0	1842	1855	0.56
Hornady 500-gr. FP-XTP	Reloder 7	58.0	1805	1876	1.15
Hornady 500-gr. FP-XTP	H322	61.0	1814	1812	0.95
Hornady 500-gr. FP-XTP	Reloder 10X	62.0	1834	1947	1.37

*Shorten case to 1.97 inches for this bullet for cartridge length not to exceed 2.55 inches.

NOTES: All powder charges shown were pressure-tested by Michael McCourry, developer of the .50 B&M Alaskan, and are safe in his and the author's rifles. All charges are maximum or close to it and should be reduced by 10 percent for starting loads. Accuracy is the average of three, three-shot groups fired at 50 yards with the author's rifle in a Caldwell Lead Sled. Velocities are averages of nine rounds measured 12 feet from the 22-inch McGowan barrel. Starline .50 Alaskan cases and Federal 210M primers were used in all loads.

up the upper end of the finger lever where it engages the bottom of the bolt. The exterior surface of the bolt needed a bit of smoothing, and its track inside the receiver had tool marks over its entire surface. Coating the body of the bolt with Brownells 600 grit aluminum oxide lapping compound (being careful not to let any get into its locking bolt slot), I operated the bolt a couple hundred times. I then removed the bolt, wiped it and the inside of the receiver clean, applied 800 grit, and repeated the process. With those improvements and modifications, the action of my new rifle operated as my old rifle. Total weight with the Weaver 1-3X scope is 8.75 pounds, half a pound heavier than my custom 1895 in .45-70.

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