

I here isn't much doubt this old Texas marksman is one of the finest shots who ever pulled a trigger. See if you don't agree after reading about . . .

The man was very old. His tall frame was stooped with age, his eyes dim, his bony hands gnarled. Yet, when he took the rifle from the wall, he straightened proudly to his full height of more than six feet. His dim eyes flashed and the gnarled hands manipulated the

weapon with fluid grace. Swifly he whipped the rifle to his shoulder, drew a bead on an imaginary target and worked the lever with practiced ease.

Turning suddenly, he cried "Catch!" and tossed me the rifle. I caught it correctly, holding it by stock and barrel in a horizontal position. The ancient marksman beamed his approval. "That's the way, son. *Never handle a rifle with the muzzle pointing at a man — unless you want to shoot him!* Rule Number One in the Shooter's Code."

I returned the beautifully balanced rifle — a .32-20 Model '92 Winchester — to its owner. His hands caressed it lovingly a moment before he hung it

back on its peg. "Quarter of a million rounds I've fired through that barrel, but the rifling is just as perfect today as the day it was bored in the Winchester factory forty years ago. Know why?"

I shook my head, awed to speechlessness at the intense flame of his enthusiasm.

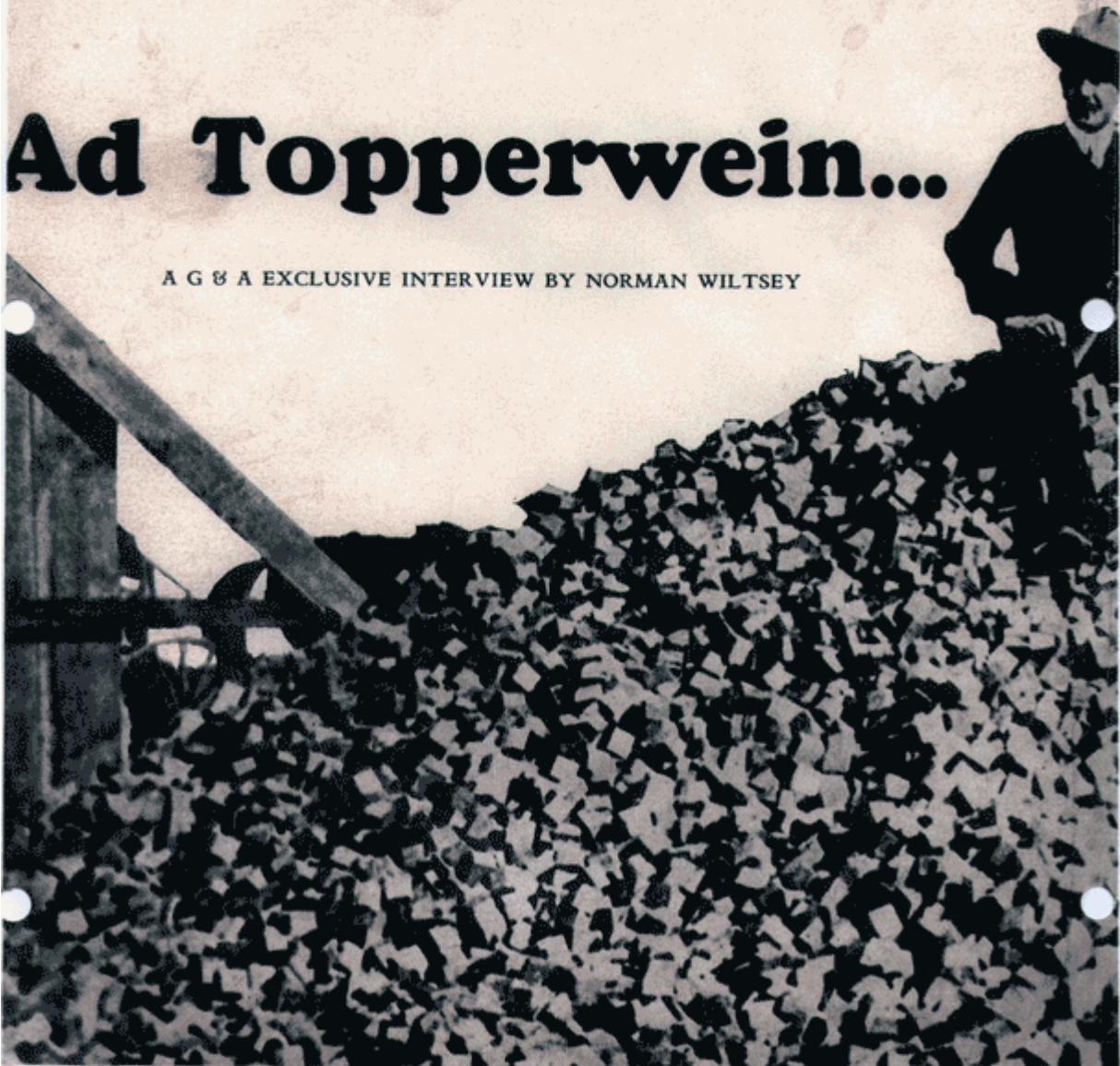
"Never once did I put a gun away without cleaning it. Rule Number Two in the Shooter's Code."

"What are the others?" I asked, finally finding my voice.

The 91-year-old man chuckled. "You'll find 'em written over my mailbox. Rule Three: Keep your powder dry. Rule

Ad Topperwein...

A G & A EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY NORMAN WILTSEY



Four: Don't let your trigger finger get rusty. But the most important rule of all is Number One. That should be drilled into every boy learning to shoot until it becomes instinctive. Then there wouldn't be all these terrible shooting accidents we have today. And I would add this to Rule Number One: Never trip the hammer of a gun when it is handed to you, and always check a gun to see whether it is loaded or not. That rifle I just tossed you was NOT loaded, but I was glad to see that you handled it as if it were. You'll do to shoot with, boy."

I hadn't felt so pleased since Dad praised my handling of the little single-

shot .22 Stevens he'd given me on my 12th birthday long ago.

Adolph Toepperwein (later changed to Ad Topperwein or plain Topps) was born on October 16, 1869, at Boerne, Texas. His father, a German gunsmith who specialized in making rifles for buffalo hunters, taught him to shoot at the age of six. Ad still remembers his brawny father carrying him in his arms three miles for lessons in shooting ducks on the wing. Crippled ducks were dispatched with a .22 through the head.

When Toepperwein Senior died in 1879, Ad was perhaps the best 10-year-old marksman in America if not in the entire world. Already he was talking of

beating Frank Butler, the circus and vaudeville marksman, who grandiloquently billed himself "The World's Champion Rifle Shot." But with his father dead, young Ad had to go to work to help eke out the family's slender income. His first job was in a San Antonio crockery shop, and later he caught on as a cartoonist with the San Antonio *Daily Express*. His artistic talent was to pay rich dividends in an entirely different field in the colorful years to come. Today, Ad's bullet-drawn "portraits" of Uncle Sam, Indian chiefs, cowboys, etc., are treasured possessions of gun clubs and shooting enthusiasts across the country.



A Shooting Legend

Ad Topperwein, "world's greatest marksman of all time," on a pile of pine block targets. In 10 days he fired at 72,500 of these, missing only nine.

Ad Topperwein

At 19, forsaking the cartoonist's pencil, Ad was on his way to New York determined to crack show business with a shooting act. Vaudeville was in its heyday and Ad's unofficial manager, George Walker, was hopeful of placing his talented protegé on a national circuit.

The going was rough at the start. Ordinary marksmen were as common as banjo players in the late Eighties and the hardboiled booking agents were unimpressed with Walker's claim that the tall, rangy Texas youth was the best in the country. "Just another rube with a popgun," was their verdict.

"Go get a reputation in New York," yawned one bored representative of the B. K. Keith Circuit. "We don't care a hoot *what* you did in Texas."

"Come with us to the Coney Island shooting galleries," challenged Walker. "See for yourself what this boy can do with a rifle." The booking agent reluctantly accepted Walker's invitation.

That Saturday afternoon was one that Coney's shooting pitchmen did not soon forget. In gallery after gallery, young Topperwein blasted every clay pipe, duck and glass ball on the shelves. A crowd gathered quickly to watch the lanky youth's dazzling performance, but the spectacular free exhibition was short-lived. Word spread rapidly through the gaudy arcade area, and the shooting gallery owners still to be visited by the tall Texas wizard hurriedly shut up shop. At the first darkened stand, Walker inquired dryly of the Keith man: "Well, what do you think of the Texas rube *now*?"

"Never saw anything like him before in my life," promptly admitted the agent. "Come to my office in the morning and I'll sign him to a contract."

So began Ad Topperwein's long professional career.

Ad worked the vaudeville circuit for about three years, following the jugglers and trained dog acts. Boring as it was to one who had always been an outdoor shooter, the monotonous routine served to publicize his phenomenal skill and make his name familiar around the country. The apex of Topps' vaudeville career arrived when he played the famous Palace theater in New York for a triumphant three-week run.

"After the Palace there was nothing else in vaudeville to shoot for, so I wanted out," Ad recalls. "Anyhow, I wanted to get back outdoors and shoot a bigger rifle than a dinky little .22. But first I accepted a circus job."

This chance came when he signed on as a star performer with the Orrin

Brothers' Circus in 1892. "I traveled with the circus eight years and had a barrel of fun," chuckled Topps. "We played most of the United States and Mexico too — wherever there was a railroad track or even a good road. And all the while I was dreaming of quitting the sawdust trail and the big top to take a crack at Cap Bartlett's title of world's champion marksman."

Topperwein had a personal stake in wanting to beat Bartlett. The sharp-shooting Captain had won his title from Ad's boyhood idol Doc Carver in 1889. Carver, in six days of shooting with a .22 rifle at New Haven in 1885, had shattered 55,151 glass balls with 60,016 shots. The following year, at Minneapolis, the shooting dentist racked up a score of 59,340 hits out of 60,000 shots, a quite amazing performance both from the standpoint of marksmanship and physical endurance.

Doc Carver's record remained unbroken for three years before Captain Bartlett, a virtual unknown, smashed it to smithereens with a startling performance at Buffalo, New York. Shooting over a period of six days and six nights, the rugged Captain missed only 280 targets out of 60,000 shots. Bartlett's iron man performance was especially impressive in that he fired at 2½-inch composition balls, one-quarter inch less in diameter than the 2½-inch glass balls used by Carver. Marksmen everywhere hailed Bartlett's record as unbreakable, believing that it would stand for all time. They didn't reckon with the dogged determination of 20-year-old Ad Topperwein. Somehow, somewhere, he vowed, he would break Captain Bartlett's record.

Ad is fond of reminiscing of his circus days, particularly of his tours in old Mexico. "Those people really appreciated good shooting, living as they did close to Nature where a fine marksman was a respected personage. But I never really deserved the title of miracle worker won by a couple of stunts of mine. Once in an exhibition before a bull fight, the local chief of police tossed three silver pesos in the air in rapid succession. I nailed all three of 'em in mid-air and sent them flying out of the arena. Outside, so I was told, a poor old woman was kneeling in prayer to the Virgin. I dunno if this part is absolutely true, but the excited Mexican officials told me later that the first bullet-pierced peso dropped right into her outstretched hands. The other two coins fell near enough so she could get to them before the kids spotted 'em. That's the story. Anyhow, the police chief swapped her three good pesos for the holed ones and presented the target coins to me. So — miracle or not — everybody wound up happy."



Topperwein as he appeared at the height of his career in the early 1900's. He was employed by Winchester for many years to give exhibitions.



Ad and Plinky are shown 3rd and 4th from left with other members of Winchester Shooting team in early 1900's.



Ad Topperwein assists his wife Plinky as she performs some of her feats for servicemen during World War II.



Topperwein with one of the famous bullet drawings which were his trade-mark at the many shooting exhibitions.

Ad Topperwein

"What was the other 'miracle' you worked?"

Topps looked slightly embarrassed. He pulled at his ear-lobe and laughed softly to himself, obviously reliving the experience in memory. I repeated the question.

"Oh, *that!* I sure pulled a darn fool

stunt that time for a fellow who all his life has preached proper handling of firearms. Well, I reckon every man is entitled to make an idiot of himself once in his lifetime — and that certainly was *my* time to do it. I been sort of ashamed of it ever since — and yet it turned out just fine. Happened this way:

"The circus troupe was winding along

a lonely road skirting the base of a hill when one of the boys looked up and saw what looked to be an old abandoned mission halfway up the hillside. 'Let's see you ring the bell in the tower with a bullet, Ad,' he challenged.

"Now this was a hare-brained stunt for any shooter to pull — especially for a young fellow who was supposed to be a careful expert like me. But — without thinking that somebody might get hit by the bullet — I up and cut loose with my .22. The range was about 100 yards and I missed with the first shot. Automatically correcting for the elevation, I hit the bell with the second shot and then four more in rapid succession. The bell chimed with each hit. Now here is where the 'miracle' comes in. Within two or three minutes we saw *peons* running in from their work in the nearby fields, shouting, pointing at the bell and crossing themselves!"

"Why all the ruckus?" I asked.

"That's what *we* wondered. We found out later that the mission bell I'd used for a target hadn't rung in years until I'd rung it with bullets. The clapper had been lost in some manner and the parishioners were too poor to replace it. Then, when the *peons* in the fields heard the clapperless bell pealing out again after being mute so long, they spread the word of the miracle. Right off things began to happen in that poor parish. People believed it was a true sign from heaven and they got to work fixing up the old rundown church. A new clapper was bought for the bell, and the mission was crowded at every service for the first time in ten years. I reckon that's the only time in history a religious revival was started with a gun!"

By 1901 trouping with the circus had begun to pall on Topps. Winchester Repeating Arms Company offered him a contract in that year and he was glad to accept. For fully half a century Ad worked for Winchester as an exhibition shooter. Today, at 91, the venerable champion looks back over the long trail with fond nostalgia.

"I'd do it all over again if I had the chance — but *this* time around I would stress even more the importance — the *vital* importance — of every American boy owning a rifle and knowing how to handle it. Working with Winchester as exhibition marksman brought me all I ever wanted; a wonderful wife, the world's rifle shooting championship, travel, good friends and a good living. What more could a professional marksman possibly desire — except the dearest wish of his heart?"

"Which is . . .!" I prompted.

Ad turned his nearly sightless eyes full upon me — he is afflicted with

Ad Topperwein on his 91st birthday, October 16, 1960. He holds one of his favorite rifles.





Top: Mementos of Topperwein's long career. The guns were made by his gunsmith father, during the buffalo hunting days, in Texas.

Above: Copy of poster used to advertise the shooting exhibitions by the Topperweins.

cataracts in both — and spoke with deep conviction: "Just this: That every American citizen in good standing shall, in accordance with Article Two of our Bill of Rights, be allowed to keep and



Mrs. Ad (Plinky) Topperwein (top) as she appeared firing a pistol during an exhibition. Below: Mrs. Topperwein poses with her favorite 12 gauge pump shotgun.

bear arms, and that this Constitutional right shall not be infringed! No dictator will ever meddle with a whole nation of marksmen. For proof, look at Switzerland. Every man in Switzerland over sixteen is a trained soldier, with his rifle and marching gear ready at a moment's notice. Even madman Hitler wanted no part of the sharpshooting Swiss! America could be another Swit-

zerland, if only our lawmakers had the brains and vision to take action. The nation's future existence may depend on it."

Topps met his future bride during a visit to the Winchester factory in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1902. "A lot of folks think I met her in the plant, but that isn't true," he remarked with a reminiscent smile. "She *did* work for Winchester assembling cartridges, but I first met her at the pump in New Haven Common. Right romantic place; all green grass and trees. I spotted this bright-looking young redhead right away and she seemed to notice me, too. You know Texans — when we see something special we go for it hard. Sure, I was scared all right, but I got up the nerve to tell her my name and ask for hers. Elizabeth Servaty, it was — and it sounded like music to me!

"Well sir, to make a short story shorter, we hit it off right away and were married a few weeks later. It sure pleased me when she took an interest in my shooting — most women were scared of guns in those days, you know. I taught her to shoot and soon after we were married Elizabeth was part of my act on my tours, shooting one-inch pieces of chalk from between my fingers, shooting empty shells off my fingers, and other feats of skill. Later on, she won the title of world's champion woman marksman. Winchester signed her too and we became widely known as the world's greatest shooting team — The Famous Topperweins. Man, those were the days! Whole towns turned out to see us perform; schools were closed in order that the kids might come and witness the crack shooting exhibitions."

From a Winchester brochure of the period:

"Seeing the Topperwein shooting exhibition is like going to a circus — a rapid succession of thrills and exciting feats, each more unbelievable than the

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AD TOPPERWEIN
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"Clay pigeons — wooden blocks — composition balls — metal discs — marbles, etc; even apples, oranges, real hen eggs — all are shattered with different types of guns. Sometimes two — three — four — and even five targets are in the air at the same time, only to be broken before they fall back to mother earth.

"It has always been a debatable question as to which of the Topperweins is the better shot, Mr. or Mrs. While both do the most remarkable shooting stunts, each has a few tough ones which the other hesitates to try, so it is up to you to come and see for yourself."

All America came to see for itself — and the friendly family argument was still unresolved at Mrs. Elizabeth (Plinky) Topperwein's death in 1945.

I asked Ad the same question. "Well," he grinned, "like the booklet says, I was best at some feats and she was best at others. Reckon it was a toss-up between us. I'll tell you this: She could shoot smoke-rings around Annie Oakley or any other woman marksman who ever lived! Let me give you just a few of her records: Her best pistol score; one hundred consecutive shots fired into a five-inch diameter spot at 25 yards. Best rifle score on flying targets was 1460 straight hits on 2½-inch wooden blocks thrown into the air 25 feet from her firing position. She was the first woman ever to score a perfect 100 at clay pigeons and later rung up 367 consecutive hits. You know what a hole-in-one in golf is?"

I nodded, then added "Yes," remembering he couldn't see clearly.

"Well, a hole-in-one in golf is just about like hitting a hundred straight targets in shooting. My wife Plinky did this 193 times in competition."

My intended half-hour visit had already stretched out to over an hour and I still hadn't heard of Ad's greatest shooting feat — his breaking of Captain Bartlett's monumental record of 1889. It required considerable tactful coaxing on my part to get the story of this — the most famous of his 14 world records; the old champion wanted to continue talking of his wife. I didn't want to tire him, but I did want to get the story from his own lips.

"That record of mine was a good many years in the making," he said finally. "Shooting at tossed aerial targets started with Doc Carver in the late 1870's and was picked up by Captain Bartlett and others. Carver started it off by shooting holes in silver dollars, both here and abroad. Doc came back from Europe to find a dozen claimants for the world's championship at shooting objects thrown into the air. It became a national fad, probably sparked by Buffalo Bill Cody shooting at glass balls in his Wild West Show."

"How about that act of Cody's?" I cut in. "As a kid, I remember seeing him break tossed glass balls with a Winchester '73. Even then I figured there must be a trick to it or else the bullets would have gone through the top of the tent and maybe killed somebody. And his rifle sort of popped when he fired

Ad laughed, snapping his fingers in hearty enjoyment. "You're right, son, there was a trick to it. Cody's cartridges were loaded with half-loads of powder — 20 grains — and one-quarter of an ounce of fine chilled shot. Had to be, for safety. But old Bill could shoot pretty good at that — when he wasn't drinking. But to get back to this aerial target business:

"Everything was all mixed up — everybody was shooting according to his own idea of what the rules should be. Marksmanship was a big item in the sporting papers of the day; almost equal to the press coverage given baseball and football today. We weren't too far from the frontier days then to realize the importance of being a good shot. Anyhow, a group of sports-writers, tired and disgusted with the conflicting claims of all the self-styled champions, suggested that all the prominent aerial target shooters of the times get together like sportsmen and gentlemen and draft a set of standard rules. Well, the 'sportsmen and gentlemen' did considerable wrangling over conditions, but they did come up with a set of rules that satisfied everybody — more or less."

Topps dug into the middle drawer of his desk. "I got the original paper right here, some place..." The yellowed paper was found and he handed it to me to read and copy. It read as follows; edited somewhat to save space:

1. The shooter could use any kind of rifle shooting a solid ball.
2. The target was to be a standard glass or composition ball (Both were used as shotgun targets at that time).
3. The assistants tossing the targets were to stand between 25 and 30 feet in front of the shooter.
4. The targets were to be thrown into the air at a height of 25 to 30 feet.
5. There must be officials present at all matches; a judge, a referee, and a scorer — to make each match one of record.

"Did Carver and Bartlett set their records by these rules?" I asked.

"Yes, and Dr. Ruth and Annie Oakley too. Ruth set the first official world's record at aerial targets with a rifle in 1883, when he broke 984 of 1000 glass balls. Annie Oakley tried to break his mark in 1884, but missed by 41 shots of tying Ruth's record. Annie's score was 943 hits out of 1000 shots."

"Doc Carver told me about the rules right here in San Antonio in 1897," Ad continued. "Fact is, he wrote 'em down for me and advised me to follow them exactly if I wanted any marks I made recognized as official. He called them by a fancy name: The Carver-Bartlett Rules for Aerial Target Shooting with the Rifle. But then Doc was a fancy fellow... I used the rules all the time I was working my way up to be champion."

Topperwein's first official record was made for Winchester at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904. He smashed 3507 2¼-inch aerial composition targets without a miss, and knew that he had made the big-league in marksmanship at long last. But breaking a world-tremendous record was still three years away.

In 1906 Ad shot at 20,000 hand-thrown 2¼-inch wooden blocks during three hard days' shooting and scored 19,990 hits. "I was sure then that I had

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AD TOPPERWEIN

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"My equipment during that shoot consisted of three Model .03 Winchester .22 Automatic rifles and Winchester ammunition. These rifles held ten cartridges in the magazine. In order to save time in loading, we used loading tubes, which held ten cartridges, and all I had to do was to open the magazine and re-load the rifle with ten cartridges. This operation took only five or six seconds. I loaded the guns myself and changed guns every 500 shots, because in such rapid shooting, the barrels would be pretty hot. I had no trouble whatsoever with the guns operating. They worked beautifully throughout all the shoot without a single malfunction or hang-up. The breach—sic—mechanism was cleaned every night to remove powder residue, but the barrels were never touched.

"We had three men to pitch up targets, changing every 500 shots, in order to keep them from getting too tired and to make it easier for them to throw the targets with regularity and speed. These targets were thrown into the air to a height of between 30 and 35 feet, 25 feet from where I was standing and as rapidly as possible... The boys became so accurate in throwing that I was able to shoot at practically every target they threw...

"As I ran way ahead of my supposed schedule for the first few days, we were running short of blocks toward the end, and the boys selected the blocks that were not too much mutilated for the rest of the score. Some of these blocks toward the end were rather small, but I was lucky and I don't think I missed any on that account. The misses that I made were mostly because my arm was so tired, and the gun seemed so heavy that I just couldn't get it into place.

"I went through this shoot the first few days without much discomfort. Of course I was tired, but I expected that. However, it was a fact that all during the ten days I had very little good sleep, for I had nightmares in which I kept on shooting blocks... From the fourth day until the end, I was in constant physical misery. My arms and shoulders ached, my neck muscles were painful, my whole body ached as if somebody had pounded me all over... The fingers and wrist of my right hand cramped and caused me a great deal of pain. This was caused mostly because I have a habit of gripping my gun very tightly with my right hand... Finally one of the boys suggested some hot water. They made a fire and heated a pail of water, into which I put my hand frequently to relieve the pain... It was necessary for me to have a rubdown with a hot bath every night and another in the morning to get me ready for the next day's ordeal.

"On the eighth day I passed Bartlett's record and the crowd cheered wildly. Some of the spectators begged me to stop at this point, but I was determined to continue as long as I could hold and aim a rifle and had cartridges to shoot. Fact is, I was in pretty sorry shape. For the last two nights I had been so stiff and sore that Plinky (his wife) had to undress me. I couldn't lower my arms below the waist and my shoulders were swollen and tightened.

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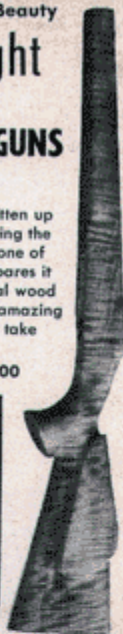
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