



# A BLAST FROM THE PAST

written by Mike Zlotnicki  
photographed by Melissa McGaw

*From Grandpa's old shotgun to Dad's deer rifle,  
heirloom guns evoke memories and carry on  
traditions from generation to generation*

*It sits above the mantel on a couple rusty nails  
It ain't worth a lot of money  
And it damn sure ain't for sale  
The good Lord only knows all the stories it could tell  
My Granddaddy's gun*

*"Granddaddy's Gun,"  
recorded by Aaron Lewis*

A few years before my father passed away, he gave me his guns. It was a small but eclectic collection of long arms and a couple of revolvers. It included a Fabrique Nationale bolt-action .270, a Spanish-made 12-gauge side-by-side shotgun, a lever-action Marlin 39 in .22 with a tiny 4X Weaver scope and a Sears J.C. Higgins 12-gauge pump shotgun. For a man so tight with his money, I often wondered about the story of each purchase. They had to be deals.

If I were to offer advice to anyone who might inherit some firearms, it is to ask questions and learn the stories behind the guns. I waited to do so and now I'll never know the stories of my dad's guns. Ask questions before you can't. Regret has a pain all its own.

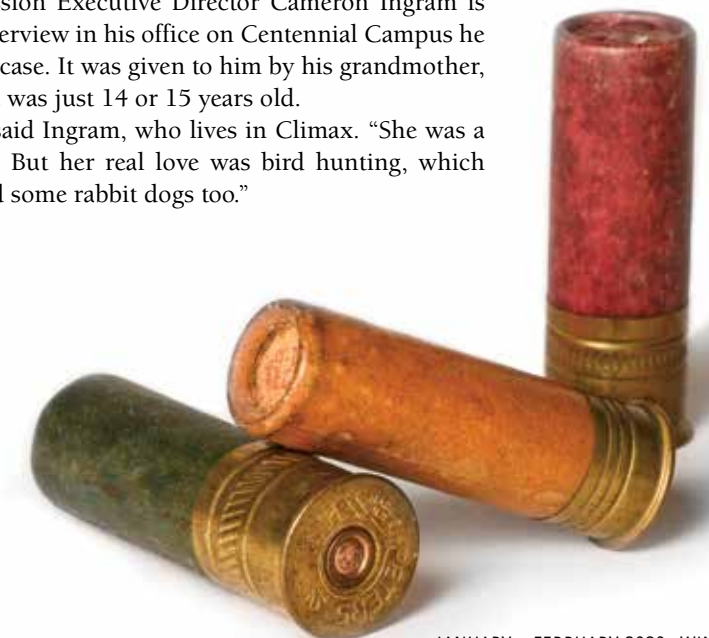
This past fall I took the Spanish side-by-side to North Dakota on a sharp-tailed grouse trip. I managed to kill a bird with it, and with that bird came some closure. I plan to have the bird mounted in his memory.

With my own experience in mind, I asked several of my colleagues at the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission about their experiences hunting with hand-me-down firearms. Here are their stories.

## **Grandma's Gun**

N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission Executive Director Cameron Ingram is one such employee. During an interview in his office on Centennial Campus he pulled an autoloader out of a soft case. It was given to him by his grandmother, Ruth Durden, of Ellerbe, when he was just 14 or 15 years old.

"That's my mother's mother," said Ingram, who lives in Climax. "She was a big hunter and she deer hunted. But her real love was bird hunting, which means quail in the South. She had some rabbit dogs too."



***“That’s my mother’s mother, ... She was a big hunter and she deer hunted. But her real love was bird hunting, which means quail in the South.”***

Ingram said this his grandmother spent a lot of time on Sandhills Game Land and would often take him out there when he was young. His first gun was a Remington 20 gauge. Like most young folks, Ingram thought he was ready for a 12 gauge. So his grandmother took him into the woods behind her house to let him shoot her gun, which was made by SKB for the Ithaca Gun Company, before giving it to him.

Ingram remembers the first time he used it during a squirrel hunt on her property.

“My best memory is that this is the gun I was carrying when I killed my first deer,” he said. “I was in an old, steel climbing stand. I remember it like it was yesterday: It was a morning hunt and I remember it being cold in Chatham County. I shot a doe with it, one shot. Since then, I’ve duck hunted with it a little.”

Ingram’s daughter started shooting skeet with it and used it when competing in the Youth Hunter Education Skills Tournament as part of the state’s Hunter Education Program. (She tallied a perfect score with it her senior year.)



Cameron Ingram with an Ithaca auto-loader in 12 gauge he inherited from his grandmother.

“There’s great memories with this gun,” he said. “It’s special to me and it’s special to my family. There are so many memories and good times with this gun, in the field with my family. Guns are just tools of a sport I’ve spent my life enjoying and I have passed that tradition on to my family.”

### ***The Family Fox***

Ashton Godwin works as the government affairs liaison for the Commission. Growing up in Wilmington, he hunted since he was little. “As long as I can remember,” Godwin said.

“My family—my brothers and I—still have a farm that abuts Holly Shelter Game Land. We’ve maintained that all our lives, hunting that all our lives. My son and my brothers’ children are the fifth generation that have hunted on that land. We’ve been exposed to that lifestyle since birth.”

There’s a gun, a Fox side-by-side shotgun, that has been in his family for generations as well. Godwin said that his brother

keeps the gun in Wilmington, and they use it on “special occasions,” like the opening of dove season and during turkey hunts.

It was his great-grandfather’s gun that Godwin believes was built in the mid-1920s. He no longer has the original paperwork but hopes to get a copy of the work certificate from the manufacturer. His great-grandfather hunted waterfowl and deer with it and his descendants have carried on the tradition of hunting small game with it.

“It’s an older gun so we tend to use it on special occasions,” Godwin said. “This isn’t a beat-around gun. We try to keep it out of the salt marsh. You have to be careful with the ammunition you use.”

Godwin recalled one special memory of the gun that featured his great-uncle deer hunting with hounds with his great-grandfather on what is now the Bear Garden tract of Holly Shelter Game Land.

“My great-grandfather had a wooden leg, so it was hard for him to get around. He had modified an old Model T Ford. It had a dog box and something in the back he could lean on and be elevated. He said he remembers shooting a deer ahead of the hounds at about 100 yards.”

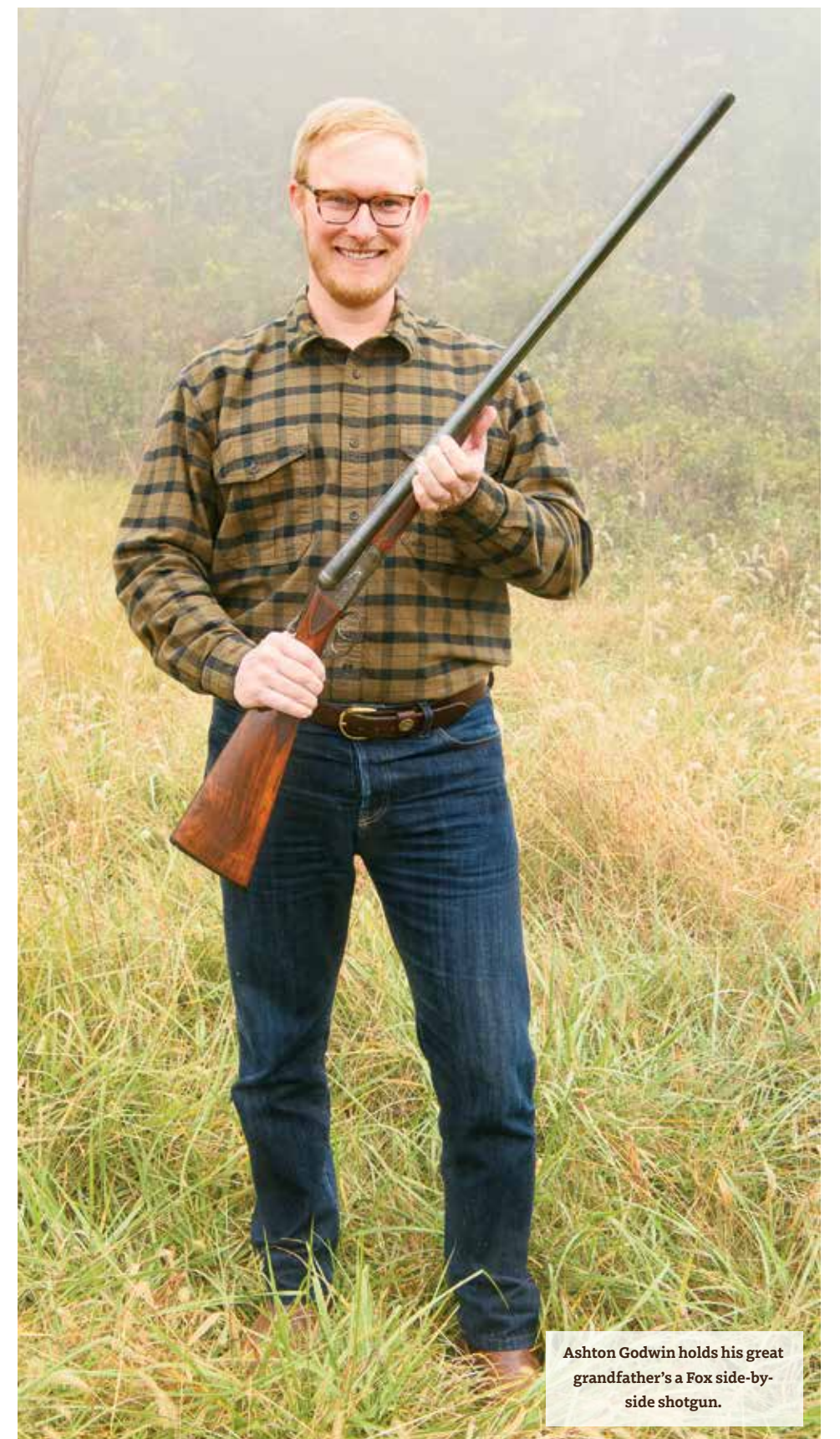
Godwin describes the gun as having 30-inch barrels, maybe 32-inch, and choked full and full as far as he could tell. “It’s nostalgic,” he said. “I’m the fourth generation to use that gun and take it in the field. That passion is generational in our family.”

### ***The Old Ithaca***

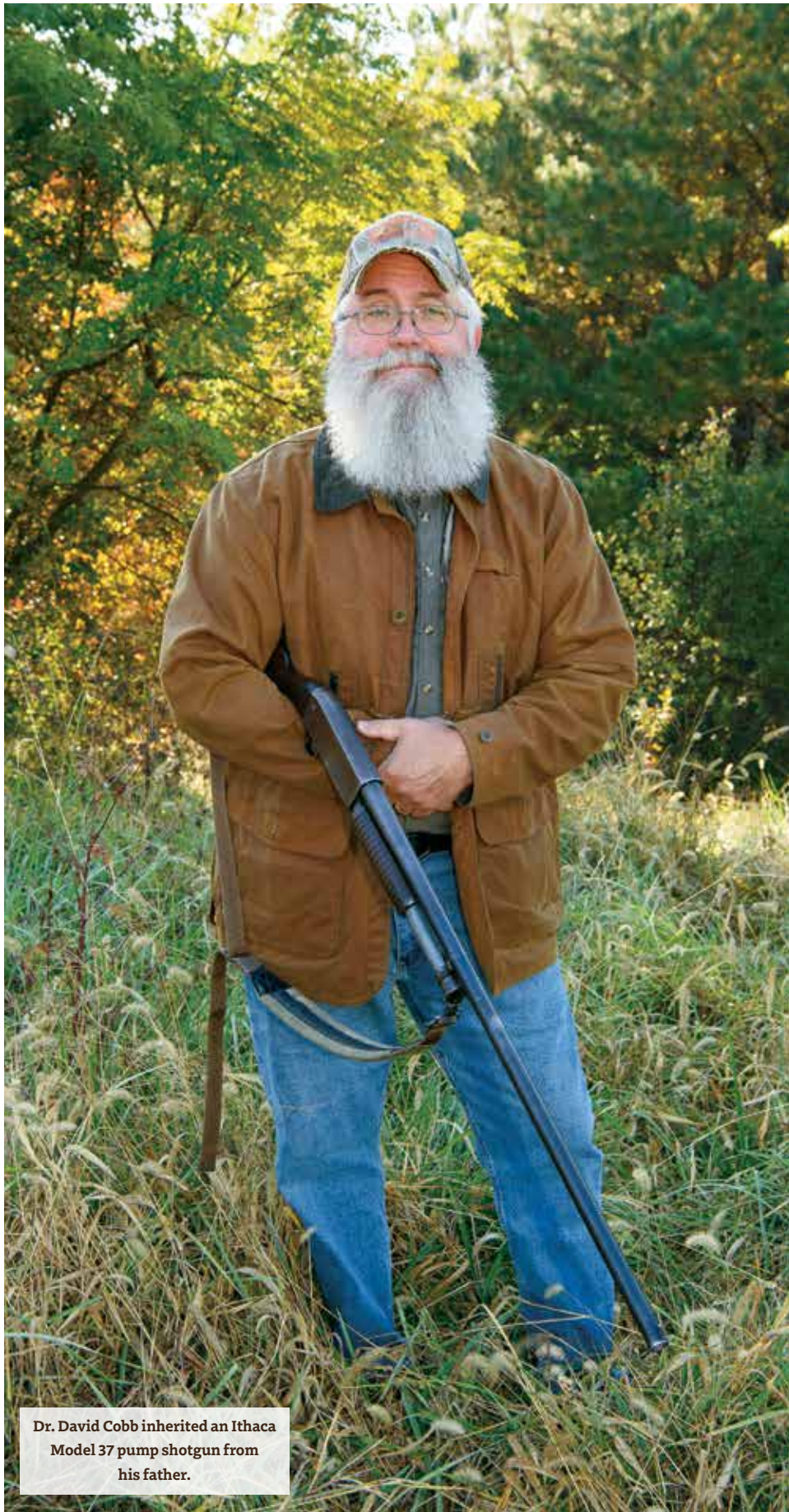
David Cobb is the research director for the Commission and an avid hunter. He lives in Franklinton.

Growing up in Gibsonville, Cobb and his brother were allowed to start hunting alone when they were 11 years old. He never learned why 11 was the designated age, but that was the family rule. “You had to prove proficiency with a firearm to go by yourself,” Cobb said.

Cobb got his first firearm when he was 12. That’s when he began hunting independently, often with a couple of friends who lived nearby. “When I was 12 years old, I’d strike out on a Saturday with a gun and a couple of buddies and be gone all day.”



Ashton Godwin holds his great grandfather’s a Fox side-by-side shotgun.



Dr. David Cobb inherited an Ithaca Model 37 pump shotgun from his father.

Cobb's hand-me-down heirloom is an Ithaca Model 37 pump shotgun that he inherited from his dad. Cobb's grandfather was killed when his dad was just 8 years old, which is primarily why his dad was never allowed to have a gun growing up. When he turned 18 in 1950, he bought the Ithaca Model 37.

"He hunted with it his whole life," Cobb said. "For the longest time it was the only gun I remember him having. He dog deer hunted, squirrel hunted, bird hunted of course, all that stuff. He never did a whole lot of still hunting for deer until much later in his life after I was grown."

Cobb said his dad shot so many shells through the gun, especially while dove hunting, that he would bet anyone he could shoot his pump shotgun faster than they could shoot their autoloading shotgun.

"I never saw him lose," Cobb said. "It was so worn out and worn in you could shoot it as fast as you could pump it."

Cobb's dad died in 2020 and the four children split his guns up among themselves. Cobb wanted the pump shotgun because it's the one his dad hunted with the most. After inheriting it, his goal became killing a turkey with it. The gun, a 2 3/4-inch 12 gauge with no screw-in chokes, essentially became his turkey gun.

"The second year I ended up killing a bird with it," Cobb said. "It was one of those goals I set that somehow, in my mind, tied my hunting and that gun back into the memories of [us] turkey hunting, which we did for years."

### ***Cherished Memories***

Not many young ladies cherish a Remington bolt-action rifle, but Hannah Whitley does. Whitley is an administration officer in the Wildlife Education Division and lives in Fuquay-Varina.

"I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family that spent a lot of time outdoors, mostly hunting and fishing," she said. "As a kid I was always outside with my big brother, Joel, often in the woods exploring or out at a pond with my dad and granddaddy. As an adult I deer hunt mainly, sometimes my brother will still let me tag along with

him and we will go turkey hunting. I hope to go bear hunting with him this year."

Whitley's grandfather, Dan Shattuck, acquired the gun in the 1980s on a hunting trip to Pennsylvania. After arriving, he realized that he could not hunt with a semi-automatic rifle, so he headed to find the closest place that sold bolt-action firearms. He ended up purchasing a bolt-action .30-06 from Kmart.

Whitley said her first recollection of her heirloom rifle came when she would see her papa (grandfather) with it heading out with her father, retired Commission employee Wesley Shattuck, or brother to go hunting.

"Papa had one of those white Chevy Cheyenne's single cab with that red interior. I can see that gun sitting in it now, between him and my brother getting ready to hit the road for an afternoon hunt," she recalled.

Whitley's favorite memory using the rifle is when she harvested her first deer with it around the age of 13 while hunting with her grandfather. "I'll never forget that day. He was so proud of me," she said.

Like the others in this essay, Whitley revels in the bond and memories that a simple metal and wood tool can evoke.

"You can't understand that unless you've been a part of it and experienced the treasure trove of memories made from Papa's gun," she said. "I can't share those feelings and memories with anyone else and to me, that's priceless. That's what Papa's gun means to me."

"When I hold this gun, I go back in time to a little girl that just wanted to spend time with her granddaddy, carefully trying to keep up behind him, mimicking his steps as we walked through leaves, briars and brush to get to a deer stand, with an old rifle from Kmart draped over her shoulder."

### ***Another Family Fox***

Travis Casper is the chief of Wildlife Education and has worked for the Commission a little over 20 years. The Sunbury native lives in Clayton with his wife and two girls.

"I've been hunting and fishing ever since I can remember," he said. "When I was real little, I remember walking the swamps with Daddy on cold mornings after it frosted

looking for coons up in the forks of trees on the south side of a tree. He'd shoot the coon and Granddaddy would eat them and take the hides to Moyock and sell them."

Casper's "old iron" is a Fox Savage Model 8 side-by-side shotgun in 12 gauge. Casper thinks it was made in the 1940s. It belonged to his maternal grandfather, Paul Rountree.

"He lived right across the field from us in the old home place," Casper said. "Back in his utility room there was a gun rack, and that shotgun was on the top of the gun rack and my grandmom's BB gun that she had growing up was underneath it."



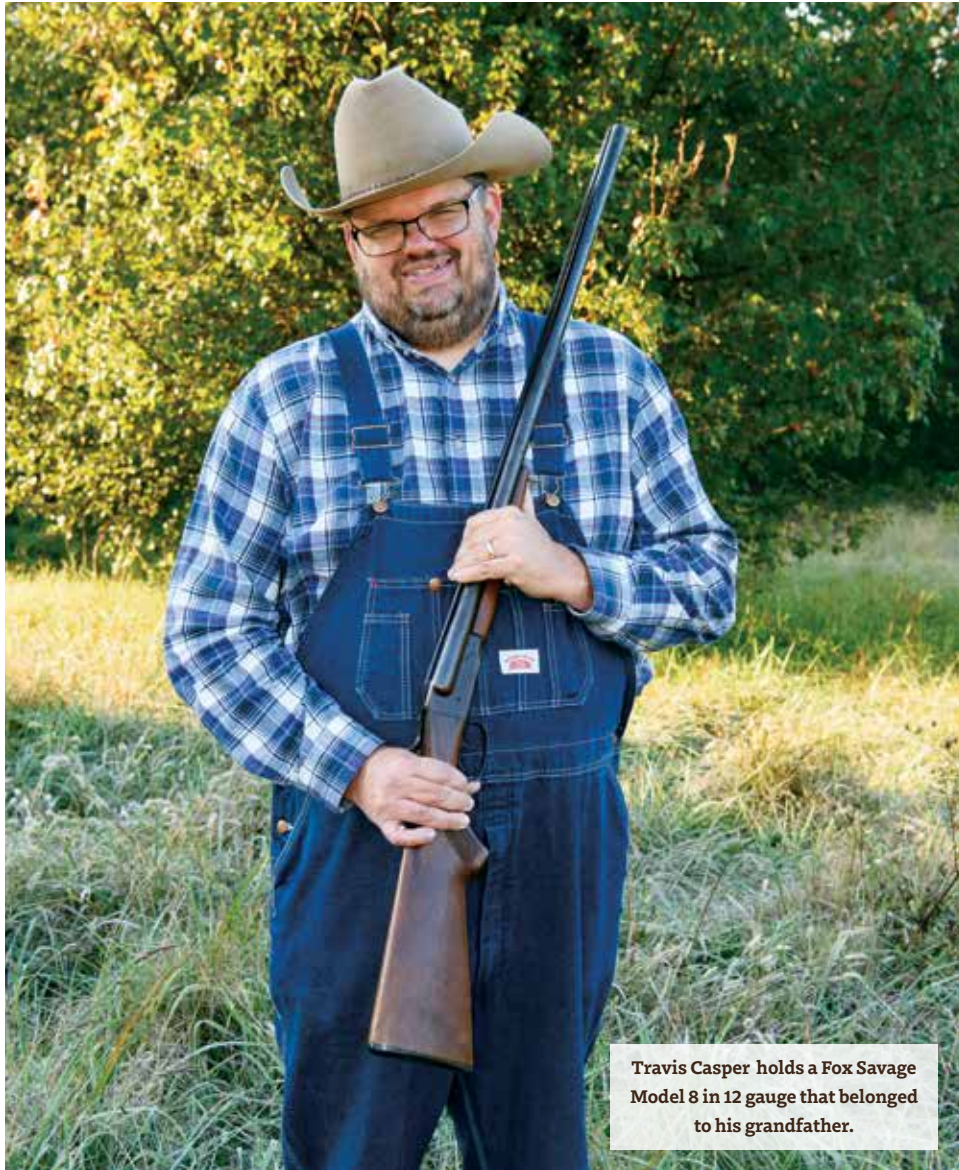
Hannah Whitley hunts with her grandfather's Remington Sportsman 78 chambered in .30-06.

**“Hunting with your kids and grandkids forms bonds that will never be broken and memories that last a lifetime”**

Cleaning the gun became a family tradition, Casper said, even as it got used less frequently as his grandfather aged.

“As I got older, I think we cleaned it about every other Sunday,” Casper said. “It would never get shot but we’d go over there and clean it. It had been a working gun, but Granddaddy was getting some age on him by the time I came along. When Granddaddy passed away it was left to Momma. It’s kind of a communal gun because it still hangs out at Momma’s house.”

Nowadays, the gun serves more as a memento of the past than a working shotgun. Nevertheless, it still evokes fond memories.



Travis Casper holds a Fox Savage Model 8 in 12 gauge that belonged to his grandfather.

“I have squirrel hunted with it a little bit,” Casper said. “I took it quail hunting years and years ago when I had a quail dog. I had a Brittany.”

### **Thanks, Dad**

Bradley Howard is the chief of Wildlife Management at the Commission. He was born and raised in Mooresville. We had talked about the subject of heirloom guns long before this story came together.

“I started thinking about this some time ago when a longtime family friend posted a picture of his son, Sawyer, after one of their first dove hunts together,” he said. “There sat his son with three doves and a little single shot pellet rifle. He carried the gun to feel like a part of the hunt, his dad killed the doves. I chuckled at how much Sawyer looked like his dad and how amazing it was to see an image from 30 years ago right there in front of me. You see that little pellet gun was the same one I had watched his dad learn to hunt with. Seeing that little took me right back to the hunt club three decades ago and thousands of memories later.”

Howard said it made him consider that many of my fondest childhood memories are related to a gun.

“Now some across the country would cringe at that statement, many unfortunately might have some pretty bad childhood memories associated with guns, but not mine,” he said. “My memories associated with guns are all pleasant and all warm my heart.”

Sometime in the mid 1970s, Howard’s dad introduced him to deer hunting. They hunted public lands and had little expectation of shooting a deer. Now, when he sees his dad’s old Remington 742 Woodsmaster he thinks back to cool mornings in the hardwoods of Uwharrie National Forest.

“I learned many things on those hunts,” Howard said. “My dad took the opportunity to explain what a scrape was, what buck lure was and why we used it. He also transitioned nicely into an explanation of what the rut was and what that meant. Let’s say I didn’t learn about the bucks and the bees, I learned about the bucks and the does. Smart man, my dad.”

Howard said a little 20-gauge Stevens single-shot shotgun is perhaps the gun that holds the most memories for him.

“It was my dad’s first shotgun and became mine,” he said. “I remember the first time I ever shot the gun! I had to prove to Dad that I could handle it safely, withstand the recoil and could in fact hit what I was shooting at. The soda can didn’t have a chance! Once that lesson was done, it was pronounced that I was ready to squirrel hunt.”

Once Howard become proficient with the 20 gauge, he pined for “more gun,” and was soon using his Papaw’s 20 gauge double barreled shotgun of unknown make.

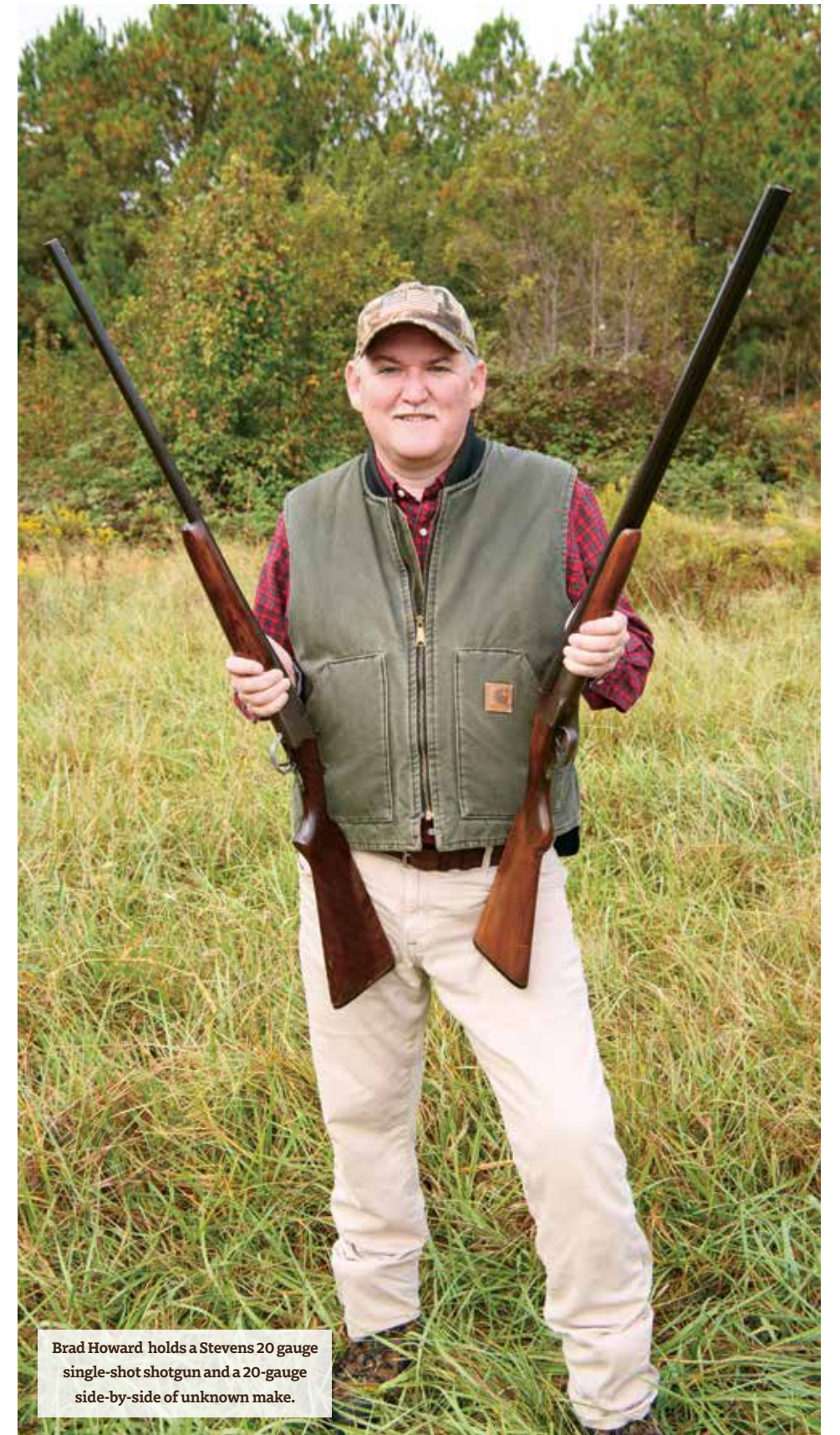
“I killed a bunch, ok a few, doves with that gun and my very first rabbit,” he recalled. “The rabbit hunt was special because it took place behind our house on Thanksgiving morning with my other grandfather who had been an avid rabbit hunter before I came along. He was walking out the thicket and ran the rabbit right at me; I shot it at about 15 yards with the full choke barrel. It was a very clean ethical kill but didn’t do a lot for the table readiness of that particular rabbit. However, Mom cooked it up and we had rabbit along with turkey for that Thanksgiving. That was just about 40 years ago but it seems like yesterday. That shotgun is now in my gun safe where I take it out and look at it from time to time and remember that day.”

Howard looks back fondly on those days and thinks there is a lesson to be learned in them for parents.

“Hunting with your kids and grandkids forms bonds that will never be broken and memories that last a lifetime,” Howard said. “Teach your kids to shoot and take them hunting because everyone deserves to have memories like mine. Thanks for all the memories Dad!” ♦

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*Do you have a story about an inherited firearm? Send it to us! It will be considered for an upcoming magazine edition or shared on our social media platforms. Send your story via email to [letters@ncwildlife.org](mailto:letters@ncwildlife.org). We look forward to hearing from you.*



Brad Howard holds a Stevens 20 gauge single-shot shotgun and a 20-gauge side-by-side of unknown make.