



# Return of "LITTLE B"

STORY AND PHOTOS: JEFF JOHN

**W**inchester's 1876 .50-95 rifles first arrived in 1879 with factory literature declaring it to "Meet the needs of the hunter who needs a weapon having absolute killing power but not necessarily long range..." Original ammo had a 300-grain lead hollowpoint bullet with a copper cup in the hollow "... modeled after the famous English Express bullets."\* Winchester intended the rifle to be used at ranges within 150 or 200 yards, and at such close range, the bullet was quite effective on thin-skinned game.

It is perhaps not surprising that many of these rifles subsequently went to Africa and India as close-quarters stopping rifles for lions, leopards and tigers.

The 1876 Cimarron reproduction (reviewed in the September 2009 issue), made by Uberti of Italy, comes standard with a 28" or 22" barrel and a full magazine. I took an immediate liking to the 28" rifle, enough so that I bought it after the story for this project.

While nicely balanced, the 1876—any 1876—is a huge, long rifle, especially with a 28" barrel, and modestly heavy with a tare weight of 10 pounds. Put 10 rounds in it and you can add a full pound. Thus, the rifle with that entire payload shoulders and swings slowly. The short, fat bullet over black powder tends to foul the bore quickly, so accuracy tends to decline after two or three shots, rendering the rest of the magazine more or less progressively





# "IG 50"

useless. Black powder velocity with smokeless powder is unsafe even in a modern-made toggle-link Uberti action. This is why I call the rifle "Little Big 50." In power it pales before its big brethren in the Sharps family—but it *is* a .50, and the caliber alone always has a certain cachet. If heavy bullets, power and velocity are truly desired, move up to the Sharps or the 1886 lever action—or even the X-frame .500 S&W—all are strong enough. The toggle-link 1876 wasn't, isn't and never will be.

I quickly concluded the long barrel loaded with only a few cartridges would still handle more like an infantry musket than a sporting rifle. Within these weight/length/power considerations, I began to think of ways I could remodel the Cimarron 1876 into a handier rifle. Most of these calculations would revolve around the barrel, its contour and the magazine length.

## The "Business Length" 1876 rifle.

### THE CHAMBER

I had acquired RCBS dies, but my handloads during the initial test were disappointing compared to the Ten-X factory loads (Ten-X uses a special set of dies for the Uberti chamber). After looking over the factory barrel, gunsmith John King was reluctant to change the contour because of its diameter and the depth of the magazine ring cut, which would've needed welding. So the search was on for a suitable barrel and chambering reamer, which proved much harder than anticipated.

There was no group such as today's Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute (SAAMI) when the last .50-95 round was factory loaded and John King and I discovered there were many chamber drawings in circulation to add to the confusion. Pacific Tool & Gauge offered two slightly different versions, neither of which were close enough to the dimensions of the RCBS dies.

### WHERE TO BEGIN?

First step: decide on brass and bullets. American-made Jamison brass, properly headstamped .50-95, the RCBS 50-350 cast bullet and Barnes .510" 300-grain FNSP jacketed bullets were easy choices. Already on hand were RCBS dies.

The barrel proved problematic because we couldn't find anyone duplicating the 1:48" twist of the Uberti barrel. Although it isn't cataloged, Douglas Barrels can make a 1:42" twist, which seemed a good choice for both the 350-grain cast and 300-grain jacketed. Better still, delivery was quick and prompt. King





**A**



**B**



**C**



**D**



**E**



**F**



**G**

**A)** The dust cover of the Winchester Express rifles had this unique stamping, here recreated with acid etching by John King. **(B-D)** An original-style reproduction of the factory ladder sight from Buffalo Arms was chosen because it was standard on the Express rifle **(B)** no doubt due to its V-notch. A V-notch is quick to pick up, but not conducive for aging eyes to aim with precisely.

Paired up with the standard front sight **(C)**, this repro from Winchester Bob is complete with German silver blade and lock screw on the base. The express sight with ladder raised is optimistically graduated to 1,000 yards **(D)**. The 1,000-yard range flies in the face of Winchester's advertising, which claimed the rifle was only powerful enough for 200-yard shooting. **E)** The crescent buttplate is

notorious for increasing felt recoil, however, it is just fine on an 1876 rifle, since power (and recoil energy) is limited by the action's strength, rather than the shooter's tolerance for pain. **F)** Original barrels were marked "Cal. 50-95" just ahead of the chamber, here recreated by acid etch. **G)** John King made the button for the 1/2 magazine, which is held in place by the fore-end cap.





sent a fired Jamison case, resized in the RCBS dies and topped with a bullet to Pacific Tool & Gauge for a reamer.

## BARREL & BALANCE

The next step was to choose a barrel length. After much anguish (partly because this was uncharted territory as to balance and feel of the final arm), and long searches through George Madis' *The Winchester Book*, the 24" length was chosen. Only a couple of original Winchester .50s were originally made with 24" barrels, the 26" was the factory standard length and 22" was much more popular than any other optional barrel length. I briefly considered the 22", but the fore-end and magazine are shorter and likely would make the gun a little squirrely to handle, since the action itself is fairly long and heavy.

The 24" proved to be very appealing to my eye (I determined this by taping off the barrel and mag tube at various lengths and configurations with masking tape, leaning it against a wall, and casually studying its look for a day or so). Looks aside, the 24" 1/2 round, 1/2 octagon with 1/2-magazine configuration proved to provide the gun enough forward weight to be steady during offhand aim yet keeping it handy and quick to shoulder. Oddly, there wasn't more than a 1/2-pound savings in overall weight, but the balance point changed. The

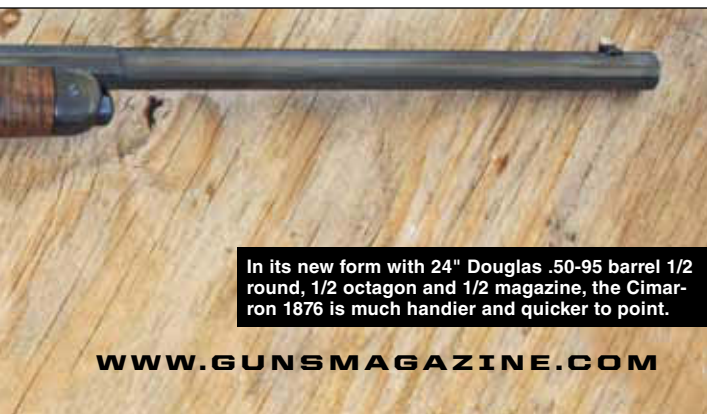
The polished receiver blued quite nicely, but look at all the real estate available for engraving. The 1876 is a natural for a highly finished custom rifle. A custom Old West rifle deserves an ammo box replicating the era, too (above). Did Jeff mention fouling? After shooting the chronograph session of 10 consecutive shots, Jeff took the rifle home, turned it upside down and dry brushed out this huge tidy pile of filth (below). Birchwood Casey 77 Black Powder cleaner finished up the cleaning task in no time.



balance point now is around the receiver and the step just forward of the receiver leading to the fore-end acts a rest for my fore or middle finger giving the rifle a very secure feel in carry.

## SIGHTS

Standard sights for the Express Rifle would be the odd long-ladder rear "Sporting Leaf"-style, and is a reproduction offered by Buffalo Arms. I say "odd sight" because Winchester literature always claimed the Express was only effective out to 200 yards max, yet "standard" was a sight graduated for 1,000 yards. The front is a new reproduction standard model by Winchester Bob. It has the correct German silver blade and a screw to lock it in the dovetail.



In its new form with 24" Douglas .50-95 barrel 1/2 round, 1/2 octagon and 1/2 magazine, the Cimarron 1876 is much handier and quicker to point.

## CUSTOM 1876 WINCHESTER

ORIGINAL IMPORTER: CIMARRON ARMS

P.O. BOX 906

FREDRICKSBURG, TX 78624

(830) 997-9090

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CIMARRON-FIREARMS-CO

**Action type:** Lever action, **Caliber:** .50-95, **Capacity:** 4+1, **Barrel length:** 24", **Overall length:** 43-1/2", **Weight:** 9-1/2 pounds, **Finish:** Blue, **Sights:** Sporting leaf rear, post front, **Stock:** Walnut, oil finished, **Price:** \$1,650.60 (stock rifle), \$4,500 (as shown)

The original wood wasn't bad, just not striking and I'd already spent enough on this project that going whole hog wasn't a hard decision. King kicked through his firewood pile and scrounged up a purty darn nice stick of American walnut. In keeping with the mission of making a custom Uberti, we used the original stock for a pattern and the final shaping is more true to Uberti than Winchester. The nose cap had been aggressively machined polished and the forearm had to follow its shape, so the forearm is a little narrower at the front than I would prefer. In keeping with the new iteration



The RCBS cast bullets wanted to shoot. Jeff believes black powder fouling in the throat caused the third shot (above) to continually go astray. The best accuracy was obtained with the Barnes 300-grain JFP bullets at 1,454 fps (below). At 50 yards, the Birchwood Casey white Shoot-N-C targets are very easy to aim at and bullet strikes easy to determine without a scope, since it is, of course, a .50.



of "Deluxe Model," checkering was added after giving the wood an oil finish with Pilkington's. The inside of the tangs and the buttplate were sealed with Permalyn.

As I had already taken the action apart back in '09 and stoned away any burrs inside left from the original machining, there really wasn't much to do to tune the action beyond making the lever safety-bar-spring lighter. This safety makes you consciously hold the lever tight against the receiver before the trigger can move. The Uberti factory spring is too stout and puts too much stress on my hand for comfortable shooting. King softened it so it's close to the way Winchester set them. I stoned the hammer notch and sear square to each other which made the pull crisp, if not light, at 6.5 pounds.

The original magazine tube was shortened and King spun a button for the 1/2 magazine to fit inside the Uberti nose cap. The 24" barrel still looks good with the rifle-length forearm and holds four rounds.

While Uberti does one of the better polish jobs in the business, machine polish can soften edges and dish screw holes. Having more time than sense, I stoned the action flat and final polished with paper backed by wood or metal. In the process I lost the external Italian proof-marks and Uberti name. The hole where the lever lock resides is the only hole still slightly dished. I didn't want to monkey with the thin struck serial number although it is also stamped inside the tang.

The hammer and lever exhibited very nice case colors, although the lever had a few thin, white areas. An easy fix was randomly applying G96 Blue Creme with a Q-Tip to the thin spots without doing any degreasing. Leaving a little oil on the lever keeps the blue from giving the even coverage normally desired. I didn't want to cover all of the light spots, so some thin spots received a simple light pass of the Q-Tip and other spots more passes to deepen the color. Being a creme, the G96 is easy to control on the Q-Tip.

The receiver was given a deep Brownells Oxynate 7 finish by Jim Hoag. When hand polished to a 1,200-grit finish, metal finished with Oxynate 7 replicates the look of the old deep blue-black charcoal blue used by Winchester, but is sturdier and can be touched up much easier. I briefly explored case hardening the receiver but it caused shivers to those who do the work. Warping of the thin walls of the receiver and sideplate is highly possible and at this point in the project, the thought of getting the receiver back in the form of a pretzel was enough to convince me to go with blue.

I rust blued the barrel using Pilkington's American Rust Blue. Polishing the barrel to a 400-grit finish, it has a subtle matte finish complemented by the blue receiver. Rust bluing is easily in the realm of the hobby gunsmith. You only need a tank big enough to submerge the parts in boiling water, and the ability to follow instructions. Brownells can supply it all. My setup from the firm uses a standard BBQ-size propane tank.

King nitre blued the screws, loading gate and sundry small parts to give the final rifle a pleasing multicolored finish. Oddly, some of the screws under the action refused to take on the nitre blue or my subsequent stove-top heat blue. They easily were darkened with the G96.

The barrel has original-style Winchester address markings and caliber acid-etched (sorry Cimarron), but the serial number, was left alone and is obviously Cimarron's and not Winchester. Uberti marks still exist on the steel under the stock, so this is not a "fake" Winchester, but a custom Cimarron.

## **.50-95 HANDLOADED AMMO PERFORMANCE**

<b>BULLET</b> (BRAND, BULLET WEIGHT, TYPE)	<b>POWDER</b> (BRAND)	<b>CHARGE</b> (GRAINS WEIGHT)	<b>VELOCITY</b> (FPS)	<b>ENERGY</b> (FT-LBS)	<b>GROUP SIZE</b> (INCHES)
BARNES 300 JFP	SWISS FFG	79	1,454	1,409	1-3/8
RCBS 350 LFN	SWISS FFG	77	1,399	1,561	2-1/2*

NOTES: RCBS CHRONOGRAPH SET 10' FROM MUZZLE. VELOCITY RESULTS ARE THE AVERAGE OF FIVE SHOTS. CCI 200 PRIMERS IN JAMISON BRASS. \*TWO SHOTS IN 1-1/4". GROUPS FIRED AT 50 YARDS.

Into Jamison brass from Buffalo Arms went the aforementioned RCBS 50-350, which dropped from the mold at 359 grains (cast from 20:1 mix, sized .512" and lubed with SPG lube) and the .510" Barnes 300-grain jacketed flatnose. The jacketed bullet is mostly contemporary with the original 1876 being offered at least as early as 1899 (the earliest catalog I have showing it). Capacity of the modern solid-head modern brass is much less than the advertised 95 grains of the original loads. For the cast bullets, 75.5 grains of Swiss FFG was dropped through a tube and a 0.060" Walters vegetable fiber wad placed over the powder before seating the bullet. The jacketed Barnes Bullets, being a little lighter were seated over 79 grains of FFG and both were lit with CCI 200 primers.

Here's some advice for anyone rebarreling one of these 1876 rifles. Have the gunsmith make you a chambered barrel stub to check your reloads. After loading the Barnes Bullets, I decided to load some more cast bullets with Trail Boss powder. I had to readjust the crimp between the cast and jacketed bullets and applied a just a hair too much crimp to the Trail Boss loads, subtly bulging the shoulder.


I loaded the ammo before my move to Nevada and had to pack and move before continuing this project. Not remembering I never checked the smokeless loads, I loaded the rifle with the Trail Boss loads first and the first round stuck in the chamber, trapped in the carrier. I spent the better part of the morning carefully taking apart the rifle almost completely to remove the stuck round.

That ordeal over, the shooting commenced. Recoil isn't bad, even with the crescent buttplate, but it's loud. Accuracy with the 300-grain Barnes Jacketed Flatnose bullet at 50 yards was good with a pleasing 3-shot cloverleaf of 1-3/8" and velocity was decently high. The average of 1,454 fps is pretty good even compared to the original Winchester advertised velocity of 1,641 fps.

The cast bullet would shoot decent 2-shot groups, but the 3rd shot always opened up the group. Light bullets over black powder means fouling occurs pretty rapidly, especially in the throat. My cast bullets were heavier and softer than originally used by Winchester, which were of 16:1 mix. It'll be worth trying a harder bullet. I'm frankly grateful to get such 3-shot groups without having to wipe or blow down the barrel. If I stay with the Barnes jacketed bullets and can't sort out a hunting problem with three quick shots of .50-95, it's likely the loose nut behind the trigger and not the load.

The Cimarron 1876 has proven to be a very worthwhile platform for a custom gun project. There really weren't any surprises once gunsmith John King and I decided the heart of the build was going to be the barrel and chamber both matched to components commercially available. After the reamer investment, the rest followed naturally. Being able to do a lot of the finish work and preliminary polish work both saved money and gave a feeling of accomplishment, not to mention one very unique rifle. As expensive as the project was, it was far cheaper than searching for a scarce original

Winchester with this many "special order" options. Had I bought such an original, which appear in the 5-figure ranges these days, I'd likely be afraid to do much more than look at it!

\*Quoted from *The Winchester Model 1876 "Centennial" Rifle* by Herbert Houze. 

**The Winchester Model 1876  
"Centennial" Rifle, Herbert G. Houze,**  
©2001, 192 pages, illustrated, ISBN: 0-917218-97-3,  
Mowbray Publishing,  
54 East School Street Woonsocket, RI 02895, (800) 999-4697,  
[www.manatarmsbooks.com](http://www.manatarmsbooks.com)

**The Winchester Book,**  
George Madis, ©1985, 640 pages,  
1,800 photos, ISBN: 0-910156-03-4,  
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