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GUN NOTES



By Elmer Keith, Executive Editor

Dear Elmer Keith Fans:

Literally hundreds of you have written letters and sent beautiful cards, all expressing your concern and best wishes for Elmer's well being and return to good health.

Every card and letter has been read to him or we are in the process of reading some to him each day.

The walls of his room at Capital Care Center in Boise, Idaho, are lined with these cards. He has had numerous chuckles from some of the letters and is interested in the voices of concern and best wishes you have all sent. One well-wisher told him that he hoped he would recover and live another forty years to which Elmer groaned, "Oh no!" His grandson, Gregor, said, "That's all right Grandpa, you would only be 124."

As his family, we are truly appreciative to this concern shown by all of you and we want you to know that these letters add a real bright spot to his day.

Our heartfelt thanks,

Lorraine, Ted and Betty Keith

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following was taken from Keith's book, *Hell I Was There!* The portion we have reprinted here is from Chapter 3, entitled, "Ranch Life." In these paragraphs, Elmer recalls his early days in Montana.

THERE WERE ALWAYS GUNS AROUND...

■ During these years I experimented with every type of gun I could get, sixguns and rifles as well. My first good sixgun was a

Colt .36 Navy; the second, .32-20 Single Action Colt. I kept a record for three years and killed 41, 43, and 42 blue grouse with that sixgun alone in the three seasons. After killing three deer and an elk with the .32-20, I found out it was much too small for my purpose. Before I started punching cows in earnest and fighting broncs, I got hold of a good .45 caliber 5½-inch Single Action Colt. That gun with 40 grains of Remington black powder loads and 250 grains of lead, did the business. It would go into an old cow's skull and back into her neck and would stop anything.



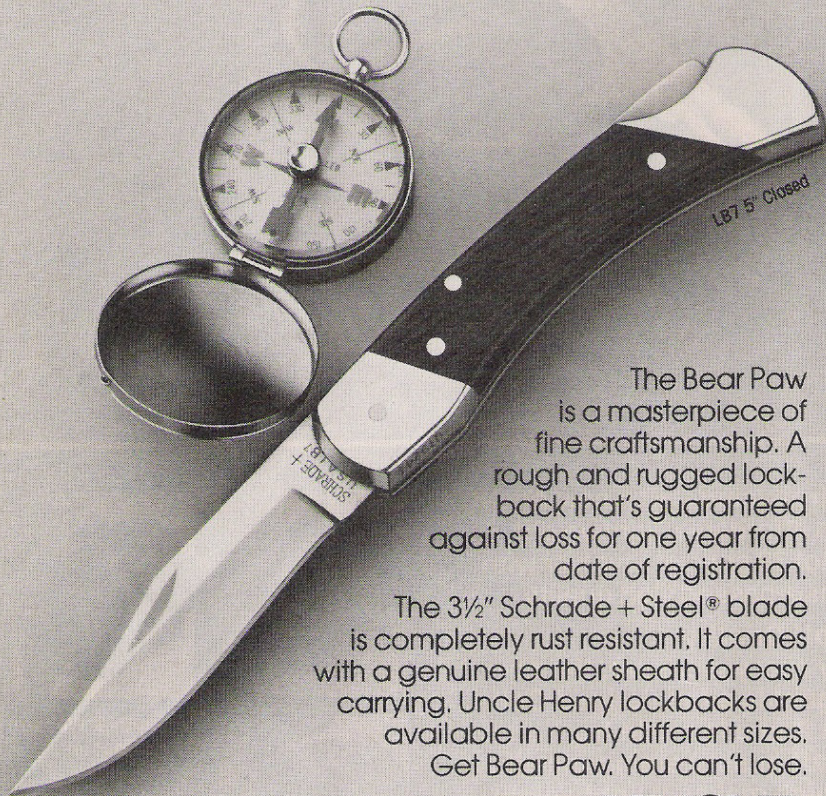
Keith used Sharps rifles extensively in his early years. Here, he and his brother display a day's hunting results where Elmer bagged his buck with a .44-105-520 Sharps Creedmoor.

I corresponded a lot at that time with Chauncey Thomas of Denver who was then a writer for *Outdoor Life*. *Outdoor Life* was published at that time in Denver under John McGuire. Harry, McGuire's boy, was associate editor. Later the magazine went to Minneapolis and Harry McGuire ran it there, and still later was bought by New York interests and moved to its present location in New York.

I bought several Sharps rifles off of Chauncey Thomas and he taught me a great deal about loading and sizing shells.

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GUNNOTES

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He was an old westerner and a very fine friend. Between him and shooters Waldo P. Abbott, and Samuel Fletcher, as well as Sam Russell, I had most excellent instructors in rifle and pistol shooting.

I bought an 18-pound Sharps off J.D. O'Meara, who was then chief of police, and also head of the guards at the Homestake Mine at Lead, South Dakota. O'Meara told me it was Hank Water's old buffalo rifle that he'd used throughout the hide-hunting days in the Dakotas, Montana and Wyoming. It had killed a pile of buffalo. The bore was bad and O'Meara had bought a blank that would make up into an 18-pound rifle from Bannerman. Bannerman at that time had a bunch of these old heavy .45 caliber Sharps blanks on hand. He did a good job on it. He said there was one tight place in the barrel and he lapped that out. He sent me a target with five shots in one hole at 40 yards. I gave him \$18 for the big rifle. It was too heavy to pack on the side of the saddle, so I lugged it home from Winston across the fork of my saddle on a bronc. First I bucked him out, and then had the rifle handed up to me.

Mother was at the ranch at the time, Dad and my brother being away selling sewing machines. I loaded up a batch of ammunition and sighted it for 100 yards, using 100 grains of soft coal and a heavy card wad and a quarter-inch of deer tallow and then the paper patch bullet. It shot exceptionally well. It would stay under an inch and sometimes I'd get five shots in one ragged hole at 100 yards.

That weekend Father came out from town in his old Ford and said that a local businessman, Andy Tomchek was having a big turkey shoot at Montana City. Montana City at that time was barely a railway station along with Tomchek's big dance hall. Dad proposed we go over there, so we drove over to Montana City in his old brass-mounted Ford. We arrived just before lunch and I got into three matches.

The match was a six-inch bullseye at 200 yards, ten shooters at four bits apiece, and nearest-the-center takes the turkey. They were shooting off a car fender, having parked it across the road. A buffalo robe was piled between the fender and the hood. They'd lay down partly on the running board and shoot thataway. There were several Springfields from the Helena Rifle Club, along with Krag's, Winchesters, Remingtons, and about everything you could name, about 50 shooters on deck.

Not liking their makeshift rest, I shot prone with my Springfield, lying down in the muddy road, as it had just had a hard rain. I was in the black with three shots, but somebody beat me each time. Then we had lunch. In the afternoon Mother says, "Why don't you try the old Sharps?"

I said, "I don't know where to shoot at 200 yards. I'm sighted at 100." So I asked

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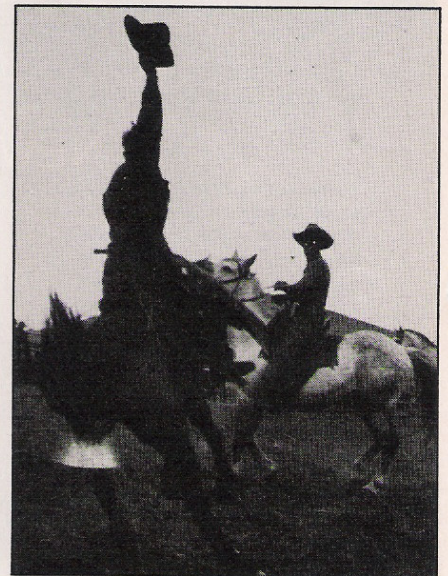


Good hands still make
the best knives.

GUNNOTES

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the officials if they'd allow me three shots to sight the old Sharps. They were all interested in the big gun and wanting to see how it would perform, so they told me to go ahead. I got a beer case from Andy Tomchek and a saddle blanket out of the back of Dad's Ford and laid on the case and laid down in the middle of the road. I jacked up the front sight to about what I thought would be right, set the set triggers, put the pinhead at the bottom of the black, and touched her off. One of the other shooters, Ross Degan was lying, half reclining, on the hood of this car on the buffalo robe where he'd been shooting. He was just about on a line with the muzzle of the big Sharps. When the gun went off, Ross's plug hat fell in the mud, he dropped his cigar, and staggered back holding both ears from the concussion. The boy at the target marked my shot just above the black.



Elmer Keith was quite a bronc rider in his youth. This photo of him was taken in 1922 in Claysoil, Montana.

I proceeded to lower the vernier sight, held exactly the same again, and shot again and I was just the same distance below the bullseye. Having made notes as to where I had the sight set each time, I split the difference. The next shot was a pinwheel. They shot off seven turkeys that afternoon. I took them all with the old .45-100-550 Sharps and my homegrown loads.

My brother Si was quite a ladies' man. Father bought him a Ford to take the girls to dances and socials. My pals, Ed and George Lamb and I weren't interested in girls in the least. All we were interested in were guns and broncs. If we'd hear of a horse that couldn't be rode, we'd ride 50 miles to take a setting at him. Likewise we were always experimenting with guns. One election day at Winston there was quite a crowd there. Ranchers had all come in for the election. One of them, Con Sweeny had

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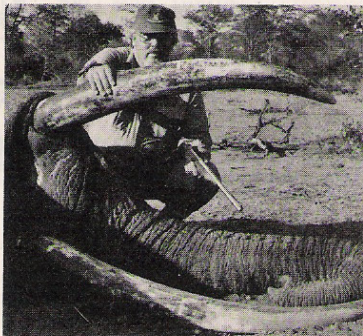
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GUNNOTES

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a new Stetson hat he'd just bought. Out in the middle of the street there was quite a crowd and he started kidding George and I. He said, "What are you two kids always wearing them old .45s for? You can't hit anything with them. You can't even hit my new hat."

He sailed it straight up and George and I drew at the same time and shot when it was just about at the height of its throw. Down came the hat. One .45 had hit the edge of the brim, split it clear to the sweat band, and cut through both sweat bands. The other one had punctured the brim and put two holes through the crown of the hat. Con took one look at it, and threw it aside. I took another look at it and had another thought. I says, "George, that will make awful good wads for our cap-and-ball sixguns."

I wadded it up and stuffed it in the saddle bags, later to be soaked in tallow and have wads cut out of it to put on top of powder before we seated the round ball in our cap-and-ball guns. Con never kidded us anymore about being able to shoot with those old sixguns.

TRAPPING AND THE LAW

I ran a trap line from our ranch around over past a neighbor's place down Beaver Creek to the bridge, and then on to Winston. Another man ran down Beaver Creek with his trap line, clear down to Stadler & Kaufman's old home ranch on the Missouri River. He was always kidding me about packing a gun to shoot bobcats in the traps. I found it was easier to shoot the cats in the chest, so it come out the rear end, than it was to club them. Coyotes I'd tap on the nose, stun them, and stomp them behind the foreleg with my boot heels and not have any holes in the hides. But bobcats were a different thing. Sometimes you'd catch them by a hind foot on a long chain and they'd fight a buzz saw.

One day this trapper that worked down Beaver Creek came staggering into Winston. On the left side of his face the cheek was cut and was lying down on his throat and you could see all his teeth on that side. His left ribs were all bare and his intestines showing in one place and one arm was badly chewed. We asked him what had happened. He had caught a big bobcat in a #3 Victor trap, an old trap. He picked up an old black birch to kill it with, and black birch are notorious for rotting in a year or so after they lay on the ground. He batted the cat over the head with it, and the stick broke and the cat jumped and nailed him, got him down, and he really chewed him up. The trap came all apart at the first jump the bobcat made. So we put him on the first train that Catlin flagged to go to Helena and he spent a month in the hospital. He came back pretty badly scarred on the left side of his face, and a much wiser

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GUNNOTES

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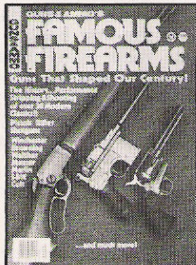
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man. That fall I noticed he was packing a six-shooter when he started trapping. I used to kid him, asking him why he packed a sixgun to shoot bobcats.

The first bobcat I ever trapped was in the Spokane hills north of Helena when we were still living at 1012 Billings Avenue. I was a little shaver, and learned a valuable lesson about that breed of kitties. I had a trap pen built against a fir tree right on the edge of a ledge. Behind the tree it dropped off down to another ledge and successive ledges down into the canyon. I'd rocked up side walls, covered it all with fir boughs and I'd stapled the chain, a rather long chain about six feet long, to a root of the tree, and then covered it all with fir needles. I had a snowshoe rabbit in the back of the pen for bait and the trap covered with fir needles in the mouth of the pen.

I'd run it every weekend and as often as I could get away from school. It was quite a hike. So when I ran the trap, the pen was all torn to pieces. I didn't see any sign of a chain or a thing, and no sign of the cat. I kneeled down and started digging at the root of the tree where I'd stapled the chain to see if it was still there. When I uncovered it, bless Moses, the chain was still there, and it extended over the ledge! Like a fool I peeked my head over the ledge.

There sat the cat three feet below me. With one snarl he was in the air. I threw myself backwards, jerked the .45, and shot at the same time. The old cat landed on my chest. My bullet had gone up through his neck and through his spine and he was all done. But it taught me a lesson about bobcats . . . they will fight. He was a big bobcat and, because he was my first, I had a rug made of him.

Later at the ranch at Winston we had lots of bobcats, and I trapped a lot of them. I had one set on the hill back of the cow barn. One night my brother and I were milking cows and we heard the doggonedest cat yowl I've ever heard in my life. It apparently came from a little point of rocks about a quarter of a mile from the barn. My brother said it was a lion. I'd never heard a lion holler and I didn't know. It was no scream or shriek like a woman. It sounded like an old tom cat on the back fence magnified several times.

The next morning I took my rifle, as I wanted to run my traps on the hill anyway, and went up there. There had been a foot of wet snow and the only tracks I could find on the hill were those of a pine squirrel, a snowshoe rabbit, a few grouse, and one enormous cougar following my trail from one trap to another. I had caught a bobcat in one, not a very big cat, and the pen was torn to pieces and the cat was dead. The lion had killed him. Evidently the cougar didn't like bobcats. He hadn't eaten him, though, and I saved the hide and sewed up the fang holes.

Continued Next Month