

GUN NOTES



By Elmer Keith, Executive Editor

EDITOR'S NOTE:

A few months ago it was the sad duty of this editor to alert the many fans of Elmer Keith to the fact that Elmer had suffered a stroke which made it impossible for him to continue to write this column. In the interim we have been printing "the best of Elmer Keith," nuggets of timeless information from his past works.

I am sure that many of you have been both concerned and anxious about the health of this grand old man, the undisputed Dean of American outdoor writers. Due to our long lead time—this is being written in mid-August for the November issue—it has not been possible to keep our readers up-to-date on Elmer's condition. However, I would now like to share with you the latest news concerning his present fitness.

As might be expected, Elmer has fought the same gutsy, gritty battle against this illness that he has shown throughout his life. In his mid-eighties

Elmer has shown a determination to battle this latest affliction that would put a younger man to shame! I wish I could say that he has completely recovered but that is just not the case. His condition is far better than anyone could have envisioned those many months ago when he was felled by a stroke, but he is still confined to a rest home. I know that he would treasure communications from his legion of fans in the form of letters and cards wishing him the best, and adding your prayers to ours at the magazine that he will recover fully.

You can send your messages to: Elmer Keith, c/o Capital Care Center, 8211 Ustick Road, Boise, ID 83704.

Please DO NOT expect a personal reply from Elmer! While he will enjoy hearing from you, he cannot spare the energy to reply to each and every one of you even though he would like to. Just send your prayers, cards and well wishes.

—H.E.F.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following was taken from Keith's book, *Hell, I Was There!* The portion we have printed here is from Chapter 1, entitled, "Growing Up In The West." In these paragraphs, Elmer recalls some of his first guns. The incidents cited take place in 1911.

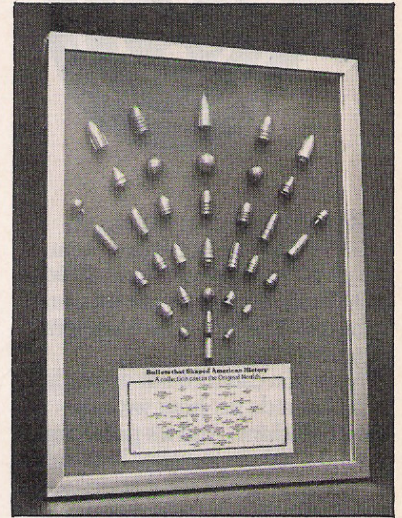
While living at 1012 Billings Avenue, we had several very happy years. My little brother Francis was born there. On Sundays we would drive to some of the streams like Prickly Pear or Beaver Creek for fishing. In the summer and in the fall we put in every Sunday hunting, either down to Helena Lake for ducks, or else go deer hunting up by Priest Pass or over on Nevada Creek.

I traded for an old Remington 1854 .58 caliber brass mounted smooth-bore musket, which was my first shotgun. It was only effective at very close range due to the extreme spread of the pattern. I did wreck a covey of green wing teal that came up the river past us one time, and was death on muskrats swimming down the river if I aimed about a foot in front of them. The concussion would kill them and they'd come up kicking and I'd have another muskrat skin to handle.

As I was not expected to live anyway, the folks let me put in part of a summer with Waldo P. Abbott. He had been a school teacher in Kansas after the Civil War, and a buffalo-hide hunter, then was

continued on page 14

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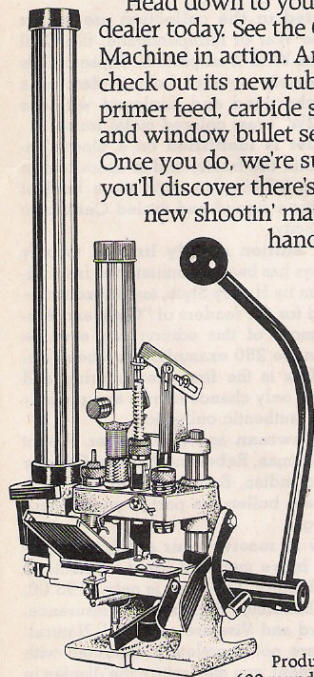
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GUNNOTES

continued from page 13

a scout for General Crook at the Battle of the Rosebud. When General Crook asked for volunteers after his defeat to carry the news to Fort Laramie and ask for reinforcements, Abbott volunteered. Crook offered him the best horse in the outfit, including his own, but Abbott told him he didn't want any horses, but said to go out and pull the moccasins off of six dead Sioux they thought would fit him, as he was going to travel on foot by the stars and shack up in thickets during the daytime. He wanted to leave only Sioux tracks in Sioux territory. Abbott taught me a lot about hunting and he was a very fine shot with a rifle.

Another summer I put in a good part of the time with Samuel H. Fletcher, an old Civil War veteran that fought through the Civil War with the 2nd Illinois Cavalry, being one of the few of that outfit who came home alive. He was a fine pistol shot and also taught me a great deal.

I put in a good part of one summer during school vacation working for the National Biscuit factory. My salary was \$10.80 per week. I was paid at the end of each week with a ten dollar gold piece and some small change in a little brown envelope. In the morning I had to shovel three tons of slack coal in a wheel-barrow, wheel it onto an elevator, up a couple of stories, and up a steep incline, and dump it in the bake furnace. That occupied the whole morning. Then I would wash up and in the afternoon I had to take the small cartons of half a dozen or a dozen boxes of cookies or crackers and pack them in huge cartons, put them on a truck to the elevator, and stack them as high as I could throw them. It helped develop my crippled left hand. From age 12 to age 16 I didn't grow in stature at all, being too busy rebuilding what the fire had taken away from me.

I began to realize that if I was going to get my share of the ducks that were so plentiful, I had to have a real shotgun. So I wrote the Ithaca Gun Company when I'd saved enough money for a No. 2 Ithaca double hammerless shotgun. I wanted Damascus barrels, but Lou Smith, the president then, wrote that during the war which had started then in nineteen and fourteen in Europe, he could no longer get Damascus barrels, and for that reason was sending me the higher grade No. 3 at the same price. It was my first fine shotgun and I did very good work with it. I shot that gun for seventeen years.

Father gave me a new Model 1894 .25-35 Winchester long-barrel rifle. I killed my first deer with it on Nevada Creek. The first shot was three hundred yards up a steep mountain. The deer had seen me and I couldn't get any closer, so I raised the rear sight two notches, got a rest, and hit her square in the shoulder. It broke the shoulder, but the little 117-grain bullet never even went on into the chest. The deer

pitched off down the hill in a run and I trailed her around the mountain for a half a mile, getting three more running shots before I got enough of those tiny bullets in the deer to put her down to stay. That was enough .25-35 for me for big game. Then I went to a .45-70 trapdoor Springfield carbine that had been given to me by an old stage driver. That and a case of 500-grain infantry loads of 70 grains of black powder and 500 of lead was a powerful rifle for a tiny kid then, but it did the job.

I asked to join the Helena Rifle Club, which was composed almost totally of much older men. The club members didn't want a kid in the outfit, but my friend, Bill Strong, sided with me and told them that I would qualify, and asked if they would let me in if I qualified expert over at the Fort Harrison military range.

They agreed, thinking it impossible that a skinny kid could handle a .30-06 and qualify expert. I bought a dollar-and-a-half Krag rifle through the N.R.A., practiced with it, and went over the course from two hundred to a thousand yards three times. Then I borrowed Bill Strong's Springfield and shot the full course with that. When the day came for the annual match, I managed to qualify expert with three points over, so they allowed me to join the club.

That winter, the club shot in the National Indoor matches. They were mail order matches. Each club shot its own and mailed in the results. It was quite a lengthy match and we shot for weeks. At any rate, I wound up as high man for the Helena Rifle Club using an old .22 Winchester musket I'd bought from Holder Hardware Company for \$10, and Mother loaned me another \$10 to buy a Stevens scope, which Johnny Linder put on for me.

About this time the right side of my neck started to abscess just below my lower jaw. Evidently the scar tissue had formed and healed over some burned tissue. Father took me back to Beaudreau and Johnson in St. Paul, Minnesota, where I spent two weeks in the hospital. The doctors operated on my neck and removed all the burned tissue there. It healed up and never gave me any further trouble. Each day they would have me up in the office, strip me, and exhibit me to doctors who came from New York, New Orleans, Frisco, and all over the country. They couldn't believe their eyes that I had lived after such terrible burns.

Father's next project in Helena was to buy the little store of an old Civil War veteran named Grosbugge at the corner of the Hawthorne School. We worked like troopers and ran this store for about two years, ending up with a bare living and some five thousand on the books that we could never collect.

While carrying the horse paper route for the Helena Independent, my route led down Helena Avenue to the NP depot where my friend, Bill O'Connell, was a night cop.

continued on page 17

GUNNOTES

continued from page 14

At that time, Helena was quite a tough town. Most of the beams that held up the porches were studded with six-gun slugs or bullet holes or gouges from different gun fights. The depot area was the toughest part of the town, and O'Connell was one of their best men. On the corner was a wedge-shaped saloon. There was one door in the apex of it and a counter ran down the east side with a break in it and then a counter was to the left. There was a side door that opened into the street that led down to the fur buyers. I gave Bill his paper one morning and he says, "Elmer, things are too quiet over at that saloon. Ride your horse by at a trot and see what's going on in there, swing around the block and come back and let me know."

On my saddle horse I could see over the curtained windows, from which everything was perfectly visible to me but not to anyone walking along the street. Two men had everybody lined up against the bar, one man holding two guns on them while the other was taking all their belongings and putting them in a hat. I rode around the corner, doubled back and told Bill what was going on.

Bill says, "I'm going in, kid. If I don't make it, you ride down to the saloon across from the NP depot and tell the bartender to give you my ten-gauge and a box of buckshot. You come back where you can cover both doors and keep everybody in there until help arrives. Have the bartender phone the police department for help."

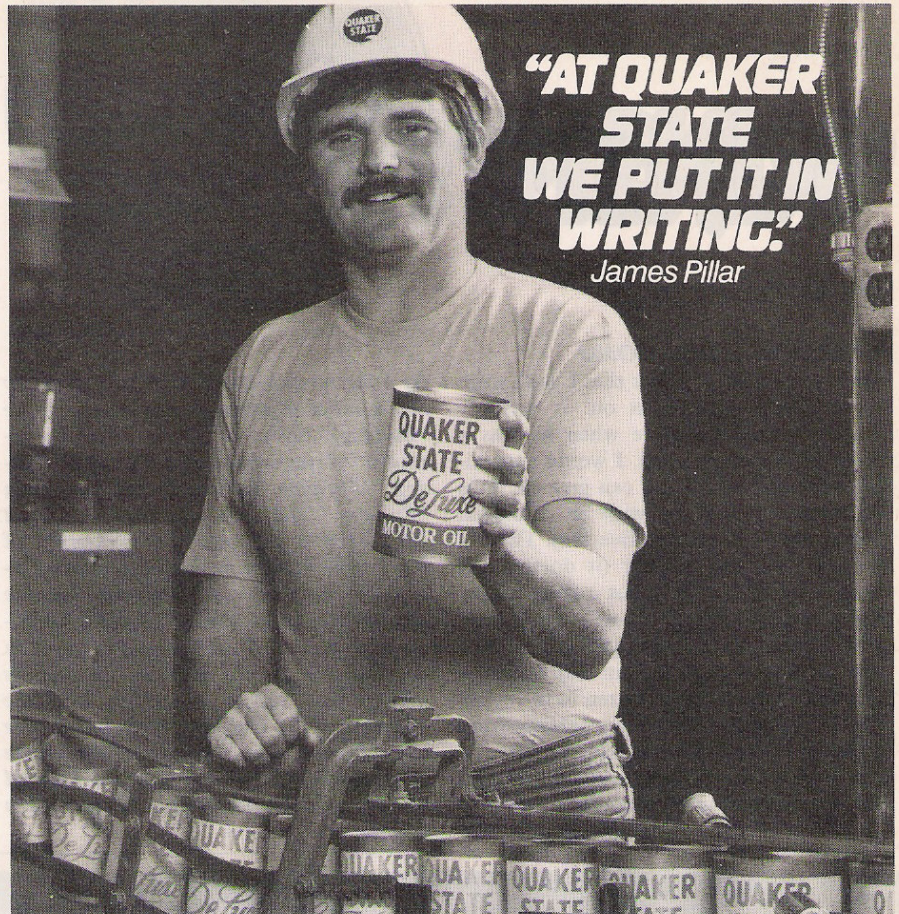
Bill went in the front door and as he went in I rode alongside to see what was going on. A man whirled around and shot at Bill, but hit the transom over the door. Both of them then jumped over the counter of the bar. Everybody else fell flat on the floor for cover.

One man raised up over the bar and aimed at Bill, but before he could shoot, Bill hit him between the eyes with the old forty-five and he collapsed. The other ran down the back bar and I yelled at Bill to watch the opening. I don't know whether he heard me or not through the windows, but anyway he swung and leveled his gun on that opening. The other man was crouched down low, running behind the bar. When he crossed the opening, Bill took him through both shoulders with the old .45 Colt. He fell on his face, while one leg came up in the air and stayed there.

As soon as I saw the thing was over, I rode around to the front. Bill came out and he says, "Elmer, go down to the depot and have the bartender phone for the coroner, the sheriff, and the undertaker, and bring the dead wagon." I did as directed.

Bill's work gun was a .45 Colt single-action with a 5½-inch barrel and Remington blackpowder loads, 40 grains of black, and 250 of lead. He carried it in a shoulder holster on the left side and was a very good man with it.

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