By Layne Simpson

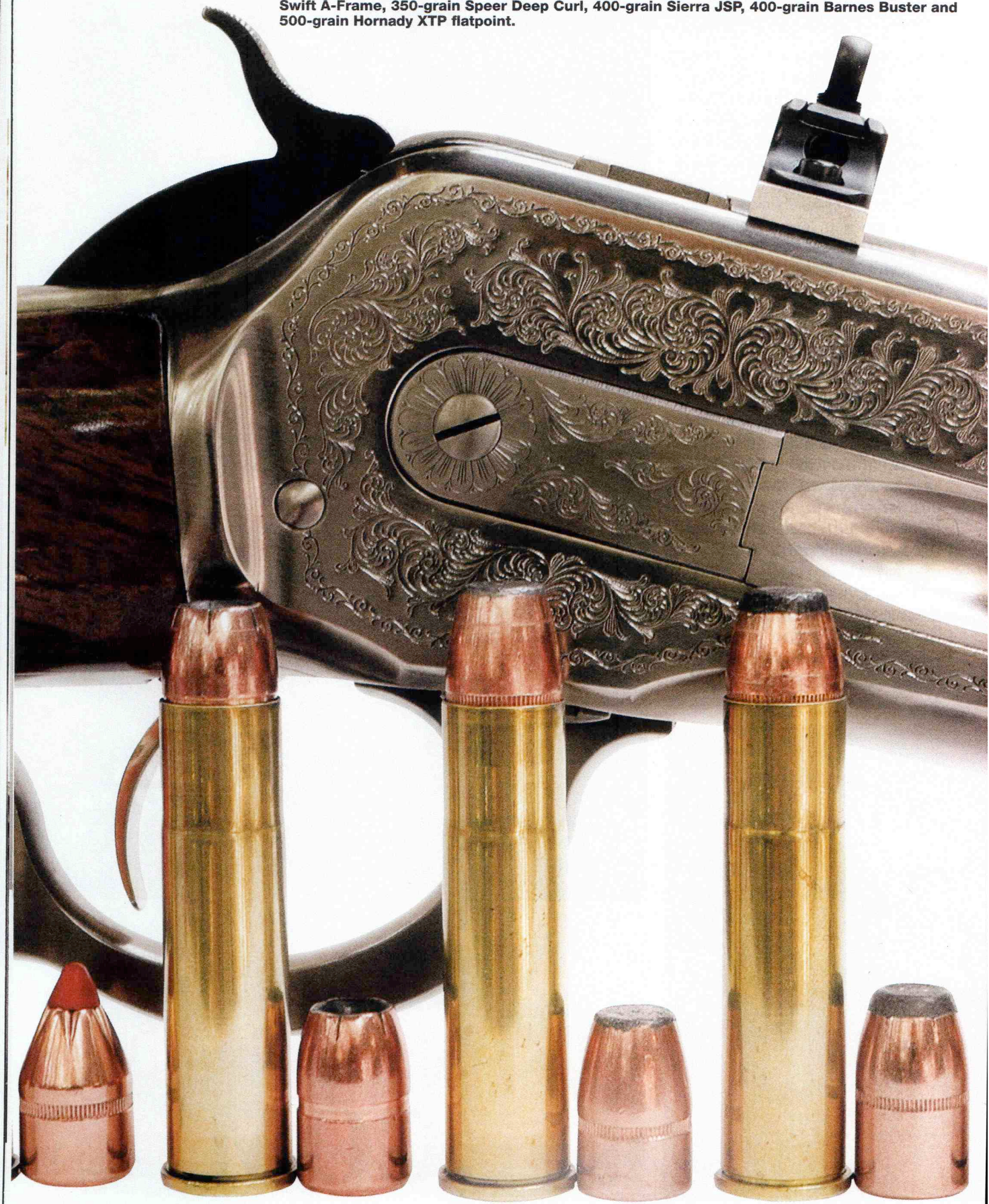
# .50 FOR THE LAST FRONTIER

## The .50 B&M Alaskan is a lever-action cartridge just right for big browns and mean moose.

Back in the 1950s, Cooper Landing, Alaska, gunsmith Harold Johnson decided to neck up the .348 Winchester case for .458-inch bullets and create a powerful big game cartridge for use in lever-action rifles. He called it the .450 Alaskan, and it had a powder capacity slightly greater than that of the .458 Winchester Magnum, which enabled the big cartridge to exceed 2,000 fps with a bullet weighing 400 grains at a chamber pressure level easily handled by two rifles: the smokeless powder version of the Winchester Model 1886 and the Winchester Model 71. Alaska bear guides found the big cartridge to be just the ticket for preventing their clientele from being mauled by a hungry bear or gored by a bull moose in rut.

Then came a .50 caliber version of the same cartridge. As the story goes, Johnson acquired a Winchester Model 86 in .50-110 with a bad barrel and decided to make a replacement for it from a military-surplus machine gun barrel in .50 BMG. But rather than chamber the new barrel for the Winchester cartridge, he necked up the .450 Alaskan case to .50 caliber.

Lacking a jacketed bullet for his new cartridge, Johnson sliced away part of the 750-grain .50 BMG bullet. When shooting his homemade 450-grain bullet base-forward, he claimed it would zip clean through a moose or a brown bear from any angle. Johnson always referred to the cartridge as "the .50," but it eventually became more commonly known as the .50 Alaskan.



**The author tested .50 B&M Alaskan loads with (from l.) 300-grain Hornady FTX, 325-grain Swift A-Frame, 350-grain Speer Deep Curl, 400-grain Sierra JSP, 400-grain Barnes Buster and 500-grain Hornady XTP flatpoint.**

The case can be fire-formed using a small charge of Bullseye and an inert filler such as Cream of Wheat breakfast cereal. It can also be formed with a special die set available from RCBS. A third option is to simply buy a supply of .50 Alaskan cases from Starline. Woodleigh offers a 500-grain flatnose bullet of .510-inch diameter made specifically for the cartridge while Buffalo Arms Co. has loaded ammo with both jacketed and cast bullets.

The latest version of this cartridge is the .50 B&M Alaskan, which was named for its developers, William Bruton and Michael McCourry. And when I use the word "developers" here, I mean just that. Hunters of considerable experience, they thrive on the technical aspect of rifles and cartridges as much as going after big game.

Both are fans of big holes through rifle barrels, and their cartridges of various calibers have given them plenty of excuses to head to Africa on a number of occasions for bullet-testing excursions for elephant, Cape buffalo, hippo and such.

The .50 project started with Bruton's desire for a handy brush rifle of that caliber on the Winchester Model 70 WSSM action. And so was born the .50 B&M Super Short, the case of which was originally formed by shortening and necking up the .300 WSM case. Next in line was a slightly longer version of that cartridge called the .50 SA (semiauto) designed for the AR-10 rifle made by DPMS.

Then came a medium-length bolt gun cartridge called the .50 B&M and it was followed by a long-action cartridge called the .500 MDM, both on the .404 Jeffrey case. Muzzle velocities range from 1,700 fps with a 500-grain bullet in the .50 Super Short to 2,250 fps for a 550-grain bullet in the .50 MDM. Unprimed brass with proper head-stamping is available from Quality Cartridge.

All those cartridges were developed in custom rifles built by SSK Industries in Wintersville, Ohio. (Bunton and McCourry are not in the "gun business," although they do offer the occasional rifle for sale at their website, B-MRIFLESANDCARTRIDGES.COM. They steer you to SSK Industries, SSK INDUSTRIES.COM, for gun builds.)

Developed for lever-action rifles, the .50 B&M Alaskan case is formed by slightly necking the down Starline .50 Alaskan case so bullets made for the .500 S&W Magnum can be used. A rifling twist rate as slow as 1:20 will stabilize the heaviest of .500 S&W Magnum bullets.

An abundance of readily available .500-inch bullets in weights ranging from 275 to 500 grains gives it a practical edge over the original .50 Alaskan and its .510-inch bullet. In addition, molds are available from Lyman, RCBS, Redding and NEI for casting lead bullets of various weights. Reloading dies are available from RCBS and Hornady.

The same guys who developed the .50 B&M Alaskan (l.) also came up with (beginning second from l.) the .50 Super Short, .50 SA, .50 B&M and .50 MDM.

The Marlin 1895 and Browning Model 71 in .50 B&M Alaskan I shot were converted by SSK Industries and had Pac-Nor barrels. Work performed on the two actions included opening up the loading port a bit and modifying the loading gate and cartridge carrier. And since the replacement barrel is slightly larger in diameter than the factory barrel, the barrel channel in the fore-end and the steel fore-end cap have to be enlarged. The action is then fine-tuned to assure smooth cartridge feeding.

The Model 71 had an 18-inch barrel and weighed 7½ pounds. An XS Systems aperture sight with a .190-inch aperture in a custom base was attached to the top of the receiver. Up

Both the Marlin 1895 (top) and Browning Model 71 conversions to .50 B&M Alaskan were done by SSK Industries.

front, a banded N.E.C.G. sight held a .100-inch, sourdough-style blade with a gold-colored insert. Attached to the barrel about a third of the way out was an SSK T'SOB base for mounting a long-eye-relief scope.

A quarter-pound lighter than the Model 71, the Marlin 1895 also had an 18-inch barrel. Muzzle diameter was .785 inch compared to .745 inch for the Browning. In comparison, factory .45-caliber Model 1895 barrels range from .720 inch for early production to .740 inch on later rifles. The Marlin rifle wore front and rear sights from N.E.C.G.

It should be noted that at .50 B&M Alaskan impact velocities some of the .500 S&W Magnum bullets are too soft for use on the larger game animals, especially inside 50 yards where velocities are still high. Most would likely work fine on deer, but for bears weighing much over 300 pounds—as well as moose and elk—a stout bullet is in order.


Dies for the cartridge are available from RCBS, and Alliant offers two powders that are excellent choices.

McCourry has found the 500-grain Hornady at 1,800 to 1,900 fps and a custom SSK 425-grain all-copper hollow-nose bullet at the same velocity to be deadly on game as large as eland and giraffe, with great penetration and weight retention. I think either would work on any game animal in North America, and that includes grizzly out to 125 paces or so, but the ultimate bear medicine for this cartridge may be the upcoming 450-grain bonded-core bullet designed by McCourry and made by North Fork Bullets.

For deer-size game, McCourry likes the 400-grain Sierra Sports Mas-

ter at 2,000 fps and the 300-grain Hornady FTX at 2,100 fps. Overall cartridge length with the FTX bullet is too long for the Marlin, a problem easily solved by slightly shortening the case. That bullet works fine in the Model 71 with a full-length case.

As powders go, IMR-4198, Reloder 7 and Reloder 10X have proven to be some of the better choices.

On a good day I am capable of staying around an inch at 50 yards with irons, so when shooting the two rifles I stuck with the aperture sight on the Browning and the open sight on the Marlin. The Browning averaged two inches and slightly less with three loads: Swift 325-grain A-frame and 62.0 grains RL-10X for 2,062 fps; Sierra 400-grain JSP and 62.0 gr. IMR-4198 at 2,047 fps; and Hornady 500-grain FP/XTP with 58.0 grains RL-7 at 1,834 fps). The Marlin delivered the same accuracy with the Sierra and Hornady bullets.

Other, less-accurate loads I tried included the Hornady 300-grain FTX with 65.0 grains IMR-4198 at 2,156 fps; Speer 250-grain DeepCurl with 61.0 grains RL-7 at 1,986 fps; and Barnes 400-grain Buster with 62.0 grains IMR-4198 at 2,018 fps. Starline cases and Federal 210M primers were used in all loads.

Recoil? Yes, there is some. For my Marlin 1895 in .45-70 I load 300- and 400-grain bullets to respective velocities of 2,100 fps and 1,900 fps and as is to be expected, recoil feels about the same as with those bullet weights loaded to the same velocities in the .50 B&M Alaskan. Push a 500-grain bullet to 1,800 fps in the .50, and while you know you are not shooting a .45-70, the recoil will likely go unnoticed on a rainy Alaska day with a big grizzly at 30 paces and closing fast.

**WARNING: The loads shown here are safe only in the guns for which they were developed. Neither the author nor Inter-Media Outdoors assumes any liability for accidents or injury resulting from the use or misuse of this data. Shooting reloads may void any warranty on your firearm.**

Since the Browning was a bit heavier I figured it would be more comfortable to shoot, but the Marlin won out. The difference was not great, but it was there.

McCourry says the Marlin Guide Gun is not a good candidate for the conversion because excessive drop in its straight-grip stock makes it less comfortable to shoot than Model 1895 variations with curved grips. I'm thinking the Model 1895XLR with its stainless steel barreled action and laminated wood stock is the ideal candidate for the conversion.

Both of the carbines I shot were very nice, and either would be just the thing for a bear guide or for the fisherman who needs protection in bear country. For my own use I would prefer a 22-inch barrel. A bit more barrel out front would dampen muzzle climb a bit and also put muzzle blast farther from the ears. I'm thinking the longer tube would increase velocity by 75 to 100 fps. I cannot think of anything else I would change about either rifle.