

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

Ridin' with a Levergun

By: Jim Taylor

We had climbed up into the high country, the horse and I, early of the morning. The sun had greeted us about an hour out, and the brisk November morning air had warmed up until by mid-morning I had stopped and pulled off my jacket and tied it behind the saddle. We were in broken country - rounded hills that bottomed out in steep rocky draws and hillsides covered with a mixture of scrub oak, cedars and prickly pear cactus.

As we came up over the rise of a small ridge I saw the disappearing backsides of two Whitetail bucks going over the hill ahead me, maybe 200 or more yards off. I reached down by my left knee and pulled the levergun from its scabbard and jacked a shell into the chamber. Letting the hammer down to half cock I laid the rifle crossways on my lap and continued riding in the same direction that I had seen the deer go.

As I rode over the hill that the deer had passed over I began to look around. The horse was moving at a slow walk and as we continued on I suddenly spotted both bucks across the valley to my right. The deer did not seem to notice me and were just walking along, browsing on whatever they could find. I stepped off the horse, knelt down and pulled the hammer back on the rifle. Aiming at the deer closest to me I pulled the trigger and saw dirt kick up short. Durn! It must be further across there than I thought!

I levered in another shell while the deer milled around, not seeming too excited. I put the bead on top of the deer's back about at his withers and pulled the trigger. At the shot the buck dropped. I waited a little while to make sure he was down for good, then stepped back into the saddle and rode across the valley to where it lay and to the work of getting the deer ready to transport home.

The rifle was the Winchester Model 71 in .348 WCF. The load I used was Winchester's 200 gr. Silvertip factory load. I had shot a big Mule Deer a couple weeks earlier using this same load and had no qualms about shooting the small Coues Whitetail Deer with it. And I have to say it worked right well. Both times.

Horseback Carry

Most of my hunting has been done with a sixgun, but what times I have carried a rifle horseback it has been a levergun. Leverguns are ideal for use horseback. Compact, thin, even in the big Model 1886 or Model 71, they pack easily on a horse.

I have not done a lot of hunting with them but I have carried one quite a bit. During the "off" season (whenever it was not hunting season) I usually carried a Marlin Model 1894CL in .32-20 in the scabbard. That little rifle came in handy more than once and settled quite a few coyotes, dogs, feral cats, not to mention Javelina and a deer or two.

My normal carry mode was to tie the scabbard on the left side, butt up fairly high, with the barrel riding back under my left leg. I tied the scabbard back far enough that the stock would not interfere with the horse moving its head to look to the left. In this position I found it easy to pull the levergun from the scabbard while sitting in the saddle, should the need so arise.

I have watched people carry them tied fairly level on the right side (such as is shown in many movies) and while this is a comfortable carry, if the gun is not securely fastened in the scabbard it will come out when the horse jumps a small ditch or goes up a steep hill. That type of carry is often preferable when riding in heavily wooded country, but again, the gun needs to be fastened securely in the scabbard. It's best to angle the muzzle down and have the butt up fairly high near the horse's flank.

I was riding down into the hills below Oracle, AZ one Fall morning, looking to shoot a Mule Deer. As I went down the trail I noted that there were tracks of several horses traveling the same direction as I was. About a mile down the trail there was a washed-out ravine and the horse had to make a little jump to get over it. There on the other side of the ravine lay a nice-looking Model 94 Winchester.

I stopped and picked up the rifle, made sure it was unloaded and climbed back on the horse. About a half hour on and I came upon 3 riders who were in a clearing, discussing which direction they were going to go. I knew them and said "Howdy" as I rode up. We sat there making small talk for a few moments and then I said, "Hey, guess what? God gave me a new rifle!" They looked at me for a second and one of them said, "How?" I told them that I had been riding down the trail and there it lay, right in front of me, obviously a gift from God.

At that one of the riders checked his scabbard and found it was empty. The look on his face was hilarious! I handed him his rifle and told him that he ought to make sure it was tied in if he was gonna carry it in that fashion. We all had a good laugh. He thanked me several times and we all went our ways.

Shootin' From the Saddle

My horses were trained to be comfortable around gunfire. I broke them to it slowly. When I would grain them I would pop some firecrackers at the other end of the corral. When that became "normal" for them I took my .22 sixgun and did some shooting in the corral, usually 30 or 40 yards from them. Over several weeks I worked up closer to them until at last I was standing beside them, shooting my

pistol while they were eating. The blue roan got to where she would begin to salivate when she heard gunfire. I would ride out a ways, get off the horse and shoot rocks for a bit, and she would begin looking for something to eat.

As they became accustomed to gunfire I worked up to shooting while sitting in the saddle. Whether with sixgun or levergun, I made it a practice never to shoot near their head. I would turn in the saddle and shoot off to the side or to the rear. In this manner I killed deer and other critters over the years. My horses never got boogered by having a gun go off near their ears. It made life easy for all of us.

I never did master shooting the levergun while the horse was trotting or galloping. I shot the sixguns on the move but never played with learning the rifle. Truth be told, I never got real good with the sixguns from the back of moving horse either, but what little I did was fun. Now days I wish I had spent more time at it.

Saddleguns & Scabbards

I carried both Marlin and Winchester leverguns horseback and cannot say one is better than the other. Both are fine guns and both work just great. I have leverguns by both makers in various calibers and like them equally well. I usually chose what gun I was going to carry by its caliber and not by its brand-name, the caliber choice depending on what I was planning to do that time out.

I have 2 scabbards that I used. One is an old leather scabbard of the type still seen today. This particular one came off the Peterson Ranch in the Sierra Ancha's and is nearly 100 years old. The leather has deteriorated some on the edges, but that is OK for this scabbard did it's duty for many years.

The other one I made from a canvas gun carrier. It is an enclosed case, lined, with a zipper. I sewed and riveted straps and saddle rings on it so that I could tie it on the horse. It works for bolt guns or leverguns and completely protects the rifle from the elements as well as from scratches and dings when

riding in heavy brush.



Neither one are fancy but they both did the job required of them.

If you like to keep your guns in pristine condition you don't want them banging around against a sweatin' horse's flank and jostling in a leather scabbard. I carried my everyday levergun that way and it shows. But it's honest usin' wear. As I write this the gun is at Nonneman's (www.leveractions.com) being refinished and having a few custom touches done to it. When I get it back I will show it to you.

In Use

I had been gone from home quite a while and both the horse and I were ready for a rest. We had been on a long trip up into the high country behind my place with my friend Tom Peterson, just seeing the sights and enjoying God's Creation. We had climbed up into a rough area of the mountains that I had not explored before. It was cut-up country with lots of rocks. Rocks from the size of a marble up to the size of a house ... just laying every which way. Some of the places we started to go through required us to back-track and go around. It was just bad country.

For some reason I dis-remember at this late date I separated from Tom and rode over toward the east, toward a fairly steep and rough canyon. I got up to the edge of it and was setting the horse just looking things over. About the time I figured that there was no way we would get down through this one my horse threw her head up and looked across the canyon. There on the side working their way up to the rim was a fine herd of Javelina.

I remember thinking "I will just shoot one and we can take it home and have it for supper." and I bailed off the horse, jerking my Marlin .32-20 out of the scabbard.

The pigs were about 100 to 120 yards across the canyon and not moving real fast so I pulled down on the lead one and fired. And nothing. A clean miss. I worked the lever and fired again and again - nothing.

The pigs had put it in high gear now and were moving pretty quickly. They were pretty much in single file as they are wont to do during times of high-speed stress. As they came out of a couple of rocky cuts I had a clear view and would shoot. The pig I shot at would run on out and I would lever in another shell and shoot again. I did this about 5 times wondering what the heck was going on. It was all happening pretty fast.

After about the 4th or 5th miss I pulled the gun off my shoulder and looked at it and discovered what was wrong. In jerking the gun out of the scabbard I had wiped the folding sight forward! Flat! *I had been "aiming" through the screw that held the sight to the barrel!* (It was one of the first indicators I had that my eyes were not as good as they once had been)

I flipped the sight upright and drilled the next pig that ran out right through the head. Then it came to me in sudden clarity. How am I going to get to it?

It took about an hour but we finally found a way to get over and around that little canyon. Tom had shot one also and by the time we recovered them and got on home it was pretty late. I figured it was worth the hassle. My wife could make some of the best tamales from Javelina that I have ever eaten.

At the time it did not seem as if we were having as much fun as I remember now, some 15 years later. Looking back I now realize that many times I had a most wondrous adventure. At the time it was happening I often wondered how I had gotten myself into the mess I was in. Now I would not trade the memories for anything.

Adventure

If you have never taken a trip horseback in the back country, packin' a sixgun and a levergun along but have dreamed of doing so, DO IT NOW! Don't put it off. Life is full of "what if's" and other regrets and you don't need to add to them. You do not know what tomorrow may bring.

There is nothing like setting a good horse high on a mountain ridge looking over God's creation, away from all sights and sounds of civilization. Coffee never tasted so good as on a cold clear morning with the stars still out. And things you see... folks nowadays go to the zoo and think they have seen wild animals. When you ride into a clearing and see that first bear or elk you will realize those poor critters in the zoo ain't wild animals. Not anymore.



You may not own a horse or live where you can. Your lifestyle and job may not allow you to. You may not know anything about horses, packing and living in rough country. However there are reputable outfitters who will help you, teach you and work with you. Do some searching. Check the references. And realize, yes, it will cost something. But it's only money. In the end the memories are worth more than money.

Go have an adventure while you can.

When you are old and too feeble to get around and your grandkids ask you, "What did you do when you were young grandpa? you won't have to sigh and say, I shoveled poop for a corporation." (apologies from the author to Gen. Patton)

Start now. If you don't have a levergun, begin by getting one. All adventures begin with the first step.

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