



Ridin' Shotgun

Family carbine.

By Jeff Goodson

My father has a Spencer carbine. Made in Boston during the Civil War, the Spencer was one of the most colorful firearms of the 19th century.

My own people came to Texas in 1853, fought for the Confederacy, and went back to ranching in DeWitt County after the war. The Sutton-Taylor feud, one of the deadliest in American history, was raging there during the years of “reconstruction” and it was then that the carbine came into the family. John Wesley Hardin was in the thick of the feud, and so was just about everybody else within shootin’ range. Not even the Texas Rangers could put it down, at least not the first time they tried.

My great-grandfather finally left the area in search of a quieter place to raise a family. He took the Spencer with him, and settled near Brady on the Texas frontier. Comanches were still raiding those parts in the early 1870s, and between the Indian wars and raising horses the carbine saw a lot of action. My father still remembers his grandfather calling it a “mountain gun,” and telling him how it could knock a buffalo over and you off your horse at the same time.

Today the Spencer’s in pretty rough shape. The mechanics are rusted, the stock looks like hell, and it probably hasn’t been cleaned since the late 1800s. Also, the barrel is bent at a 30-degree angle. How it got bent isn’t a story about the Texas frontier, though; it’s a story about the generation that went off to World War II.

My old man grew up in Galveston during the Depression, along with 10 brothers and sisters. They didn’t have a lot of hard cash, but they did have a high sense of humor and a taste for the jugular when it came to practical jokes. After Pearl Harbor, the boys signed up for duty. The old man fought in the South Pacific, at Leyte Gulf and on the bloody beaches of Luzon. His unit was training to invade Japan in August of ’45 when President Truman ended things by dropping the atomic bombs.

The Goodson boys all survived the war, and each of them came home with a trunk full of souvenirs. All of ’em, that is, except for the old man; he got sent off to map the coast of Manchuria, and as a consequence his trunk got back to Texas a lot quicker than he did.

Now the old man wasn’t living under any illusions about his brothers, and he had taken the precaution of putting the best damned lock on that trunk that he could find anywhere in the Far East. Sure enough, one night before his return his brothers got to eyeballing the trunk and decided to have a look inside. One of them—it was never clear which one—grabbed the Spencer. Unfortunately, when he tried to pry off the lock, the short fat barrel of the gun bent like a bad case of arthritis.

For decades, every time the brothers got together there was a spirited discussion about who bent the family carbine. This usually happened late at night when the women and kids were asleep, the men were suitably lubricated, and talk turned to growing up in Galveston and on the battlefields of World War II. None of the brothers ever admitted it, and of course none of ’em ever ratted out the culprit. To this day, though, the old man swears he knows who did it.

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For years we talked about straightening the barrel of the Spencer, and restoring it to the condition it was in during the old family ranching days on the Texas frontier. But somehow we never got around to it. At first it was the visceral aversion of the “Depression generation” to spending money. Later, as our own generation came of age and we watched the brothers go to greener pastures, the barrel seemed to capture a part of family history.

As kids, the Spencer conjured up visions of feuds and outlaws, of buffalo hunts and Indian wars. As adults, watching our father’s generation quietly slip away, it conjured up different visions—of early Galveston, the battlefields of World War II, and a band of brothers—sippin’ whiskey late at night, and arguing over who bent the family carbine back in 1945.

Eventually, the idea of fixing the gun just slowly eroded away. Like memories of old-time Texas, or the sands of some faraway beach in the South Pacific. ■

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