

The Early Years:

New Hampshire Primitive Season

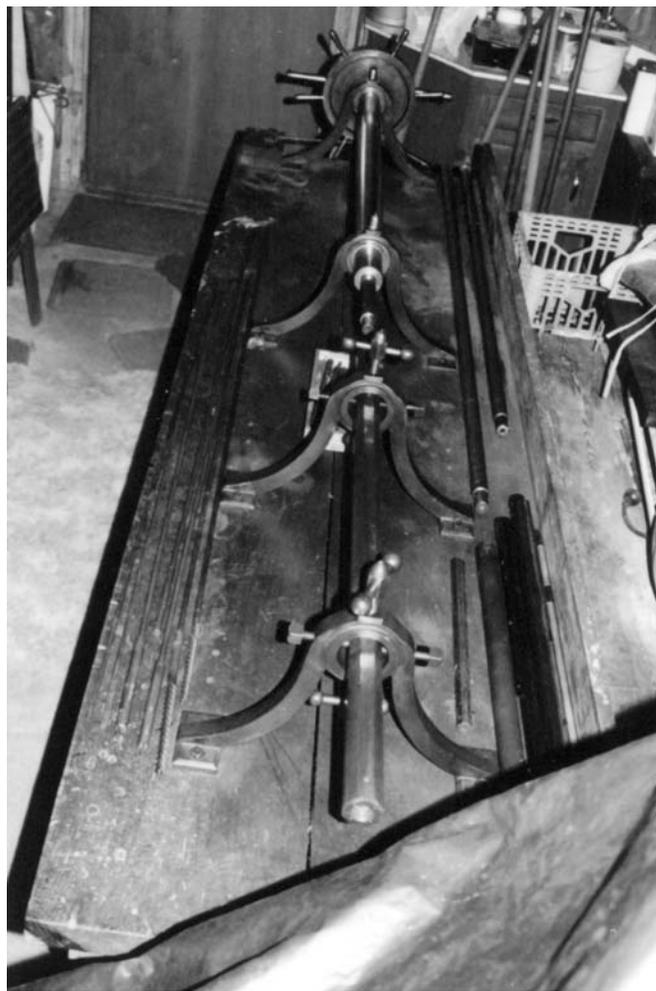
by Bruce E. Simonds

The month of October in New Hampshire is a glorious month. The mountain views are spectacular as the hardwood forests turn to brightly colored red, orange, and yellow intermixed with greens of the softwoods.

The days turn sunny and crisp. Overhead large V formations of geese can be seen and heard as they fly south before the harsh winter arrives. The ruffled grouse season starts the first of October and is a wonderful time to be hunting the woods and old apple orchards. In 1969 the Fish and Game Department announced the start of a new three day deer season for primitive weapons that would be before the regular rifle deer season. Any muzzleloading weapon could be used, it was state wide, and any one deer could be shot per hunter.



The .50 caliber Thompson/Center Hawken rifle purchased in 1971 and the first place award from the 1989 Vermont trappers rendezvous black powder shoot held in Tunbridge, Vermont.



The original David H. Hilliard of Cornish, NH rifling machine - in the factory building workmen had worn a groove in the floor from traveling back and forth rifling thousands of barrels.

My brother Nelson and I had been experimenting with muzzleloading rifles, pistols, muskets, and shotguns since the late 1940's and had competed in some local matches as well as attending the national shoot at Friendship in 1956. A regular hunting license was all that was required to hunt. We decided to try our luck and planned to have our equipment ready to start early the first morning of the three days of the season.

I was using my original Robbins and Lawrence 1850 marked model 1841 U.S. percussion rifle. It had a barrel that had been relined from .54 to a .52 caliber. I had shot a crow and a woodchuck with the load of 80 grains of FFG Dupont black powder, a patched round ball and musket cap and was ready to try for a deer. Nelson had a New England half stock rifle,



unmarked by the maker. He had bored and rifled the barrel to a .50 caliber. He used the original machine of D.H. Hilliard of Cornish, New Hampshire, who was a well known early gun builder who made over 3000 rifles and pistols from 1842 until 1877 when his son took over the business. The rifling machine was owned at the time by Raymond Mitchell, a gunsmith in Hanover, New Hampshire.

The first day my brother and I hunted until about 10:00 a.m. when we met our local fish and game conservation officer. He asked if we had any luck hunting and if he could take our picture. We were the first muzzleloading hunters he had ever seen. The next day a button buck stood up from its bed about 50 yards from me. I fired striking the deer. After a short chase we had our first muzzleloading deer.

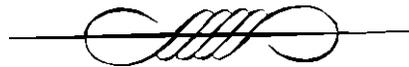
Although in times past I had shot several deer including a 10 point 200 pound class buck I was not a trophy hunter. My goal was to put venison in the freezer to feed my family who liked wild meat. My wife Hilda helped process the deer and did all the cooking.

The next summer I sold my Robbins and Lawrence when approached with a request to sell. I set a high price at that time of \$150.00 and to my regret it was accepted. That fall when the primitive season arrived I hunted with a long .40 caliber percussion Pennsylvania rifle built by Amos Benfor of Troxelville, Snyder County, Pennsylvania. He was born in 1841 and died in 1916.

As demand for long rifles had dropped off he also farmed and did some gun repair. Although in early days the .40 caliber was considered a large bore I found the small round ball not big enough. I dropped a nice 8 point buck on his nose with a well placed shot at about 65 yards, had trouble reloading the long barrel, and followed him until he was claimed by some other hunters. I next tried an underhammer .45 caliber rifle made by John Brown in Fremont, New Hampshire, between 1840 and 1857. When my father Raymond bought the rifle we found that it was loaded and had been for at least 100 years. Upon removing the breach plug we discovered the powder charge was a solid mass which took a lot of ef-



The author with his T/C Hawken, Colt 1862 police revolver, the deer, and the grouse shot on a one day hunt in 1973.



The authors children: Heidi, Heather, and Bruce Henry were happy to pose with the deer and grouse in 1973.

fort to remove. The bullet was a long lead slug. I used a .45 caliber bullet with a 60 grain charge of FFFG Dupont black powder. The rifle had no ramrod thimbles so I had to carry the loading rod separate which did not work well. Also the rifle was unhandy to carry and slow to fire. I did shoot one grouse with that load before trying to find a better rifle.

In 1971 Thompson/Center Arms in Rochester, New Hampshire, started to produce their now famous Hawken percussion rifle. When the first one arrived at the Green Gun Store in North Haverhill, New Hampshire I bought the rifle. It was number 1286 and was in .50 caliber. I removed the original sights and installed a Lyman 1/16 ivory bead front sight and fitted a Williams peep sight to the tang. Next I worked up a load of 85 grains of FFG black powder with a bed ticking patch soaked in sperm whale oil and a .490 round soft lead cast ball. The percussion caps were Remington number 11. Years before, my father had found in the basement of an old drug store a half filled gallon can of sperm whale oil and purchased it. We cut round bed ticking patches of the right size and put them in a jar of sperm oil. After soaking over night they were removed and placed on a brown paper bag to dry. This removed the excess oil so that it did not affect the powder charge. When all the sperm oil was used up and could not be replaced we used bear oil from locally shot bears. The bear has white lard which is used for cooking and a fine oil used to protect hinges, guns, and other items. It worked well, but I liked the sperm whale oil better. The Hawken proved to be a fine hunting rifle for use in the New England woods. It was easy to carry, accurate, and with enough fire power for the game. One problem with the first T/C Hawken rifles was the ramrod would swell and could not be removed from the thimbles. I made a fine hickory rod for my rifle that I still use. The company cured the problem with an unbreakable waterproof rod. My Hawken developed a large crack in the stock on the side of the forearm. I made a trip to the Thompson/Center factory and requested a replacement stock and asked if I could get some nicely figured wood. In a few days a package arrived from Rochester. Inside was my rifle with a beauti-



The black bear shot at close range with my .54 caliber T/C Renegade rifle.

My son Bruce Henry with a buck he harvested using his own T/C .45 caliber Hawken rifle in 1993.



ful new stock that it has worn since. The Thompson/Center factory stood behind their quality rifles and there was no charge. I replaced the case hardened trigger guard with a solid brass one when they became available. I named the rifle "Rosin The Beau" and had the name engraved on the patch box.

On the way home from a muzzleloading shoot in Maine, where I had won a Green Mountain bullet mold I stopped at the rifle barrel factory. I asked Branch Meanley, the owner of the company, if I could trade the mold for a .395 size and have him make me a .40 caliber drop in barrel for my T/C Hawken. In a few days, after I had returned home, a package arrived with the new barrel. When I opened the package I could see Branch had built a special barrel for me. It was 32 inches long, 15/16 inch across the flats, was complete with under rib and thimbles and had the hook breech plug installed and was in .40 caliber. The number on the barrel was 005555. The barrel was in the white so we browned it. I put on a Lyman 1/16 ivory bead front sight and open flat top folding Lyman rear sight. The load I used to win many matches, including the New Hampshire State Championship in 1990, was 55 grains of FFFG Goex black powder, a .395 soft lead round ball cast in the Green Mountain mold, a Teflon coated .015 bed ticking patch, and a CCI number 11 cap. The rifle has wonderful balance offhand with weight forward and the barrel has always been super accurate.

The area where I did a lot of hunting was the National Forest between Windy Hill and Cobble Hill. The land had been purchased from the hill farmers some time before I started hunting the area in early 1955.

The old houses were still standing although they were in very poor condition and were full of porcupines. The Forest Service later burned the buildings and afterward all that was left were the field stone foundations and many stone walls. The old apple orchards still produced apples in the fall and attracted large flocks of ruffed grouse, deer, and black bears who fed on them.

The second day of the New Hampshire primitive deer season in 1973 another fellow and I drove about two miles on a Forest Service road to the last farm where we parked. The road from there takes a sharp turn down hill and in about two miles connects onto Route 112. We left the Bronco and started into the

woods on foot. After going a short distance we separated with the other hunter going left and I turned right. I had gone to the base of a very steep hill and saw two deer run up the rise ahead of me. I followed in the general direction they had gone and walked for about two hours. Nearing the top of the hill in a patch of hardwoods several grouse took off in all directions around me. A large drummer came walking into a small clearing giving me a shot. I fired my T/C Hawken and the round ball struck the bird high in the back and did not spoil any meat. Placing the grouse in my pack I continued to the top of the high wooded hill. I found a flat rock in the sunshine, sat down and ate my lunch. I

checked my gear which was my .50 caliber rifle, an original Colt 1862 .36 caliber police model five shot revolver with four chambers loaded and the hammer on an empty chamber. I had a hunting bag with extra balls, patches, a ball starter, a capper, and a powder flask with a measure. I carried my small knapsack with a squaw tomahawk in a case, and a good hunting knife. After the noon rest I started down the hill traveling through hardwoods. When I was about half way down I turned right and progressed through a belt of evergreens.

Suddenly I felt that I was not alone and with a glance over my right shoulder saw a deer lying in the underbrush. All I could see was the head and neck of what was a nice doe. In one motion I turned, cocking the hammer at the same time, and fired. The ball struck where aimed. It hit the deer in the neck and the deer could not rise. This one time I did not follow Ned Roberts' Uncle Alvaro's advice who told him to always reload his rifle after firing before he moved from where he was standing. Taking the Colt from my holster I ran towards the deer while another deer ran by me at about ten feet and disappeared up the hill. I fired all four shots into the neck of the deer I had hit but they had no effect. I then reloaded the Hawken and dispatched the deer with a neck shot. When I processed the doe at home and removed the hide I found all four .36 caliber pistol balls in a tight group about an inch into the neck. The load was 20 grains of FFFG black powder, a .360 soft lead ball with bear grease on top. This was the last time I carried the pistol and depended only on the rifle after that. After I dressed the deer I got my rope and started the long drag down the hill. About one and a half hours later I arrived at the beaver pond near the last farm. Going

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up a rise I found my fellow hunter and the Bronco. He had not seen any game.

Thompson/Center Arms Company started building their Renegade hunting rifle in 1975. It was a caplock with a barrel that was one inch across the flats and 28 inches long. It had a plain stock with blue hardware. When a .54 caliber became available I bought one. It was number 4614 and cost \$165.00. I removed the original open sights and installed a Lyman 1/16 ivory bead front sight. On the tang I fitted a Lyman peep sight. This made for a fast and accurate sight picture. The load I used was 100 grains of FFG Goex black powder, a T/C Maxi 430 grain bullet lubed with bore butter, and a RWS cap. One problem I found was the bullet would work its way down the barrel and I would check often to make sure that it had not moved away from the powder. I solved the problem by putting a small amount of tissue paper on top of the bullet. The Renegade became my favorite large game rifle. With the rifle I shot a large whitetail doe and four bucks all with one shot except one. In 1985 while deer hunting alone high on Moody Ledge I came eye ball to eye ball with a large male black bear at about 20 feet. When Ned Roberts came to New Hampshire in 1880 with his uncle Alvaro to hunt black bears they used double barreled .44 and .45 caliber muzzleloading rifles loaded with bullets. Uncle Alvaro said a quick second shot was necessary if a bear was wounded and put up a fight. I had one shot and in the instance the bear was deciding what to do I fired. The Maxi ball struck the bear in the shoulder, passed through the animal and exited the other side. One shot was enough. I was glad the rifle was loaded for bear and was not a smaller caliber. If I had trouble on the mountain all help was miles away.

During one hunt a doe jumped over a fallen tree 40 yards from me. I shot it through the heart. The deer came running up the trail straight towards me. At the last moment it changed course and I could have touched the deer as it ran by. On another hunt I was lying behind a low stone wall with a barbed

wire fence behind me. I was watching a green field where the deer liked to feed. Suddenly a deer leaped over the fence and missed landing on me by a foot. I pointed my Renegade with the muzzle almost touching the animal and fired. The shot knocked the deer into the field. I was shaking as I reloaded and spilled some powder but finally got the gun recharged. The deer was a button buck and no additional shot was necessary.

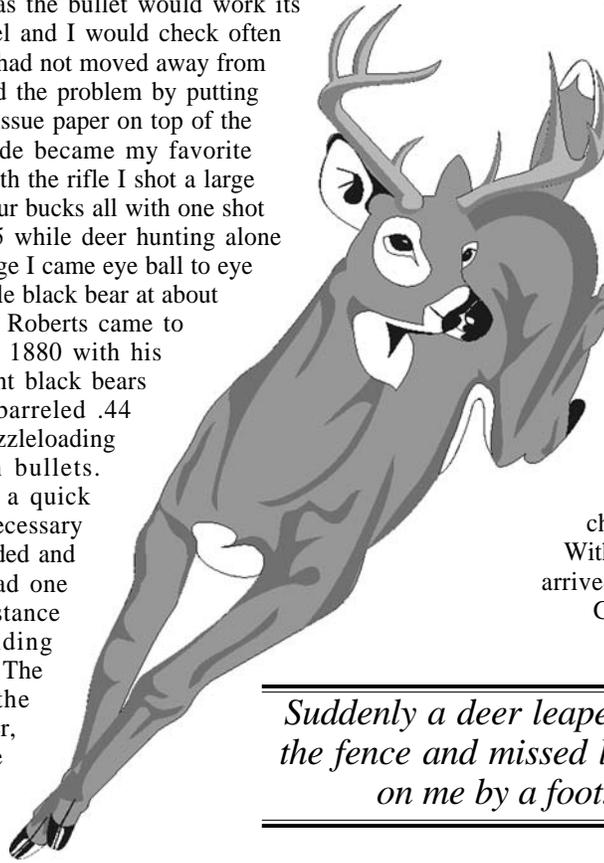
When hunting on a small rise in some softwoods one day a grouse took off below me. The bird flew up the hill straight toward where I was standing. I had no time to dodge and braced for the crash. At the last second the grouse swerved as its wings brushed my arm. One year we were hunting hares in the winter with a good beagle hound. I was on a rabbit path and could hear the dog below me when I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. It was a large hare in full leap. I just had time to lean to one side and the rabbit bounced off my leg.

Over the years as my son Bruce Henry grew from a small boy we went on many hunts together. He has become an excellent marksman and has won many shooting contests including winning the winter primitive biathlon and the New Hampshire State Caplock Championship. He also is a skillful hunter and brings home a nice buck almost every fall to feed his family. Game that we brought home included venison, grouse, pheasant, and three New Hampshire bull moose.

Times change. The State of New Hampshire is now divided into wildlife management units with separate rules for each. Biologists monitor the game checking on the numbers and condition of the herd. With the milder winters, deer ticks and wood ticks have arrived. Packs of coyotes can be heard hunting the hills. Grouse are scarce, wild and flush far ahead of a hunter.

The primitive season is now a ten day muzzleloading season. It is always towards the end of the month of October before the regular rifle season starts.

Only single shot muzzleloaders of .40 caliber or larger can be used. A regular hunting license is required plus a muzzleloading license to hunt the special season. There is a license for the archery season, a bear license, a pheasant license, a youth hunt, and many other laws a hunter must check before he heads for the woods. When the leaves turn to color in the fall and the high ridges beckon, my age now says that I do not go. But I will always be glad that I hunted the early years. **MB**



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