

GUN NOTES



By Elmer Keith, Executive Editor

PRONGHORNS

continued from last month

In last month's Gunnotes column, Elmer's story ended at the point where he had just dropped a buck antelope with 16 1/2-inch horns. The animal dressed out to an estimated 135 pounds. After the head and cape were removed the carcass was packed out, concluding the hunt.

Next year C. M. O'Neil came from Minnesota for a hunt with me. We were also experimenting with the .250 Magnum rifle and developing that cartridge at the time. We hired young Martiny to pack our light camp over the top of the Divide to an old abandoned mine cabin, near a spring in the timber, while we made the long pull upward from 7,000 feet on foot and hunted all the way in to camp. For some reason we saw only three bucks in that long climb and some 10 miles of travel through the high basins. The year before, that country had been full of antelope, with big bands in every deep gulch containing water, but this year they were conspicuous by their absence. Just before dusk, we circled the south side of the mesa as it was starting to rain and snow. The wind was cold, and we were wet with perspiration from our long, all-day climb upward. We had seen two bucks but neither worth going after, then in the timber on the south side of the mesa I located several antelope. Though Charley wanted to go on and find camp before dark, I stopped and set up the spotting scope for a look at the distant antelope. Imagine my surprise and delight when the first antelope to come into focus proved the same old huge crooked-horned buck that Jess had chased so long the year before and

later claimed to have killed. There could be no doubt of its being the same buck. His left horn was twisted and the prong or paddle projected straight out to the left, while the tip curved in and forward at the top. He was feeding with only three does in sight and I then told Charley I was going to kill that old gentleman, or go home without an antelope, even if it required the



entire 10 days of the season. Too late to go after him then, in the driving rain and wet snow, so we climbed on over the pass and found our camp where Martiny had left it.

We moved into the pack-rat infested cabin, whose roof had a huge hole in the center, cooked and ate supper and rolled out our beds. We had little sleep, however, on account of the rats. Next day we worked back into the pass and set up our spotting scopes and started searching the mesa. Soon we located a big band of antelope. Careful scrutiny proved them all does but one huge old buck. He was my old friend of the year before and had gathered up over 20 does for his harem. Soon, three more big bucks came over the sky line and

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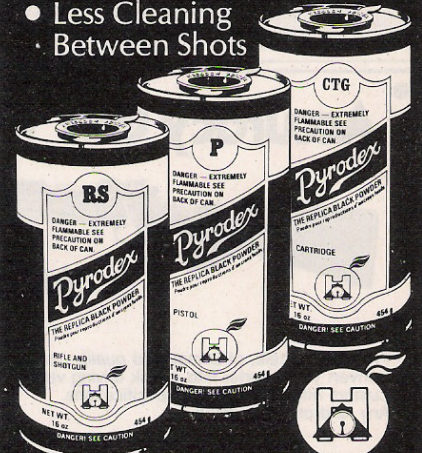
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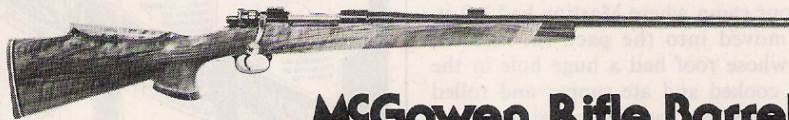
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attempted to join the band, but the old crookedhorned buck went for them with a vengeance. He was so old his knees were beginning to buckle at the joint and he looked like an old buck-kneed ram. He was still plenty fast on his feet and soon whipped out the younger bucks. Two of them looked to carry well over 16-inch horns, but the old boy stood a good six inches higher at the withers, and whenever he reached one of the smaller bucks, we could see the hair fly from the tips of those crooked horns. He was wicked with them. The other bucks stayed well out of range of the band after he gave each of them a good drubbing, but they would not leave the vicinity. Clearly the old buck had gathered up all the does on the mesa and was not about to share them with his rivals.

We watched this beautiful scene for a couple of hours. Occasionally one of the smaller bucks would make a quick dash for the herd of does and the old boy would be after him in a flash and those long horns would again send the hair flying. The younger bucks were no match for him and would not make a standing fight, so that he usually raked their rump or sides as they were in full retreat.

Finally they fed around above a point of timber about a quarter mile to the left and west of where I had stalked him with Jess, the year before. Charley and I arranged signals, so he could signal to me which way the band fed, and I started my long mile and a half stalk. O'Neil signaled they were feeding to the left, so I worked into a point of timber that ran up on the right of a steep gulch, toward the top of the mesa. When I had reached the extreme tip I found I was within 400 yards, just nice range for a prone shot for the big rifle. The old buck was turned rump to me, horning at a small scrub pinon pine tree. Not wanting to plaster him in the rear end, I waited for him to turn to a more favorable position. I had an excellent prone position, with tight gun sling, and had about settled down from my hard climb.

Then, just as it looked as if my dreams were finally coming true, the wind changed, the band winded me, and an old doe barked first, then the buck, and with their white rumps all flashing, with hair standing on end, they ran back up the slope and circled to the right. I slipped back over the ridge and ran up that steep slope for all I was worth, in an effort to catch them at the head of the draw. They soon flashed around the head of that basin and again took off in a hard run. Setting the scope up from 400 to 500 yards, I bedded down for a shot. Finally the old buck exposed his chest, and just as I started squeezing the trigger the band again took off in a hard run, around to the right, but not getting much farther away. Again I dropped back out of sight, crossed the draw and worked

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up under cover of some larger sage on the other side. Soon the band again came in sight at 500 yards and stopped. The does started feeding, but the old buck was looking my way. I believe he had caught a glimpse of me. From a good prone position, I watched for an opening. His back and head were clearly visible over the does but for some time they gave me no opening. Finally, they fed clear of him, leaving me a clear shot, and I instantly brought the cross-wires to bear on the center of the white patch just behind the shoulder and started the trigger squeeze. When only an ounce or so remained on the trigger pull, a doe jumped forward, just behind the buck. Knowing at such long range the slug would go through both animals, I refrained from shooting. I am sure the old buck saw me then, for he left that band of does on a hard run and went back to the left, out on the extreme top of the mesa, where he could see everything in all directions for a full half mile. The younger bucks instantly joined the band of does. I lay out of sight in the sage while Charley climbed up the mesa to me.

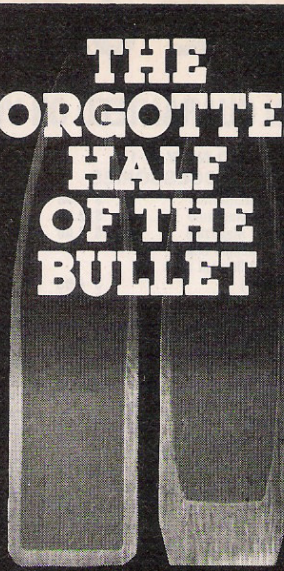
There was no possible chance of getting onto the old buck again that day from all indications, so we watched the band feed on around the mountain top to the east, and after they had been gone for a half hour, O'Neil and I slipped along after them. We decided we might as well try to get in range and allow Charley to kill the next finest head, if possible, and try for the big boy again the next day. I was determined to kill him or none. We worked clear around the east slope of the mesa, seeing only tracks of the feeding band and old beds in the slide-rock, much like mountain sheep beds. Nearing the north shoulder of the mesa about a half mile from where I had killed my buck the year before, we located the band in a big grassy swale some half mile across. We picked up a shallow draw and crawled up it to the head, where it ended in some sparse but tall sagebrush. The band then looked to be fully 500 yards away and O'Neil did not want to chance a shot at such a range with the .250 O'Neil Magnum he carried, nor would he consent to using my .280 Dubiel. The best buck was a beauty, with very symmetrical even head, which was what Charley wanted. The left side of his neck, however, was marked differently than any antelope I had ever seen before. Instead of the usual two white bars it carried a mass of tan spots in a solid white background, like a pinto.

The sun had come out hot, and with no further cover available and the band still out of range, we decided to simply lie there and await developments. My old buck was still on his high ground about a mile to the west and there he remained most of the day, watching in all directions and making

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THE FORGOTTEN HALF OF THE BULLET

Cutaway of typical competitive bullet



The design of most bullets concentrates on the point, or the tip, for flight characteristics, mushrooming and other features. But the rest of the copper alloy jacket, since it is drawn from a coin-shaped blank, serves only to hold the lead core and contributes little else to the bullet's performance.

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Cutaway of Nosler Solid Base boat tail bullet

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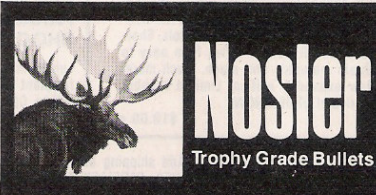
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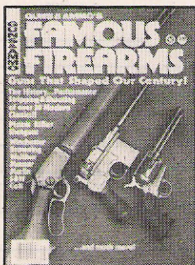
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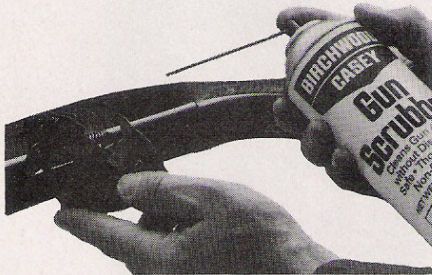
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no attempt to bed down. The day wore along slowly for several hours and O'Neil went to sleep. Lying on his back he snored prodigiously. We had the wind in our favor, but about four o'clock in the afternoon, I believe, an old doe must have heard his snoring, for she started working our way, stopping to look directly at our position in the sage, then advancing again. Clearly, she was excited and had seen the top of us, or heard Charley's snores, so I woke him up and bade him get ready as the bucks were also liable to take alarm from the advancing doe and come our way. Sure enough, all three bucks jumped up from their beds and started watching the doe as she advanced. Soon she started barking, clearly giving the alarm. Then the bucks came across the swale in a run.

Charley asked me the range and I told him it looked like 300 yards as near as I could tell, lying as flat to the ground as humanly possible. The bucks also raised their white rump patches and started looking our way and barking occasionally, but they had not seen us. The doe was clearly the worst alarmed and started running to the right. They stopped just across a small wash and I told O'Neil to shoot at the buck farthest to the left and be quick about it, as they were going to take off. I held my

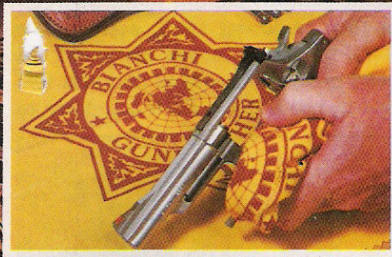
breath and waited for his shot until I almost had heart failure. Then, just as the leaders started to move, the .250 O'Neil Magnum barked and Charley's pinto buck went down in a heap. The rest of the band ran on around the slope and over a shoulder out of sight, while we remained hidden until the last animal had disappeared and for some time afterwards—to make sure no buck or doe turned back higher up the ridge for a look-see and spotted us. After a half hour, none appeared, so we straightened up for the first time in several hours. Imagine our surprise on pacing the distance to find it only around 150 yards. Had we been able to rise up and study the intervening ground, we could have made a better estimate. O'Neil's rifle was sighted for 200 yards as I remember and the bullet took his buck in the top of the white patch, directly behind the shoulder, and blew up in the lungs; one fragment had also severed the spine, putting him down and out instantly. He was a beauty with 16½-inch horns and O'Neil was delighted.

We dressed him out, after removing the beautiful head and cape, and flagged him with our handkerchiefs to keep coyotes away until the morning, when we would come back for the rest of him. We worked up over the top of the mesa through a low saddle as the sun went down, entirely satisfied with our wonderful day's hunt. We had dropped down the other side of the top and out of the mesa for a quarter mile,

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when, looking to the west, where the old buck had spent the day, I saw him on the sky line at 500 yards. Instantly I dropped to prone position and turned the safety. Having no time to change the scope for 500 yards, and knowing it was zeroed for 300 down at 4,000 feet, I raised the cross-hairs up just level with the tops of his wide-spreading horns and started squeezing the trigger. I knew that slug should drop into his chest someplace, as he faced directly toward us. However, again I was not in time, as he whirled and ran before I could shoot and I silently cursed that single trigger and its military pull. If it had been a double set trigger, that buck would have been mine, right then. He was only in sight one jump, but that one jump showed him headed back around toward the basin where Charley had killed his buck, so I jumped up and ran that steep quarter mile back to the top of the saddle as fast as I could leg it. Charley followed but could not keep up with me. Just over the top, I flopped prone in a little flat and waited.

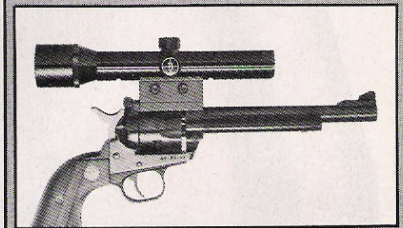
I well knew that old buck would stick to the high ground, and unless he had already crossed ahead of me would soon be along in search of his harem. He was much too wise to drop down below the ridge tops, and no doubt he had heard Charley's single rifle shot. Soon his huge horns appeared over the sky line to my left and about on a level with me. He was heading on around the slope to where O'Neil had killed his

buck, working lower on the ridge. I waited, with the rifle trained on those horns, then his head appeared and he stopped for a look all around. Dusk was fast approaching and I lay well screened in the shadow of some sparse sage, so he never saw me. He continued to work down that ridge, with more of his body coming into view each time he stopped for a look. Soon the whole of his body came in sight and by this time I had taken up all slack on the trigger and put considerable pressure on the main pull, when he stopped again. As the cross-wires settled steadily in the white patch behind the right shoulder, I finished the trigger pull. The big rifle recoiled, and I had a momentary glimpse of the buck making a long twisting jump downhill out of sight, as I jumped to a standing position and threw out the fired case. Then, just as I thought I had missed, for no reason I could understand, I heard the bullet strike home. The range had looked to be only 200 yards, but again I had little time or chance to size up the intervening ground, and when I rose up could see two more low ridges lying between me and the one on which the buck had stood.

Charley soon came over the saddle; said he had stopped and held his breath and waited at my shot, hoping to hear the slug strike, but when he did not hear it had concluded I had missed; then the plunk of that slug had come to him clearly, even over the

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top of the ridge, as he had been higher than the antelope. He had pulled off his hat and yelled in sheer joy. I told him where I had held, so we started pacing the distance, knowing the buck should have received a fatal hit. Soon we saw the top of one huge horn projecting up above the sparse sage and made the distance at just 360 long steps of a yard or over downhill. One of us paced it at 360 and the other at 362, so we decided to call it 360 yards as both had long checked our pacing by a yardstick and knew we were about right. The 150-grain slug had struck low behind the right shoulder, penetrating the lower tip of the heart, and gone on through the body. He had made only a few jumps and piled up. Luckily, no hair was rubbed from his lower shoulder and we marveled at the size of him and his huge head. O'Neil and I each took some pictures and due to the high elevation they came out swell, even in the evening dusk. We removed his grand old head and dressed him out as darkness fell, then worked over the summit and down to



O'Neil's head, after flagging the carcass with one pair of my socks. I knew no coyote would ever come near that carcass after all the sweating I had done that day. If he had been at lower elevation I would have missed him clean, as the rifle shot high.

After cleaning and curing the skull, it measured 17½-inch length for both horns with a spread of 17½. For a time it held fourth place in the world's records for the species and still goes seventh place in the last book of records. The head hung over my desk as I wrote these lines and an oil painting I did one winter of the old buck with a doe, in typical natural setting, hung from an adjoining wall, until destroyed by fire, fitting tributes to the finest antelope I ever saw.

I have killed other record antelope since that day in 1936, but never expect to kill a finer one, or a smarter old buck who will afford so much genuine pleasure in the taking. He was a grand specimen, well worth all my efforts over two seasons and one of the finest trophies I have ever taken. These experiences will give the novice an idea of what can be expected when you go after antelope on your own two hind legs, in a sportsmanlike manner. They are one of our finest game animals, even though of small size, and I hope they are maintained in fair numbers for many generations of sportsmen to hunt, until eternity.