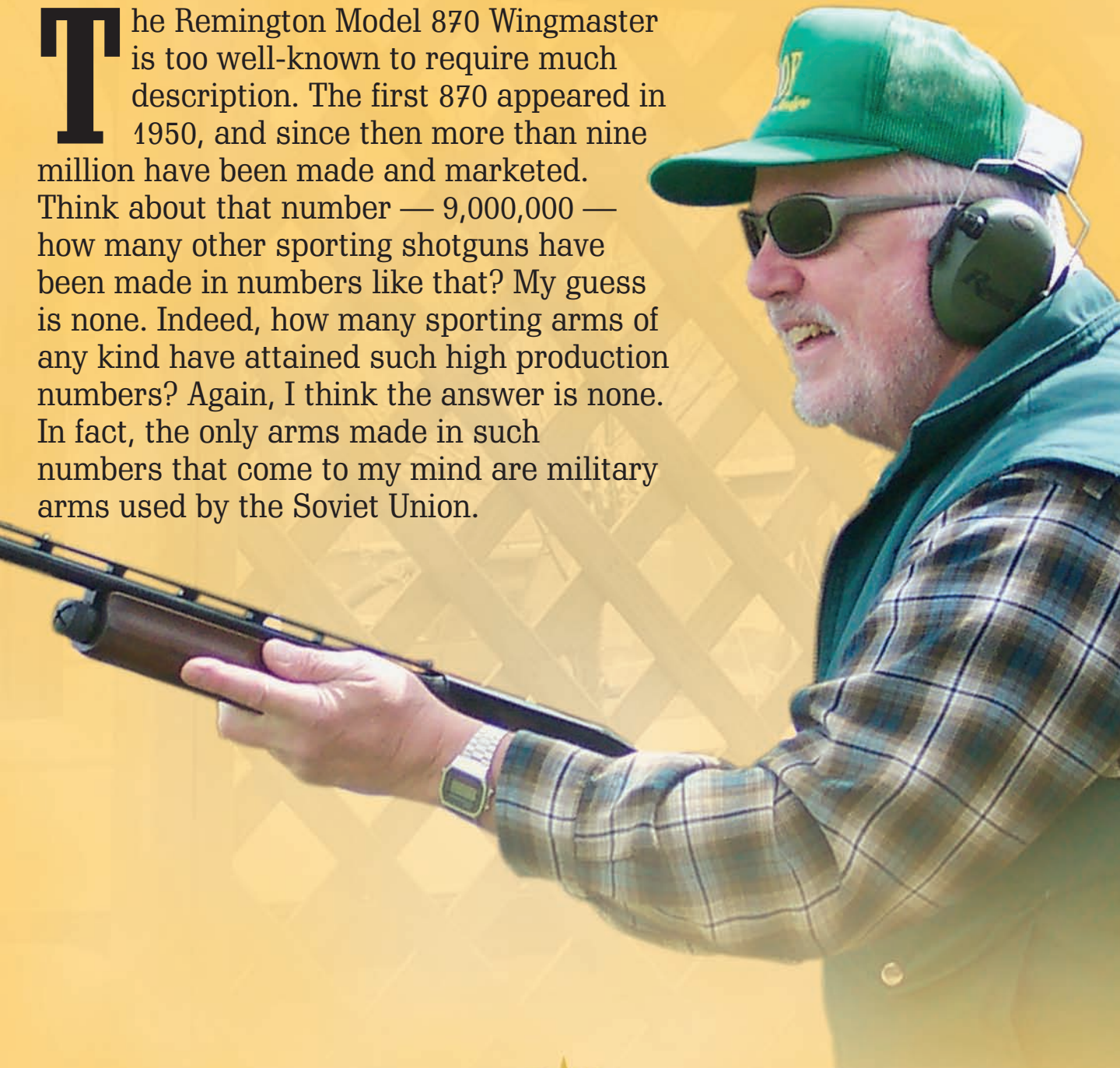


The Remington Model 870 Wingmaster is too well-known to require much description. The first 870 appeared in 1950, and since then more than nine million have been made and marketed. Think about that number — 9,000,000 — how many other sporting shotguns have been made in numbers like that? My guess is none. Indeed, how many sporting arms of any kind have attained such high production numbers? Again, I think the answer is none. In fact, the only arms made in such numbers that come to my mind are military arms used by the Soviet Union.



The Smallbore **WINGMASTERS**

by Marshall R. Williams

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In contrast, the smallbore 870s have not been made in large numbers. In fact, production was suspended on at least one occasion, and when the guns reappeared, the first ones were "Express" models with a very utilitarian finish and hardwood stocks.

The Old Smallbores

Like many other shooters, my first good, reliable shotgun was a Remington Model 870 Wingmaster slide-action repeating shotgun, hereafter "pump." I bought my first one in 1964, an "SA" Skeet gun. In essence, it was a field-grade gun with Skeet-choked vent-rib barrel. At that time, the 870 came in 12, 16 and 20 gauge, plus 3" magnum 12 and 20. The 870 of 1964 was available in grades ranging from standard or field through "F" grade with gold and in configurations suitable for hunting upland or big game, shooting skeet and trap or quelling riots. Vent-rib barrels cost extra, as did smooth-bore barrels with rifle sights for slug shooting. Other optional extras included the shooter's choice of either a Cutts Compensator or Poly-Choke. All guns were made on the 12-gauge sized frame, which made the 16 and 20 gauge weigh nearly as much as the 12.

A careful reader may note the 1964 options included neither a .410 nor a 28 gauge. As I progressed in skeet and found myself able to add these gauges, I would have preferred Model 870s, but they were not available. Apparently, I was not the only shooter who longed for a smallbore 870, and in the late 1960s, a well-known gunsmith named Claude Purbaugh actually converted 20-gauge 870s to shoot .410 and 28. At the time, the 20 and 16-gauge 870s were made on the same frame as the 12-gauge gun. Since the conversions used a standard-sized 20-gauge frame and added parts, the result was a heavy gun for a smallbore.

Remington, of course, was aware of a market for smallbore 870s both for skeet and hunting and, finally, in 1969 introduced a smaller-frame Wingmaster in .410 and 28 gauge plus a 20-gauge Lightweight. At the same time, Remington also introduced a Model 1100 on a similarly sized small frame. The small-frame guns shaved at least a pound off the weight of the standard-frame guns but maintained the essential balance of the bigger models. I regarded them as quite nice and desirable.

I believe the first year's production of both models in .410 and 28 gauge were

Smallbore Wingmasters

Lock, Stock & Barrel

	28 Gauge	.410 Bore
Weight	5 lbs. 15 oz.	6 lbs. 5 oz.
Distributed as follows:		
Barrel only	1 lb. 6 oz.	1 lb. 10 oz.
Stock & action	4 lbs. 9 oz.	4 lbs. 11 oz.
Barrel Length	25" with Remington vent rib	25" with Remington vent rib
Chamber Length	2 ³ / ₄ "	3" (for 2 ¹ / ₂ " & 3" shells)
Magazine Capacity	four two-shot plug supplied	four 2 ¹ / ₂ " shells/ three 3" shells two-shot plug supplied
Sights		
Front bead	white 1/8"	white 1/8"
Mid-bead	white metal 0.08"	white metal 0.08"
Bore Diameter	0.558"	0.416"
Chokes: (constriction)	IC (0.549 - 0.009) Mod. (0.542 - 0.018) Full (0.534 - 0.024)	Fixed Mod. (0.403 - 0.013)
Stock	straight-grained, dark-stained walnut cut checkering with good coverage	straight-grained, dark-stained walnut cut checkering with good coverage
Length-of-Pull	14 ¹ / ₈ "	14 ¹ / ₈ "
Drop at Nose of Comb	1 ¹ / ₂ "	1 ¹ / ₂ "
Drop at Heel of Comb	2 ¹ / ₂ "	2 ¹ / ₂ "
Pad	hard black buttplate with Remington logo	hard black buttplate with Remington logo
Safety	crossbolt in rear of trigger with key lock	crossbolt in rear of trigger with key lock
Accessories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • three choke tubes & wrench • green plastic plug to limit magazine capacity • two extra keys for safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • green plastic plug to limit magazine capacity • two extra keys for safety

"matched pairs" for skeet shooters. The matched pair included a gun of each gauge with matching serial numbers and special "match-weight" magazine caps that could be used to change the weight of the gun and make it more like a 12 gauge.

One big advantage of these small-bore 870s was their full-sized stocks that felt and fit very much like a larger bore, except for the weight. In contrast, the delightful old Winchester Model 42, which had excellent balance, nevertheless had a rather miniaturized stock, and its pistol grip was little more than a bump on the wrist of the stock.

It was a wonderful gun but felt nothing like a Model 12. The smallbore 870s felt like the light 870s and retained the excellent balance of that gun.

Unfortunately for me, I had just begun law school in 1969 and new guns were out of the question. In fact, they remained so for a lot longer than I expected. I did not get a smallbore 870 until about 1976, at which time I managed to obtain both a .410 and 28 gauge. Both were skeet guns, but not a matched pair, which commanded a modest premium in price. Mine matched each other very well, except



The smallbore 870s, showing handsome wood and good lines.

for weight. The .410 weighed 6 pounds, 4 ounces, while the 28 gauge weighed an even 6 pounds. The extra ¼-pound was in the .410 barrel, which was made thicker than the 28-gauge barrel. This ¼-pound changed the balance slightly, although I never much noticed the weight difference when I shot them.

The barrels were nominally 25" long, but the barrels on my old guns measured 24½". As they were skeet guns, they naturally carried Remington's very strong, all-steel vent rib. I like Remington's ventilated rib. It is made from a single piece of properly shaped steel, matted on top with a pattern of

that would mean nearly all guns made in America between the early '60s and the late '80s, but that does not make me like it any better.

While I do not care for the appearance of impressed checkering, it has other problems. The old-style impressed checkering did not provide a rough enough texture for a firm grip on the smooth surfaces of the forend, something essential on a pump gun. I lost a target in a light rain because of the slick surface on the forend of my 12-gauge 870. I snapped the gun open, but a few drops of water on my left hand made the forend so slick I could not close it for

rent pair of smallbore 870s, so I petitioned Remington for a pair to examine. When the guns arrived, I promptly assembled, measured and looked them over pretty closely. The first thing I noticed about both guns were the handsome walnut stocks. They have a dark satin finish, machine-cut checkering and full-sized dimensions. They feel like big guns, guns that mean business. Any cut checkering is an improvement over the impressed kind; indeed, in my humble opinion, *no checkering* would be an improvement!

I commenced handling the guns immediately, "store-pointing" and checking out the actions. I was pleasantly surprised to find the .410's slide action was as slick and crisp as the action on any Model 870 I had tried, and I have tried some very well-worn trap guns that were as slick as a pump can get. I well recall my old .410 had been a little stiff, at least until I shot a couple thousand rounds through it. Even then, it never measured up to my other 870s for pure slickness. In contrast, my old 28 gauge had been the slickest-sliding pump I ever used. To my surprise and delight, straight out of the box, both of the new guns were as slick or slicker than my old 28.

As noted earlier, I like Remington's rib. It is strong, well-shaped, well-secured to the barrel and without faults. The pattern of cross-hatching on the new vent ribs differs from my old guns. The old pattern consisted of rather lightly incised or stamped parallel wavy lines running the length of the rib. On the two new guns, the pattern is rather deeply cut parallel curves that run crosswise. This would seem a minor difference, but I think it is an improvement. I tried store-pointing the guns with the sun in different positions and concluded the new pattern is noticeably more effective at breaking up glare when sunlight hits the rib.

I kept the guns for a couple months,



The 28-gauge 870 with Remington's choke tubes and wrench.

cross-hatching to break up glare and then brazed to the barrel. It is very strong and adds just enough weight to help smooth out a shooter's swing. All of the metal surfaces of the little guns were nicely polished and blued.

As noted earlier, the lightly stained walnut stocks were full size. The wood was nicely finished like other standard Wingmasters of the period. That meant the super-tough DuPont "RKW finish," the one used on bowling pins. The only complaint I ever had with the little guns was their impressed checkering. To be sure, this complaint applies to any gun with such checkering, and

my second shot. The result was a lost target and a finish one target out of the money in an important shoot.

Except for that complaint, I liked everything else about the 870 smallbores and shot them often and very well, at least by my modest standards. Those two guns stuck with me until I retired and moved away from any skeet ranges. One day I realized I had not shot them in years and sold them. I have missed them ever since.

The New Smallbores

Even though I still have no skeet range close by, I wanted to see a cur-



Top to bottom: older 870 Lightweight 20 with impressed checkering and RKW finish; new Wingmaster in 28 gauge; new Wingmaster in .410. Contrast the handsome new-style stocks featuring cut checkering with the older style using impressed checkering.

and each time I took them out of their cases at the range, someone would comment on their good looks and the obvious quality of the wood. As one of the commentators was a local gunsmith with a reputation for making outstanding stocks, I think the compliments were sincere.

The proof of any gun is in the shooting, and I had plans to join some other members of the club to break these guns in properly with a long day of 5-stand and skeet shooting. The week after I got the guns, however, my wife was in a terrible auto accident and, after a long hospitalization and rehab, came home in a wheelchair. As we live alone, I found few opportunities to get away from the house for more than an hour.

When my wife progressed to where she could sit in a wheelchair for a while, I managed a short outing to Lee Breneman's Golden Meadows Hunt Club in Bittinger, Maryland. Lee is a semi-retired drywall contractor, cattle farmer and entrepreneur who has a passion both for hunting and shotgunning. He has turned parts of his large farm into a hunt club. As part of Golden Meadows, Lee has set up an unbelievable sporting clays range. It is not a field course or 5-stand setup, at least not like any you may have seen. Some 15 automatic traps throw targets at the shooter from all angles and exercise your mental faculties to the limits. In addition, Lee has a PDQ Twister Trap setup that consists of two wobble traps under a

five-station shooting platform. Lee shoots it both as straight doubles (challenging) and a progressive game (less-challenging) with a single followed by a report pair then a simultaneous pair at each station. I love this game!

In the past, I had shot Lee's Twister using assorted 12-gauge guns, but the shots are not necessarily long. After all, the traps are under the shooter's feet. Since the shooter essentially stands over the traps, viewed objectively, the shots are not difficult, often little more than straightaways. But straightaways where? The wobble traps throw targets at full throttle and full angle, both horizontal and vertical, and the angles are so wide, the shooter may have difficulty finding the target until it is out at long range. The greater challenge comes from never knowing where any target will go. And you can't anticipate. It is bad enough on singles, but doubles can go to the same side, opposite sides and high, low or mixed. A very fun game, and one quail shooters would adore.

The weather for my first outing was miserable. Even though it was early May, the day was both dreadfully cold and, worse, uncommonly windy. Some targets followed flight paths that resembled a helicopter, others looked like dive bombers. Western Maryland can be like that. Since I had limited time, I tried a round of Twister with the .410. Coupling Remington's skeet load and the Modified choke made a superb combination. The high winds and cold tem-

peratures kept my expectations modest, but my performance — or rather the performance of the little .410 and Remington's splendid skeet loads — was outstanding. The 1/2-ounce of hard No. 9s proved entirely up to the job, and I broke everything I was fairly on. I finished the round with a 22x25, which tied me for top honors among several experienced shooters using fancy 12-gauge sporting clays guns. Wow!

Unfortunately, my time was short, so I did not get to shoot the 28 gauge on the PDQ Twister. And the wind ruined any efforts on sporting clays. Fortunately, Lee invited me back several weeks later for his annual pig roast, a combination of family reunion, Chamber of Commerce meeting and genial gathering of friends. A part of the festivities included some shooting to introduce the guests to the new PDQ Twister. Many were not shooters, so those of us who were assisted them at getting off a few shots. Most new shooters tried a 12-gauge Remington 1100 auto, but several ladies had trouble adjusting to its weight. I had the 870s with me and invited the ladies to try the .410 and 28 gauge. I used Remington's excellent 3" shells with 1/16-ounce of 7 1/2s in the .410 and standard 3/4-ounce game loads of 7 1/2s in the 28. Each of the ladies who tried the smallbore broke several targets, and each promptly received a souvenir empty to show their friends. The lighter-weight guns and their lack of recoil helped them significantly. I was not sur-

prised the ladies shot well with the little guns, but I was surprised they often hit targets well beyond where one ought to have taken a shot. The little guns simply seemed to work extremely well.

The new smallbore 870 Wingmasters did not disappoint in any way. They were everything I had hoped for and more. They shot well and patterned appropriately. The 28 has all the choke options available in the larger bores. They look handsome. The actions work as slick as any pump gun I have ever tried, and I have tried nearly every type ever assembled. They are "Wingmasters" in every sense of the word!

My personal ointment had a single small fly: The .410 remains 4 or 5 ounces heavier than the 28 gauge. This has been true of all smallbore Remington repeaters I have tried — the old Model 870 Skeet guns, a pair of 1100 Skeet guns and my first pair, the venerable 11-48s. If I am the only shooter in the world who notices this, and so far I am, then it is not a problem. Goodness knows, my old 28-gauge 870 Skeet gun with its 4 less ounces in the barrel was absolutely the fastest quail gun I ever used. Period. The new one is 2 ounces faster and has interchangeable chokes.



John Cobb holding the .410. On one of those dream dove shoots in Argentina, John shot 1,497 ear doves (a relative of the mourning dove and whitewing) in just 2½ days. Who says a .410 isn't for hunting?

Today's shooters have few small-gauge options available. Most are over & unders with prices starting at two or three times the cost of the 870 and spiraling dramatically upwards. The 870

offers all the reliability, style and history of the world's most popular shotgun and is available in my favorite gauges, the .410 and 28. These guns are bargains in every way! **SS**

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