

STEVEN DODD HUGHES

HUNTING WITH VINTAGE RIFLES

This Montana hunter adds to the challenge of hunting antelope and deer by using old double guns and an antique Mauser.



Craig Janssen with a Montana mule deer taken with a vintage Mauser rifle chambered in 8mm-06.

I belong to an informal group in southcentral Montana that enjoys shooting classic and custom rifles. For the most part we handload for our rifles and many of us like to hunt with them. On summer Sundays we can be found on one fellow's ranch shooting from a benchrest to sight in and test fire, or from field positions at steel targets for fun. We never keep score, and the competition is informal. We shoot vintage single-shots, doubles, Mausers, and Springfields, as well as classic lever guns.

Craig Janssen is one of the regulars and his wife, Holly, is often the hit of the post-shoot potluck, serving game taken with vintage rifles. Daughter Caroline and son Cole are often in attendance and shoot right alongside their dad.

Knowing Craig regularly hunts with his vintage rifles, I asked him about being the subject of a Custom Shop column. When he told me about stalking and killing a pronghorn with his 8mm double rifle, I figured we had a story. That was 2013, and when Craig told me he had done it again this year I had to tell the tale.

Long-range hunting (I call it sniping) is all the rage today. The punch line is always how many hundreds of yards the shot was—400, 500, or 600, and today on TV I saw a pronghorn dropped at 800-plus yards.

That's fine and dandy for those who practice with precision rifles topped with high-power scopes and can read the wind that often prevails where the deer and the antelope play. But there are some of us who still subscribe to the notion that hunting is about getting a little bit closer, and a rifle with genuine character most likely has a walnut stock, blued steel, and maybe no scope at all.

Don't get me wrong—the last time I shot my .38-55 Marlin at one of our shooting matches, I shot a group at 100 yards that was 2 inches wide and 8 inches tall. I need a scope sight, or at least a peep sight, as the buckhorns are hell on elevation as I venture into the age of changing eyesight.

Craig is a couple of decades younger, however, and his handloading expertise and extensive practice shows when he regularly shoots five-shot groups between two and three inches from his vintage K. Schreiber 8x57R double rifle with barrel sights. He handloads 150-grain bullets and has shot benchrest groups as small as 1.5 inches. He regularly practices at distances from 100 to 200 yards on the steel clangers at the ranch range.

Craig often hunts with his buddy Peter Weber, and they are fortunate to have access to a large ranch in the Miles City area where mule deer and whitetails play alongside pronghorn antelope.

On the 2013 hunt they spotted a small band of antelope in a draw and were able to sneak up to about 200 yards following some breaks. As Craig relates, "They didn't know we were there and we had time to range them and think about the shot. I was in a solid prone position with good light, and when I put the front bead on the buck it felt like a very makable shot. I squeezed the front trigger, heard the wallop and saw the buck was hit. He jogged a couple of yards and stopped. I took the same sight picture and brought him down with the second barrel." He paced off the distance at 190 and 200 yards and both shots were in the lungs.

In 2014 Craig decided to hunt with a different 8mm vintage double. On this one, the maker's name is hidden under a claw scope mount, doubly unfortunate because the scope is long gone and difficult and expensive to replace. On the positive side, Craig reports, "This rifle is trim and elegant. It carries and comes to the shoulder like a well-balanced shotgun. It has good

triggers and very shootable iron sights and I don't feel handicapped with it in my hands; in fact, I feel pretty deadly."

After some research and a chamber casting, the rifle was determined to be chambered for the 8x57R 360, an obsolete rimmed cartridge with the small .318-inch bore dimension. Craig had to swage the more available .323-inch bullets down one at a time to fit the small bore. He found loading dies, but making brass presented a challenge.

Ultimately he arrived at 9.3x72R for cases, but these had to be formed and the necks reamed to accommodate the chamber and bullet diameter. He worked up a load with a 150-grain bullet that shot a bit flatter at lower pressure than the original 200-grain load. A couple of trips to the range had the rifle shooting two- to three-inch groups with both barrels, much to his delight.

Antelope populations have been down in Montana due to hard winters and disease. With tag numbers shrinking, Craig felt fortun-

nate to draw in his preferred unit. He stalked several bucks unsuccessfully and on the last day of the hunt managed to get in front of a large herd of pronghorn and wound up sitting in a good spot in a sparse grove of ponderosa pine. When the band of antelope wandered as close as they were going to get, he had to decide. With a clear shooting lane between tall grass and trees, he lined up the sights and shot a small buck through the heart with the first shot. The range was about 175 yards, a long shot for sure with an iron-sighted rifle. Practice, a proven load, and a steady rest combined to bag a good meat buck with a very classy and classic double rifle.

Craig grew up on a wheat farm in western Kansas hunting with his dad, who instilled in his son an affinity toward quality guns. He says, "My dad and his friends were always open to me looking at, handling, and talking about their guns. Dad had a keen eye for quality and helped me to see and appreciate fine things, including American custom

rifles. Through me, he is now developing an interest in English and European guns." As I mentioned, Craig is doing his best to pass that appreciation on to his own kids.


This past season, Craig had a bonus hunt with a different vintage rifle, an Oberndorf Mauser bolt rifle. Originally an 8x57, it had been rechambered to 8mm-06. Known as a Model B, it sported a particularly well-figured walnut half-stock.

He bought the rifle at a good price because of the odd chambering. Craig didn't think it at all odd as he already had loading dies and had experimented with the wildcat cartridge.

The rifle had been drilled for scope mounts and he put an older Leupold fixed 4x scope on the bolt gun and sighted it in with handloads. Hunting with his buddy Peter in a light snowstorm, they caught a brief glimpse of a mule deer doe moving up a draw. As it was near the rut they looked for a buck and spotted him some 300 yards away in a stand of timber. He was hard to see and offered no shot so they used ridges and breaks in the topography to sneak to within 200 yards, but the deer had moved again. They couldn't see the buck or the doe but were confident the two were close-by and still together.

With only a half hour or so of light left, Peter suggested trying a fawn distress bleat. He moved a few yards away and tried the call.

"This started the most exciting experience you could imagine," Craig said. "As soon as he blew the call we could hear the doe moving through the timber, and then we could see her with her ears pinned back. The big buck came into sight at 150 yards. He then came running toward us and stood near the doe, turning sideways. I was so surprised at what I was seeing I almost waited to see if he would come closer, but I came to my senses, sighted the scope, and touched off a shot. It was the most memorable mule deer shot of my life, taking him through the heart and dropping him at 30 yards."

Craig enjoys the entire experience—appreciating finely crafted rifles, taking on challenges, handloading, sighting in, and practicing with vintage rifles. It's a great accomplishment to take worthy game with rifles such as these. 



Janssen with a fine Montana pronghorn that fell to an iron-sighted double rifle.