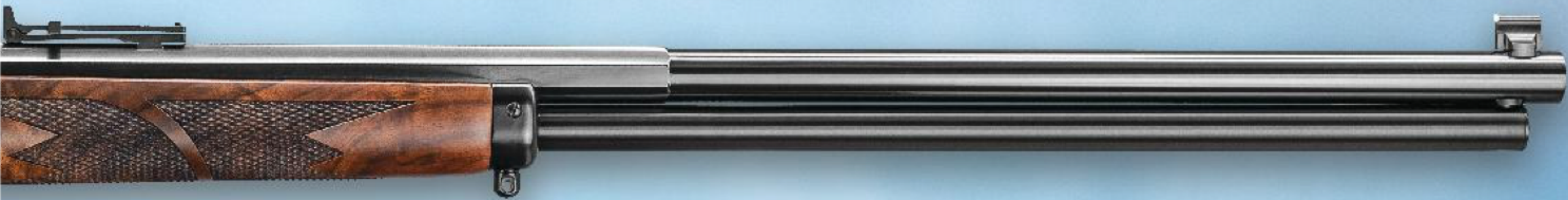




Marlin's Model 444 150th Anniversary belongs in the halls of lever gun history. It has an 8-round magazine, Skinner ladder sight, American black walnut pistol-grip stock and 24" half-octagon/half-round barrel. While this limited edition might be too pretty to take to the woods, it commemorates a legendary deer rifle's history. *Photo courtesy of Marlin Firearms*

PHOTOS BY MATT HANSEN





LEVER WAY OF LIFE

No matter the make or model you prefer, there's reason for deer hunters to love the all-around dependability and functionality of classic lever-action rifle designs.

> Most of us have a distinct memory of harvesting our first whitetail buck, and it usually includes the gun or bow we used that day. The memory of these two firsts takes me down memory lane to the hunt in South Texas on December 25, 1990.

BY CLINT
HEBERT

My father's friend Ray had invited us on a deer hunt in Jim Hogg County, between the towns of Hebbronville and Falfurrias. Because the terrain we hunted contained an assortment of plants and animals that would bite, stick or sting you, we elected to hunt from a high-rack truck, hoping to catch a mature buck trailing a hot doe across a *sendero*.

The rifle I'd brought along was a Savage 99E chambered in .243 Win. and topped with a Leupold VXI 3-9x40 scope. The birchwood on the stock and forend was less than pretty, but it was my first lever-action rifle. And I was darn proud of it!

We spent the better part of the evening cruising dusty ranch roads looking at does and young bucks. Just before dark, we spotted a lone doe that crossed the road 200 yards in front of us. Directly behind her was a big-bodied buck with chocolate antlers. His head was down, and he was following the doe's every move.

Ray quickly grabbed his binoculars and gave the buck a once-over. After a brief pause, he gave me a thumbs-up. As the buck nervously glared at us, I steadied the crosshair and slowly squeezed the trigger on the Savage.

As soon as my shot rang out across the thorny landscape, everyone hooted and hollered that I'd dropped the buck dead in his tracks. I can still see the heavy rack protruding through the knee-high buffelgrass as I walked up to him.

The perfect 10-point rack had a 24-inch spread and 5-inch bases. Back at the headquarters, we rough-scored him at 150 inches, which wasn't bad

for a 10-year-old's first buck!

That hunt set the bar for me, and it was the beginning of my lifelong journey pursuing whitetails with the aid of lever-action rifles. Over the past three decades, I've hunted almost exclusively with them. I love their timeless design, and I appreciate how they enable right- or left-handed shooters to make quick follow-up shots.

Most lever models allow for the mounting of optics, though some hunters still prefer the look and simplicity of iron sights. These rifles are easy to carry through the thick brush and/or over long distances, and they fit a rifle scabbard like a glove while hunting from horseback.

Let's look more closely at the benefits of lever guns for whitetail hunting, as well as some exciting trends in this niche firearms world.

QUICK LEVER HISTORY

Benjamin Tyler Henry's Model 1860 was one of the first successful lever-action designs commercially produced. It fired round-nose bullets and was chambered only for pistol cartridges. The breechloading tube magazine held 16 cartridges of .44 ammunition and was used widely throughout the American West. Due to its high capacity, it became known as the rifle that could be loaded on Sunday and shot all week long.

As time went on, lever guns were made with stronger actions to accept rifle-length cartridges with higher pressures. This enabled shooters to take larger game at greater distances. However, the design was still somewhat handicapped by the round-nosed bullets that had to be used in tubular magazines to prevent bullet deformation and jamming. John Browning solved this problem with his Model 1895, which contained an internal magazine that accepted pointed rifle bullets.

A few years later, Arthur Savage revolutionized the lever-gun world when he introduced his Model 1899. The "Savage 99," as it would become known, utilized an internal rotary magazine design. The rifle was chambered for high-velocity cartridges firing modern pointed bullets. The design even featured a cartridge counter on the side of the receiver, allowing the shooter to keep track of how many rounds remained in the internal magazine.

The Winchester 1895 was famously used by President Theodore Roosevelt on several of his African safaris. Many decades later, a number of rifle manufacturers went one step farther and designed lever actions with detachable magazines. These included the Browning BLR, Winchester Model 88, Sako Finnwolf, Ruger Model 96 and most recently, Henry Long Ranger.

Currently, the only lever-action rifles being produced



with detachable magazines are the BLR and Long Ranger. They're available in an array of modern cartridges and offer accuracy rivaling that of bolt-action designs.

Traditional tube-fed magazine

When his first deer hunt started in 1990, the author had no idea it would light in him a fire that's lasted a lifetime. Since downing the great Texas 10-pointer, he's been obsessed with both hunting and lever-action rifles.
Photo courtesy of Clint Hebert

designs remain popular with many lever-action aficionados. In fact, the Winchester Model 94 and Marlin Model 336, both offered in the venerable .30-30 Win. cartridge, likely have been used to take at least as many whitetails as any other firearms in history. You still see these historic guns in wide use in deer camps throughout the U.S. and even beyond.

LEVEREVOLUTION

In 2005, Hornady introduced LEVERevolution ammunition with patented Flex Tip Technology and Monoflex bullets. This gave new life to older lever-action rifles by offering a ballistically superior bullet that could be safely loaded into tubular magazines.

LEVERevolution is available in a variety of loads, and I've found this ammunition produces great accuracy and knockdown power. I use the 200-grain FTX in my own 1978 Marlin 336, which is chambered in .35 Rem.



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THE MODERN LEVER RIFLE

Over the past decade, there's been a trend toward modernizing lever actions.

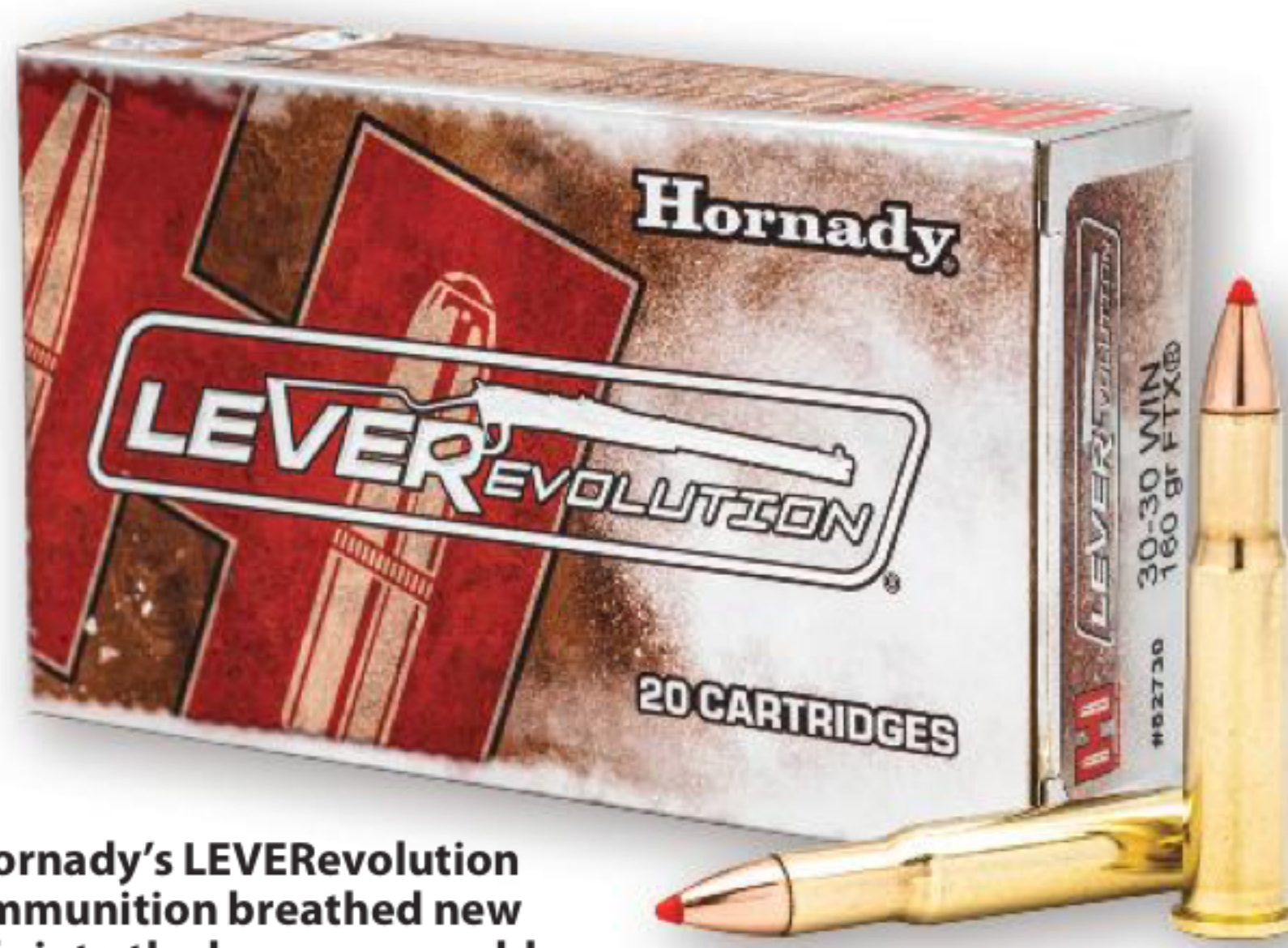
Marlin was the first major manufacturer to cater to this niche market by opening its Custom Shop in Sturgis, South Dakota. There it offers buyers the option to start custom rifle builds using the frame of their choice. Custom features that can be added include, but aren't limited to: Happy Trigger, XS peep sight with full picatinny rail system, paracord-wrapped big lever loop, painted stock, metal Cerakote finish and barrel threading.

The Custom Shop was an instant success for Marlin, and it set the stage for the company's newest mass-produced modernized lever gun, the Dark Series. Introduced at the NSSF's SHOT Show in 2019, the Dark Series comes standard with black Cerakoting on all metal finishes, black textured wood stock and forend, large lever loop wrapped in paracord,

Hornady's LEVERevolution ammunition breathed new life into the lever gun world, thanks to Flex Tip Technology. The soft-point FTX tip provides greater ballistics than round-nose bullets, which until then had been the only practical option for use in lever guns with tubular magazines. Photo courtesy of Hornady

paracord sling and threaded muzzle to allow for a suppressor. The Dark Series is available in the 336, 1894 and 1895 models and comes chambered in a variety of cartridges.

Henry soon followed suit with its X Model rifle. It's similar to the Dark Series in its modern design but comes standard



with a lightweight black synthetic stock and forend, fiber-optic sights and even a rail system on the forend for mounting lasers, lights or cartridge quivers.

The Dark Series and X Model rifles still function the same as older lever guns, but they do it with a little more modern flair.

150 YEARS – WHO'S COUNTING?

In 2020, Marlin celebrates its 150th anniversary with the Model 444 150th Anniversary limited-edition lever-action

rifle. Chambered in .444 Marlin, it features 8-round capacity, custom Skinner ladder sight, C-grade American black walnut pistol-grip stock and 24" half-octagon/half-round barrel. The rifle has beautiful wood and metal engraving, as well as John Marlin's signature etched on one side of the receiver. It's no stretch to say this special Model 444 is a work of art and that it will be a historic piece for collectors.

IN CONCLUSION

No matter which rifle-legal whitetail area you hunt this fall, there's a good chance a lever-action rifle will be hanging on the gun rack in camp. In the form of many makes and models, the lever gun has become an American icon that's stood the test of time. If Benjamin Tyler Henry were alive today, I think he'd be blown away at how his original design has evolved over time. And surely he'd be glad to know so many deer hunters still love it. **NAW**

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