

SIDE-BY-SIDE

Seduction



A CLASSIC OF FORM AND FUNCTION, THE ALLURING SIDE-BY-SIDE SHOTGUN EVOKES THE PAST AND ENRICHES THE PRESENT.

If you are of a certain age, the image of a hunter armed with a side-by-side shotgun behind a dog locked onto point at a field's edge can be as evocative as the petite madeleine was for Proust. That tableau of the wing-shooting triumvirate—bird, dog and gun—summons the past and a wistful longing for a way of life that seems to have passed.

Even if the wing-shooting way of life has not withered away entirely, the scene still can be a melancholy one as we recall those hunters who are no longer living. Hunters may outlive the bird and the dog, but eventually they, too, will remain only as memories. The only tangible thing left is the shotgun. The gun is a token of the past, a cherished relic once carried by those we now know only in memory.

For generations of hunters who pursued quail, grouse, woodcock, snipe or pheasant, that gun likely was a side-by-side. Not that it was the only gun. George Bird Evans, whose 1971 "Upland Shooting Life" chronicles his life in the field, included a photograph in that book of his friends' favorite bird guns. The group portrait consisted of seven side-by-sides in four different gauges, two pumps, two over-and-unders and one semi-automatic. The shotguns ranged from a very expensive Purdey side-by-side to a relatively inexpensive Ithaca pump.

WRITTEN BY JIM WILSON PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELISSA MCGAW



Although any shotgun could be used for bird hunting, the side-by-side was the gun of choice for most hunters, at least in the 19th century and into the 20th. The reason was simple: The side-by-side, first developed in the late 18th century as a flintlock, was the best gun of its time. (And many would argue it remains the best shotgun.) The double-barreled gun served both market waterfowler and quail hunter, not to mention just about any other hunter who pursued North American small game.

In the closing years of the 19th century, a hunter had a choice between a single-barrel shotgun, a repeater and a side-by-side. John Browning introduced a lever-action repeating shotgun in 1887 and the more popular pump shotgun six years later. The double was more expensive, as it is now, because it was more difficult to make. The semi-automatic, capable of holding five or more shells, did not appear until Browning introduced the A-5 in 1903. The “humpback” Browning would become

perhaps the most popular and recognizable autoloader ever in this country. In 1905, Remington began production of its own version of the A-5. Other semi-autos came along, as did one of the most dependable and accurate pumps of all time, the Winchester Model 12, introduced in 1912.

However, it was not until around the middle of the last century that the semi-auto became the most popular type of action. Upland bird hunters have used the semi-auto for years, although the over-and-under may have caught up. Wade Teague, director of Quail Unlimited’s Mid-Atlantic Region, said he sees a lot of bobwhite hunters with over-and-unders. “I think it’s the most popular gun now for quail hunters. I use a 12-gauge semi-auto, a Browning A-5, because that’s the gun I grew up with and I’m comfortable with it. But I’ve also got a 20-gauge over-and-under.”

A VINTAGE OBSESSION

Despite the facts, the truth is that the side-by-side holds a special place in the hearts of wing shooters. Why that is may be impossible to answer simply, if at all. Perhaps it is a combination of nostalgia, beauty, feel, a certain grace that the side-by-side possesses that no other gun can match. Why do men develop such affection for things? Maybe it’s love. At the very least it’s romance, a side-by-side seduction.

Over the last decade or so, side-by-sides have enjoyed a renaissance among wing shooters. Shooters are buying not only new guns but also vintage ones. Many of the new side-bys are European, although a few United States gun-makers still build them. The vintage market holds a combination of British and European shotguns, along with the great American guns from the first half of the 20th

century, names such as Parker, L.C. Smith, A.H. Fox and Winchester.

Phillip Futrell of Mid-South Guns in Wagram said his customers cover the whole range of shooters. “We have bird hunters, clay shooters, collectors. Some might be interested in a particular gun, like Parkers; some are interested in the smaller bores. Those guns (small gauges) are the ones that have gone up in price more. I’ve seen a lot more interest in doubles over the past 10 years, and I think the Vintagers have had something to do with that.”

The Vintagers, formed in 1994, is a non-profit organization that espouses, among other things, providing an “opportunity for the use, appreciation and collection of side-by-side shotguns and rifles.” Also known as the Order of Edwardian Gunners, Vintagers not only appreciate double guns, but many members like to dress in clothing of the Edwardian era, roughly 1895–1914. That period, called *La Belle Époque* in France, was noted for its high fashion, wealth, class distinctions and manners. (Picture Jeremy Brett’s portrayal of Sherlock Holmes to fix a picture of Edwardian society and dress.) It also was a time in which Great Britain was the preeminent world power. British writer J.B. Priestley called the era the “last golden age . . . all the more radiant because it is on the other side of the huge black pit of war.”

Named for Great Britain’s King Edward VII (who ruled from 1901 to 1910), the Edwardian era was a crowning moment in shotgun history. In just over 200 years, the shotgun had evolved from the early flintlocks to muzzle-

NOMINAL BORE DIAMETERS*

Gauge	Inches
10	.775 inches
12	.729 inches
16	.662 inches
20	.615 inches
24	.580 inches
28	.550 inches
32	.526 inches
.410 (67 gauge)	.410 inches

*Actual diameter will vary slightly with different manufacturers.

Why is a 12 gauge called a 12 gauge? The gauge is determined by the number of balls exactly the diameter of the barrel that can be made from one pound of lead. Thus, it takes 12 lead balls of .729 inches to weigh one pound.

loaders to breech loaders. By the 1820s, the side-by-side began to look like the guns of today. Over the next few decades, shotgun technology raced along: Choke boring was developed (1866), the first hammerless side-bys appeared (1871) and William Anson and John Deeley, employees of British gun-maker Westley Richards, came up with the Anson and Deeley boxlock (1875), an extremely reliable actioning system in which the lockwork is contained within a box-shaped housing. The side-by-side of 1880—the beginning of what the Vintagers call the “Vintage Era”—is very much the gun of 2006. As Ray Poudrier, one of the co-founders of the Vintagers, said: “A boxlock is a boxlock.”

For Poudrier, the guns and the social aspects of shooting are part of the same whole. “In 1994, four of us who owned hammer guns said, ‘We ought to dress to the gun.’ So we put on some old clothes, coats, ties, just stuff we could find. We invited a couple of people to join us. And, by God, it was too much fun, so we invited some more people to join us. We look at it as putting a good face on guns.”

The fun has spread to the point that the Vintagers now have 13 chapters in the U.S. and one in Australia. Each year the group holds a national side-by-side championship, primarily for shotguns, but with a few events for double rifles.

Bill Curry, president of the Carolina Chapter of the Vintagers, also found that he liked the easy camaraderie of a group of like-minded people. “Since shooting was nothing new for me, it was a natural tran-



sition to go from doing it by myself to doing it with a bunch of friends,” he said.

“One of the big things of the Edwardian era was that guns and the social hierarchy were intertwined,” Poudrier said. “The social aspects of shooting were important. It was a very accepted thing to do. All the lords and ladies wanted to be a part of it.”

Dressing in 100-year-old clothes and socializing, however, are not the main preoccupations of the Vintagers. “Most of our members hunt,” Poudrier said. “And 99 percent of them shoot side-by-sides when they’re hunting.” For most Vintagers, as for many hunters who have attained a certain age, the goals of hunting have changed. “Especially as we get older, the bag limit is just not that important,” Poudrier said. “It becomes a lot more about the gun.”

Age, too, brings a desire to end a day of shooting without a shoulder made tender from excessive recoil. Most people who shoot vin-

Top: Three hammer guns: Luciano Bosis (1994), Charles Boswell (circa 1890) and FAMARS Castore (1974). **Bottom:** Vintager accoutrements include shooting flashes (left) and a Norfolk liar, a game-counting device.

tage side-by-sides, or even new ones, tend to know more about how their guns perform with different loads of powder and shot than do other shotgunners.

The reasons for that expertise are various. Vintage side-bys often have chambers that are shorter than today’s standard of 2 ¼ inches. The chamber, for example, might be 2 ½ inches or 2 ¾. Dropping a pair of 2 ¾-inch shells into the chambers, even though they appear to fit, can prove hazardous to both shooter and gun. British guns tend to be made for a specific shot charge, using the standard—proposed by gun-maker W. W. Greener—that a gun should be 96 times as heavy as its



Top: Detail of a 1974 FAMARS Castore. **Below:** Bill Curry (left) and Phillip Floyd enjoy a day in the field for pheasants.



“The lines are beautiful,” Poudrier said. “No gun is more fun than an old hammer gun. It has the most elegant of forms. It’s a masterpiece of beauty and function. With a hammer gun, all the stuff isn’t internal. It has a thinner receiver. It’s like a very leggy, 6-foot blonde. The back-action guns are racy little devils. Because the action is in the wood, it has a much leaner form. The bar action is less racy, but it is easier to make and is a coherent whole.”

Like Poudrier, Curry finds a special beauty and delight in side-by-sides. “Hunting was a part of everyday life,” said Curry, who grew up shooting quail on his father’s South Carolina farm. “I’ve had a great love for and fascination with hunting and side-by-sides my entire life.

“I describe it as a kind of romance,” Curry said of side-by-sides. “You actually wrap your hands around the barrels when you shoot; you caress it. There’s a lot of artistry involved in these guns, a lot of engraving. There is something about the feel of a side-by that is so much better. It’s like a good, smooth whisky, a good port or a shapely woman. Those racy Italian guns, they’re very sexy. There is real pleasure to be gained from shooting a gun.”

Part of that pleasure, if the gun is vintage, comes in knowing the history of the piece. One of the guns in Curry’s collection is a Purdey hammer that was built in 1872 for Sir Henry Ingilby. “It’s been pretty neat for me, 134 years later, to take it out and shoot clays or quail. He hunted with that gun, and now I’m enjoying the same gun he did.”

Not all of Curry’s guns have such history. After losing a 32-gauge side-by-side in a fire at a gun shop, Curry went looking for another. He decided to have one built, but with an extra set of 24-gauge barrels that would fit the same frame. After a couple of European gun-makers refused to build such a gun, Curry fell into conversation (through an interpreter) with a representative of the Italian firm of Poli Armi while attending the Southern Side-by-Side Championship near Sanford. One year later, Curry had his gun. Last year at the Vintagers’ World Side-by-Side Championship, Curry won the 24- and 32-bore championships, plus the paired hammer gun and .410 hammerless titles.

Although side-by-sides can be very expensive — into six figures for a bespoke, best gun from such companies as Purdey or Holland & Holland — Curry said it is not necessary for someone to be rich to enjoy side-by-sides.

shot load. (A gun shooting a 1-ounce load ideally should weigh 6 pounds; one shooting 1¼ ounces should weigh 7½ pounds.) Those who use vintage side-bys, even those with the standard chamber length, have found through experimentation that lighter, low-pressure loads perform just as well on clays and game as do bone-jolting heavier loads. And with much less wear on shooter and gun.

THOSE RACY LITTLE DEVILS

“I just don’t need the recoil anymore,” Poudrier said. “A light load in a heavy 12-bore is very pleasurable. Men traditionally have shot the 12-bore. When I hunt birds, other than waterfowl, I use a 16-bore or 20. Sixteens have about the right weight, and are just a pleasure to use. For waterfowl, or late-season pheasants, you probably want a 12. Otherwise a 16 is just fine. It doesn’t get much better than that. “Most 16-bore shells today are pretty hot loads. They beat you up pretty good. I’ve found that 950 feet per second is enough to kill any beastie that flies. For pheasant hunting, that 70-yard crosser, maybe 1,050 feet per second. I get a very tight pattern at lower feet per second.”

Today a number of cartridge manufacturers, such as Polywad, Gamebore and RST, offer cartridges specifically designed for vintage guns. And they work just fine in modern side-by-sides, too.

Poudrier happens to be a fancier of hammer guns, particularly back-action guns as opposed to bar-action. A back-action sidelock has the mainspring mounted toward the rear of the action, and a bar-action sidelock has the mainspring mounted forward and into the bar of the action.

Top (left to right): An A.H. Fox side-by-side and an antique James Purdey gunmaker label. Middle: Bill and Cindi Curry in the field. Bottom: Vintagers’ hammer emblem.

THE OTHER DOUBLE-BARREL WHEN ACCURACY IS AT ISSUE, IS AN OVER-AND-UNDER THE BETTER GUN?

Although the side-by-side is the shotgun traditionally associated with wing shooting, the over-and-under is used far more often these days in the field and on the target range. Why that is so is open to discussion. Is the over-and-under a “better” gun, or is it just trendier to shoot?

The side-by-side has been around since the late 18th century, but 100 years passed between its invention and the time the modern over-and-under was developed. There were some early flintlock versions of the gun, but superimposing one barrel on another proved problematic for breech-loading shotguns because of the extra depth required in a receiver for an over-and-under. By the end of the 19th century, British gun-makers were turning out very expensive over-and-unders. It was not until John Browning patented the Browning Superposed in 1926 (the year of his death) and the gun was introduced two years later that an affordable over-and-under reached the public.

In the 21st century, if an American gun-maker sells a double-barrel, in all but a few instances it’s going to be an over-and-under. In fact, it was Americans, using the Superposed, who popularized the over-and-under worldwide. Historically, the rifle played a much more significant role in the United States than did the shotgun. The two shotguns that are considered “American” guns, the pump and the autoloader, look like rifles because of the single barrel. (And the lever-action shotgun, though not often seen, looks very much like a rifle.) The over-and-under has much the same appearance. Today the over-and-under is probably the most popular gun for upland bird shooting in the United States, and it rules much of the clay-target world, including Olympic competition.

Like the side-by-side, the over-and-under puts much of its weight between the shooter’s hands, making it quick to point and shoot. The over-and-under is heavier on average, which reduces recoil — a definite advantage for a clay shooter. “Gun weight is very important for a competitive shooter,” said Bill Curry, president of the Carolinas Chapter of the Vintagers. “Long barrels are an advantage, too. And competitive shooters will use interchangeable choke tubes, which we [Vintagers] abhor. I shoot side-by-sides all the time, but I would probably improve my scores by six, seven or eight targets per round of 100 if I used an over-and-under.”

A perceived advantage of the stacked-barrel gun is its single sighting plane, as opposed to the wide plane of a side-by-side. Some shooting experts scoff at the idea of a single sighting plane, saying that shotguns are not aimed but pointed. A shotgun is not a rifle, they say, and if a wing shooter is looking at the barrel of his gun, he is not going to hit his target.

Bill Kempffer of Deep River Sporting Clays near Sanford is a veteran shooting instructor and hunter who uses side-by-sides for both clays and hunting. “If I were to wake up one day and decide I’m going to try out for the Olympic team, I’d start shooting an over-and-under,” he said. “What I wonder about, though, is if all you shot was a side-by-side, would you be as good as you would with an over-and-under or an automatic. That’s the \$64,000 question.”

There is historical precedent that could make one believe accuracy is as much a matter of mind as gun. Before the advent of clays, shooters used live pigeons as targets. In Great Britain, the participants at pigeon shoots were of a lower class than those who had entrée to driven pheasant shoots or to grouse and partridge coverts. They weren’t necessarily poor, just not of the upper class. For example, E.J. Churchill and Charles Boswell, whose names still grace gun-making firms in England, were noted as superb pigeon shots.

“What makes me think the side-by-side can be just as accurate is that the people who were good shots at live pigeons used side-by-sides,” Kempffer said. “When clays and trap came to America, people thought they needed to look right down the barrel to be accurate. When Americans take to something, they tend to want to do it very, very well. The thinking was that the sighting plane of a side-by-side was too wide because of its barrels. The funny thing is, you’d say that makes sense, especially with a long barrel, but competitive shooters prefer a wide rib.”

Some also believe that side-bys work better for British shooters or those who have been taught the British method, which is tracking the target with the gun’s muzzle, then firing once the stock touches the shooter’s cheek. That method is similar to instinctive shooting, what wing shooters do in the field when a quail or grouse rises.

SHOOTING WITH YOUR HANDS

Kempffer uses a baseball analogy to describe instinctive shooting. “In instinctive shooting, you come up on target and let your hands go where they want to go. You think butt, belly, beak, bang. You track past the bird’s butt, his belly, his beak, and then you shoot. In baseball, the glove is nothing more than an extension of your hand. You never look at the glove when you catch a ball. The glove facilitates the catching of the ball. Shotgunning is the same. You’re shooting with your eyes. The gift is in your hands.”

Some shooters also believe that the over-and-under recoils straight back into the shoulder, making it easier for a shooter on the range to acquire his



second target. A side-by-side recoils up and to the side. Those who shoot both guns often use the over-and-under for clays and the side-by-side for the field. Kempffer, however, is not a believer in the recoil theory. "If you shoot the bottom barrel first (the barrel with less choke), then, yes, the axis comes into your shoulder more directly," he said. "If you shoot the over barrel first, you actually get more barrel lift. With a side-by-side there is no difference in which barrel you fire first."

Although the discussion of which gun is better can be both interesting and amusing (the theories abound), shooting is, in the end, a matter of which gun feels more comfortable. I use both an over-and-under and a side-by-side and have done equally as well, or poorly, with either. It is, however, always disconcerting the first few times I shoot a shotgun with one barrel. I like what I see when I swing a side-by-side. It looks like a wide highway leading to the target. Many hunters and shooters, however, do not agree.

The only time you will see side-by-sides in clay competition today is when the competition is restricted to those guns, such as in the Southern Side-by-Side Championship on April 28–30 at Deep River. The Southern, now in its seventh year, brings together a disparate and convivial group of shooters, some wearing breeks and Edwardian shooting jackets, others in shorts or blue jeans. The link among all the groups is a love of side-by-sides and shooting. In addition to the competitors and two tents filled with 35 exhibitors, the Southern also attracts a sizeable group of observers each year.

"I thought it would be popular when we began it, but heavens, no, I never thought we'd see it get this popular," Kempffer said. "We originally did it as a promotion, just to provide a venue, open up the gates and let people see what this was all about. It's turned into a great show. It's like a family reunion for us when our old friends come back each year."

—Jim Wilson

"I taught high school English for 31 years, so, no, I don't live in a \$2 million house here in Charlotte," he said. "Back at the turn of the [20th] century, a high-grade Parker was \$150, \$200. If you consider how little the average person made at that time, paying \$6,000 for a shotgun today is a bargain."

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Sometimes the value of a shotgun can't be measured solely in dollars. Dr. David Thomas' passion for side-by-sides was inspired partly by a relative he never knew. His great-great-grandfather, Robert Jones, was a 19th-century gun-maker in Liverpool, England. "Back then, each town or city would have its own gun-maker," Thomas said. "Production was not as centralized as it is now, and obviously he was before mass production.

"Robert Jones was not a famous gun-maker. I think there were seven or eight Joneses making guns in England at the time. He was sort of the Buick or Chevrolet of gun-makers." Thomas invested years in searching for one of his ancestor's guns. "It took 25 years to find the first one," he said. "Since then, I have found five or six more. All of them have been side-by-sides; a couple have been hammer guns. Most have been standard turn-of-the-century side-by-sides."

Thomas recently located a 16-gauge Jones shotgun, but the barrels were too thin to shoot. He decided to give it to his brother simply to hang on the wall. "It had some nice engraving," Thomas said. "There's a lot of interest in old guns as interior decoration. Each one has so much history associated with it."

Although vintage side-by-sides can—and should—be shot, there is one caveat: Any older gun, particularly one with Damascus barrels, must be examined by a competent gunsmith. Damascus barrels were made by twisting alternating strips of iron and steel around a run, then welding the strips. The rod was then removed and the barrel finished out. By the mid-1820s, Damascus barrels were in general use among gun-makers. The swirling Damascus patterns remain beautiful to this day. Combined with engraving on the lockwork and the already graceful beauty of the gun, Damascus barrels helped elevate the side-by-side into a work of sporting art.

That sense of the gun as art flourished, and today such a company as Abbiatico & Salvinelli might have an engraver working 1,000 hours on the exposed metal of one of

SHOTGUN TIMELINE

1782
William Watts invents the drop-shot process, which produces good-quality, spherical lead shot.

1787
Henry Nock patents a flintlock shotgun in which the touch hole is located on top of the breech plug rather than on the side. This development marks the beginning of the change of field shooting from resting birds to birds on the wing.

1818
Irish gun-making firm of W. & J. Rigby makes the first Damascus twist barrels.

1830
Sparked by A.J. Forsyth's use of fulminate of mercury instead of loose powder in the ignition pan, muzzleloaders gain acceptance over flintlocks.

1851
Paris gun-maker Casimir Lefauchaux debuts his breech action, pinfire cartridge shotgun at the Great Exhibition in London, marking the beginning of the end for muzzleloaders.

1861
George Daw introduces a cartridge with the percussion cap sunk into the center of the base of the case. This is basically the same design that is used today.

1866
Choke boring begins to be used to concentrate the shot pattern.

1871
Theophilus Murcott introduces the first true hammerless shotgun that captured the public's attention. The gun became known as Murcott's Mousetrap because of the sound it makes upon closing.

1875
William Anson and John Deeley of the Westley Richards firm introduce the boxlock action, hammerless shotgun. The original boxlock proved extraordinarily reliable and had but four moving parts. The boxlock action remains in use today and is one of the two primary side-by-side actions, the other being the sidelock.

1880
Steel barrels begin to replace Damascus twist barrels.

1890
First over-and-under hammerless guns appear in England.

1890
President William McKinley places a tariff on all imported shotguns, thus jump-starting gun manufacturing in the U.S.

its double-barreled guns. Naturally, such work elevates the price of a gun considerably.

Damascus barrels were designed to work primarily with black powder, which burns fast in the chamber. Modern, smokeless powder burns slower, creating lower pressure in the chamber, but much higher at the muzzle. A vintage gun should be nitro-proofed—checked to see if the barrels can handle modern powder. The barrels also can be sleeved, a process in which a new steel barrel is inserted into the old barrel.

"The very first Jones side-by I got was quite shootable," Thomas said. "Most of the others have had good barrel-wall thickness. Generally the less you do to these old guns, the better. You want it so you can drive it—shoot it. A lot of times, with minimal modifications, you can."

Thomas' shooting has carried him from Sylva, where he runs a regional cancer center, to Georgia to hunt quail with a 28-gauge to Scotland for driven pheasant shoots and rough shooting for partridges. "You can go in any direction as far as your interests," he said. "There's a lot of variation. You can shoot the sub-gauges, vary your shells. It's why shooting is so much fun. I am the furthest thing from being an expert on shooting or shotguns. My knowledge base is probably below

average. But with a little bit of knowledge, you can still sound like an expert and not get caught."

That aspiration to become an expert, at least to a minor degree, is common among those of us who shoot side-by-sides. When you are fascinated by a thing, it is natural to want to learn as much as possible about the object of your affection, particularly when, as in the case of vintage side-by-sides, that thing is a piece of history with its story waiting to be revealed. Side-by-sides have an alluring tradition, an appeal that satisfies some urge, perhaps the need as we age to delineate ourselves within a context. Even new guns retain the

same look and feel as those more than 100 years old. Picking up a new side-by-side with an oiled walnut stock and straight grip can elicit times, places and people long gone. Like Proust's petite madeleine, the gun summons the past, allowing us to give it meaning. ♦



Right (clockwise): Medal of St. Barbara, patron saint of gunners. Vintager Don Moorhead relishes a pheasant shoot. A matched pair of guns with Damascus barrels, and a game bag with pheasants.

