

A TRACTOR



OR IS IT? THIS PROJECT T SO NICE IT MIGHT NOT

7" Vermin Target

Crating Pec



Hamilton S. Bowen

Not every undertaking turns out all that well. Indeed, some are best forgotten and unreported. One way to increase the odds of a favorable outcome is to practice first, which will usually give you a fighting chance in the main event. Unmanly as this may seem (akin to asking directions), your wallet and reputation will often thank you.

So, with a couple of the resident Mannlicher carbines in want of stock refinishing, it seemed the better part of valor to practice on an expendable gun first to get the stock finish and stain color right. A good rummaging in the shop corners uncovered a mangy Marlin M57M .22 WRM lever rifle, the perfect victim for such an enterprise. The stock was cracked and had some chunks missing. Well, one thing led to another and pretty soon it looked like we might just have the makings of a fine "tractor" rifle on our hands, just the ticket for arming the Kubota for bush-hogging

missions about the old home place.

No self-respecting farmer in my neck of the woods ever sortied on the ol' Massey Ferguson without some sort of firearm. The couple I knew best as a kid seemed preternaturally preoccupied with worries about 2-legged varmints, so they carried ratty S&W revolvers in the tractor tool boxes, usually wrapped in an old sock or tattered gun rug. Another I recall, sensibly more worried about groundhogs bent on destroying the foundations of every barn in the county, armed himself with a Marlin .22 auto of decidedly shady aspect.

RIFLE

Rifle, shovel and sledge hammer. This old Marlin was just another implement and nothing special—yet.

TURNED OUT STAY ON DUTY.

Spending more time these days on a tractor around the old Bowen family homestead put me in mind of the need for a suitable tractor gun of my own. The old Marlin looked like the ideal candidate once its duties as a wood-working guinea pig were discharged.

Tractor guns are the ultimate in utility guns and first and foremost must be cheap, i.e. expendable. They spend a lot of time in dust, rain and mud in an environment full of sharp steel corners. They get beat senseless rattling and lurching around day in and day out. Dropping is always a possibility. They may also meet especially violent ends. While I do not know of a specific case where a tractor gun died the hard way, I am aware of at least one chainsaw smashed flat as a flitter under the track of the resident bulldozer. The crawler pilot (mercifully not Yr. Obt. Svt. for a change) also suffers from the genetic disorder BPS (Bowen's

Preoccupation Syndrome) and was evidently committing multi-tasking with predicable results.

Suitability

The old Marlin needed a few modest improvements and modifications to make the gun handy and effective. This wasn't a complicated gunsmithing exercise, but a pleasant one showing that in some old clinkers lurks a pretty good gun and an opportunity for weekend gunsmiths to hone their skills without risk to anything but their pride.

Some rifles do wear out from use. My M57M Levermatic was weary enough to have acquired the annoying habit of dropping the finger lever slightly at the slightest jar, which would, in turn, unlock the action. Accordingly, a bit of tinkering was in order.

While these hammerless lever rifles have an extremely short lever throw and run fast as lightning, all manner

of links, slots, camming surfaces and mousetrap springs go lame over time. Poking around on the Internet turned up a low-mileage cartridge lifter, snappier lifter spring and a new lever cam plate, which, once installed, cured that problem. Naturally, the new lifter caused feeding trouble, but a bit of file and stone work cured this. I must freely admit a lack of familiarity with the entrails of these guns, so I was especially happy to have a copy of J. B. Wood's book *Disassembly of .22 Rifles* at hand.

While patrolling on a tractor doesn't exactly make you a member of the cavalry, the problem of unwieldy weapons is the same. The needlessly long and cumbersome 24" barrel was bound to get tangled up in the gun rack, roll bar, front-end loader controls, low-flying tree branch or some other obstruction. A minute on the band saw trimmed it to a handier 18". As with many economy-grade .22s,

the barrel was pinned to the receiver. So, rather than remove the barrel and crown it on the lathe the right way, we did it the down-and-dirty way with a piloted spot-facing tool, filing the outside chamfer by hand. Cutting the magazine and inner magazine tube and milling a new dovetail slot in the barrel for the front tube hanger completed the trimming. Remounting the front sight required only drilling and tapping a couple of screw holes.

Like many 50-somethings, I suffer from optical menopause and am constantly frustrated by failing skills as a marksman because I simply can't see ordinary rifle sights any more. Most of my serious rifle shooting is with vintage rifles on which optics are an abomination, which made it difficult to warm up to the idea of a scope, even for a utility gun. Happily, peep sights have given me a whole new lease on life with iron-sighted rifles and that's how this Marlin was equipped.

The Levermatic family of rifles was made for a few years in the late '50s and early '60s, so finding a dedicated receiver sight is troublesome. As it happens, the out-of-production Lyman 66 for the Ruger .44 auto carbine has the same mounting-hole pattern and, with just a bit of work on the base mating surface contours, bolted right up. Appropriately enough, a previous owner had obviously dropped his gun and bent the cross bar on this sight. A bit of straightening set it aright and afforded a useful lesson on Lyman peep sight repair.

Despite the woodworking lesson, notwithstanding, this thing really needed some help. The first order of business was to remove as much of the original finish as possible. Jasco Stain and Varnish Stripper from the



Yr. Obt. Svt. on tractor in weeds (above). No telling what monsters might be hiding in those weeds and require dispatch. The Kolpin Gear Grips (below) keep the "tractor rifle" secure and handy, thanks to its quick-release feature.



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local Ace Hardware store worked well, abetted by a bit of judicious scraping and steel wooling. Somewhere in its life, this poor rifle sustained a beating that cracked the stock through the wrist. The tang area had chipped out leaving an unsightly garf which required a small plug of wood to fill. A little Elmer's wood glue blown into the cracks and some sawdust rubbed in rendered it sound once again.

Typical of its vintage, this gun featured a short, high-comb, monte carlo stock which would have fitted perfectly the average 4', 11" 6 year old with a giraffe neck. Attacking the monte carlo comb with a rasp and some simple shaping eliminated the annoying appendage and gave far better handling with the iron sights. The quickest way to lengthen a stock is by adding a recoil pad, which also affords a no-slip butt surface, a great aid to shooting in awkward positions—such as the saddle of your tractor. Plus, I hadn't installed a recoil pad in forever and was happy of the practice.

All the woodwork needed was the finishing, the actual purpose of the job. The Pilkington's English Red stain, totally out of place on a beater Marlin, is never-the-less a delight to my eyes and, while not totally authentic, may still get the nod in the end for the



The "new" Marlin M57M is light, handy and fast on its feet, just the ticket for a tractor gun. She will never look this good again. Of course, it might be reassigned to more benign duty, since it came out as well as it did.

Steyr guns.

Like most personal gunsmithing projects, this one began to suffer "mission creep." What with all this fancy wood and metal work, it just wouldn't do to leave off rebluing even though we were heading toward a \$500 bill on a \$100 rifle. A serious polishing effort wasn't in the cards, so we applied our faux rust blue, which covered a lot of sins of economy at manufacture and a lot of the hard miles since. Most any gunsmithing shop will have a bead-blast cabinet and use a variety of media, depending on the job at hand.

While aluminum oxide at high pressure is great for cleaning off rust and solder, it opens the pores of the metal and etches the hell out of it. Proper rust bluing has a bit of a sheen to it so a softer, smoother matte is indicated on finish work. The Bowen Classic Arms shop formula is glass beads at 40-50 psi, which, before actual bluing, yields a bright, frosted matte much like on stainless handguns from the Smith & Wesson Performance Center. It does not, however, cover any sins of metal preparation as often imagined.

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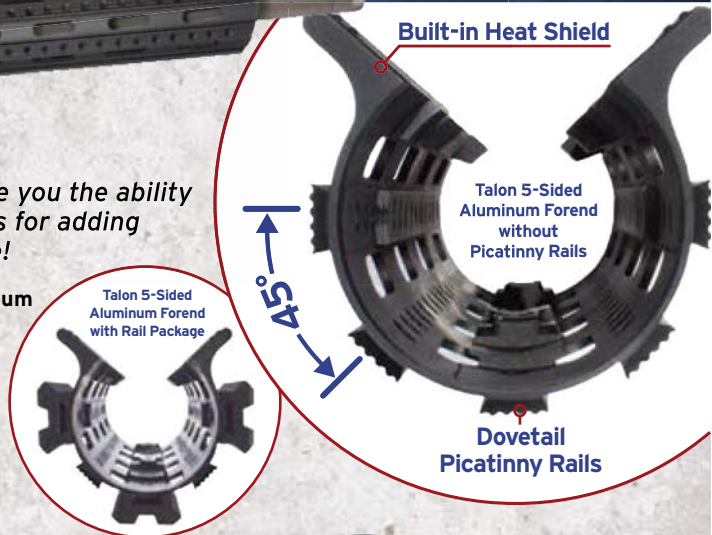


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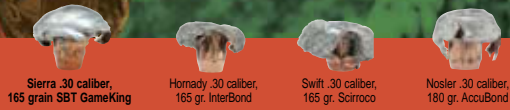
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A TRACTOR RIFLE



Rear sight staff, wedge and hammer used in repairing the bent Lyman rear sight staff. Sometimes fixing something really does take a hammer.



This crown was performed with a hacksaw, file and piloted crowning tool in about 3.4 minutes.



Yr. Obt. Svt. at vise rasping on the stock. This gun wasn't destined to be scoped, so the homely monte carlo comb on the stock had to go.

Once blued, this treatment bears a suspicious resemblance to the rust bluing found on fine custom sporting rifles. Not near as durable as the real thing, this inexpensive finish is nevertheless quite handsome. Alas, I did succumb to the irresistible urge to have Turnbull Restorations color case the lever, a senseless and futile gesture to be sure but, hey, no free-living, self-supporting groundhog should ever suffer the indignity of getting whacked by an ugly gun except under the most desperate circumstances.

With all the finished bits and pieces in hand, the gun was reassembled for testing and sighting. The CCI TNT Green ammo with its 30-grain hollowpoint bullet flying along at near 2,000 fps gave surprisingly good accuracy in the indifferently bedded M57M and produced some quarter-sized groups with iron sights at the 25- to 50-yard distances tried initially. A hopeful sign indeed.

Carrying the gun on the tractor didn't present any difficulties. My particular machine had a roll bar just abaft the seat which afforded a handy place to rig a gun rack. After reviewing the available ATV racks and mounts, I settled on a set of the Kolpin Gear Grips. Some Monsieur mouse engineering and fabricating resulted



Retribution of biblical proportions on thievin' varmints need not be large or loud. The CCI 30-grain HP at 2,000 fps is the wrath of God on small and medium critters.

in a simple, solid mount that affords reasonable protection and ready access to the gun.

This rehabilitated Marlin is now a faithful companion around the farm and will, over time, doubtless account for the occasional varmint, especially coyotes, which have discovered the delights and bounties of life in beautiful East Tennessee. Not beloved by local farmers or domestic pet owners, perhaps I can knock a bit of the lustre off their lives here in the Promised Land. The old Marlin does its work well and provided some important answers to stock refinishing questions on Mannlicher-Schoenauers. As a "tractor rifle," however, it wasn't a real success.

Alas, I have taken a bit of a shine to this old clinker and now kind of hate to beat it to death in the field and am obliged to be a bit careful with it. But at least I did not violate one of the cardinal principles of good gunsmithing: Never buy a perfectly suitable \$200 gun when you can take a \$100 gun, spend \$500 on it and have the same thing.

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