

The Evolution and Legacy of Lever-Action Rifles - Big Horn Armory's Big-Bore Innovation



American Civil War. Soldiers of the Union 7th Illinois Volunteers with their Henry repeater rifles.

Lever-action rifles are deeply embedded in the fabric of American history, from their early use in the Civil War to their starring roles in the hands of cowboys, hunters, settlers, outlaws, and even fictional heroes in Western films. Their rugged simplicity, reliability, and rapid-fire capability made them a favorite for everyone from frontiersmen to modern-day sportsmen. While lever-action rifles have seen their designs evolve over the years, they remain an enduring symbol of American ingenuity and craftsmanship, especially in big-bore calibers. Big Horn Armory (BHA) has taken this legacy to new heights, pushing the boundaries of what lever-action rifles can achieve in both performance and power.

A Brief History of the Lever-Action Rifle

The origins of the lever-action rifle date back to the early 19th century. One of the first known examples was the 1826 lever-action revolver, capable of firing six shots in rapid succession—an innovative step for its time. However, the lever-action rifle we know today didn't take shape until later, with early designs like the Colt Paterson ring lever rifle in the 1830s and the Spencer repeating rifle in 1860. The Spencer, used during the Civil War, was particularly notable for its seven-round tube magazine, a revolutionary concept that allowed soldiers to fire multiple rounds before needing to reload.



Spencer-carbine M1865, .50 inch.

The Henry rifle, introduced around the same time, became another game-changer with its under-barrel magazine and rapid-fire capability. These rifles laid the groundwork for what would become iconic American firearms. By the late 1800s, manufacturers like Winchester and Marlin had perfected the lever-action design, producing models like the Winchester 1873, known as "The Gun That Won the West," and Marlin's Model 1895. These rifles became synonymous with American frontier life and hunting.

The Rise of Big-Bore Lever Actions

While early lever-action rifles were chambered for smaller, black-powder rounds, the introduction of smokeless powder in the late 19th century paved the way for more powerful cartridges. This shift led to the development of big-bore lever-action rifles capable of taking down large game. Marlin's .45-70 Government and Winchester's .30-30 Win. cartridges became mainstays for hunters seeking reliable, hard-hitting performance in the field.

Big-bore lever-action rifles became increasingly popular among hunters for their stopping power and versatility. Lever-action rifles, with their compact size, made the perfect saddle gun—easy to unholster while riding, and quick to aim and fire. However, as time passed, the demands of shooters and hunters evolved, and modern ammunition continued to advance.

Big Horn Armory and the Modern Big-Bore Revolution

Enter Big Horn Armory. Founded in 2008 by Greg Buchel, the company set out with a clear vision: to build a modern, big-bore lever-action rifle that could handle the immense power of new calibers like the .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum. But this wasn't as simple as taking an existing lever-action rifle and modifying it. Traditional actions, such as those from Marlin and Winchester, simply couldn't withstand the forces generated by these heavy-hitting cartridges—testing revealed that the guns would literally bend under the pressure.

Big Horn Armory's solution was to build their own rifle from the ground up, employing advanced metallurgy and machining techniques. The result was the Model 89, a lever-action rifle purpose-built for big-bore calibers. Taking inspiration from the legendary 1886 and 1892 actions, Buchel and his team designed the Model 89 to incorporate the best aspects of both rifles, blending the external design of the 1886 with the internals of the 1892.



Greg Buchel testing a prototype. Note the fancy forend tip of the Marlin action.

The action was resized to perfectly accommodate the larger calibers, creating a rifle that could handle extreme power while maintaining the traditional look and feel of a classic lever action.

The Model 89 wasn't just a modified version of old designs; it was a modern reinvention of the lever-action platform. Its robust build, precision engineering, and ability to handle high-pressure cartridges set it apart from anything that had come before.



Model 89 Prototype.

A New Era of Big-Bore Lever Actions

Since the introduction of the Model 89, Big Horn Armory has continued to refine and expand its offerings, including variations in .500 S&W, .475 Linebaugh, and other big-bore calibers. These rifles aren't just for show—they are built for serious hunters and shooters who demand the utmost in power and reliability from their firearms. Whether you're hunting big game in the Rocky Mountains or protecting your homestead, Big Horn Armory's rifles are designed to deliver.

With the resurgence of interest in lever-action rifles, particularly for their versatility and rugged appeal, Big Horn Armory stands at the forefront of innovation. While the Model 89 pays homage to the great rifles of the past, it also forges its own path, offering shooters a blend of tradition and cutting-edge performance.



Conclusion

Lever-action rifles have come a long way from their early days in the hands of Civil War soldiers and frontiersmen. Today, they remain a staple of American shooting culture, revered for their speed, reliability, and classic design. Big Horn Armory, with its dedication to craftsmanship and innovation, has breathed new life into the big-bore lever-action market, setting new standards for performance and power.

For those who appreciate the rich history of lever-action rifles but demand modern performance, Big Horn Armory's Model 89 and other offerings provide the best of both worlds. As the company continues to push the boundaries of what lever-action rifles can do, it's clear that the legacy of this iconic firearm is far from finished.