

Myth & Smoke

Muzzleloading firearms bring tradition to the modern hunt

BY CHARLES CHALK

What is it about the crack of the rifle and the acrid smell of blackpowder smoke that keeps the ancient love affair with muzzleloaders alive today?

Why would anyone want to use a single-shot rifle that uses ramrods, powder, flints and an assortment of tools that require you to do a mental checklist before you go afield? Ask any experienced shooter and you will likely get three common answers: love of the guns and their history; extended hunting seasons; and the accuracy of a precision-built load. Most will also tell you that it was someone else who got them interested in the sport.

In New Hampshire, we are privileged to have an early muzzleloader season for deer, with no restrictions on types of ignition systems. Most flintlocks are legal and do a respectable job on deer, bear and moose. Every gun shop carries at least one kind of muzzleloading rifle and all the accessories. Muzzleloading is taught in Hunter Education courses, and books on the guns and hunting with them are widely available. In 2005, more than 27,000 muzzleloader hunting licenses were sold in New Hampshire, and many hunters make successful kills. This kind of hunting preserves a pure form of the hunt where you only have one shot, and you must get up close and make the shot count.

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Modern-day “mountain men” using traditional muzzleloading firearms bring history alive at shooting competitions and historical reenactments.

NO FANCY GADGETS

With muzzleloaders’ growing popularity in New Hampshire and across the country, it is unlikely to see them fade into history. But history has been rewritten.

There was a time when the original guns were almost an extinct species. Shortly after World War I, the men returning from war — having fired bolt action rifles — looked down on Dad’s muzzle-loader as “old” technology. By the 1930s, the old guns reached a low point and perhaps would have gone out of style, had not a few men gathered in southwestern Ohio to promote a shoot. An ad for the shoot ran in the February 1931 *American Rifleman* and drew 67 participants. The ad read:

An event for muzzleloading rifles only, with none of the fancy gadgets for fancy sighting. Many a fine old gun of ramrod loading will be brought out with men behind them that can show the present-day crop of riflemen a thing or two.

From that beginning was formed the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association, which has become the voice of muzzleloading.

RESURGENCE OF THE FIRE-BREATHER

Today, you have great choices in muzzleloading gun styles. There are two common lock styles: sidelock and “in-line.” As the names suggest, the lock is either on the side of the barrel or in line with the barrel. With the sidelock style, you have a source of flint or percussion ignition. With the in-line, you have a choice of percussion caps or shotgun primers, often called a 209 ignition.

Replicas following the patterns of original guns like the Hawkins Plains rifles, Kentucky Long rifles and military arms up through the Civil War replicas, put a sense of history and tradition in your shooting. These guns are quite adequate for hunting, and many fill this need every year — but the most common use is for competitive shoot-

ing and reenactments. Events across the Northeast showcase the accuracy of the guns and their shooters. Local gun clubs feature competitive shooting and places like Old Fort No. 4 in Charlestown, N.H., have reenactors demonstrating the replicas. Other events travel the region, featuring reenactors in period dress, like the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association’s Northeastern Primitive Rendezvous or primitive biathlons in New Hampshire and Vermont that test the prowess of muzzleloader shooters on wood-framed snowshoes.

The in-line is by far the greatest resurgence in muzzleloaders, filling the hunter’s needs by handling like a modern rifle and being somewhat weather-resistant. Maybe some of you started before in-lines were popular, and some may never have fired an in-line, but this unique cross of modern style, single-shot, load-from-the-muzzle “fire breathers” draws more interest yearly. Among many muzzleloader manufacturers, two local companies — Thompson/Center Arms of Rochester, New Hampshire, and Millennium Designed Muzzleloaders (MDM) of Maidstone, Vermont, are recognized nationally. Their muzzleloaders are commonly found on the gun racks of hunters in New Hampshire and around the world.

Choosing your lock type will put you into certain stocks and barrels. Barrel lengths are best chosen by the type of hunting you do most often. Stocks are chosen by which ones fit and align you best with the sights. If you are going with optics, the gun should already be set up with them to get the proper fit. Barrel lengths in most hunting guns are limited to one or two lengths, so consider the length if you plan to use a sling to carry in the woods. When you talk hunting guns, in-lines fill the need with options like camo stocks, scopes, slings and stainless steel.

POWDER, PATCH AND BALL

The old rule, “powder, patch and ball” – that is, the order in which materials are loaded into the muzzle — still applies if you shoot traditional guns, but for the modern hunter, it is just “powder before projectile.” Powder has only one caution: make sure it is for muzzleloaders! Only Savage Arms makes a gun that takes smokeless powders; all others take black powder or substitutes made for muzzleloaders.

Choosing the right powder should be based on accuracy, not ease of cleaning. You still need to clean and lubricate after shooting, no matter what type of powder you use, because they all leave corrosive by-products that will slowly destroy your bore. Most hunters choose pellets over granular, just for the convenience.

The last part of the equation is the bullet. This is the most hotly debated subject in muzzleloading. There are literally a hundred different types of bullets. Each maker has different styles and grain


It's a Blast

weights, each giving you different trajectory and muzzle energy. How do you choose? First, know that bore diameters vary by maker, so it's usually best to pick a bullet suggested by the gun company for your specific model. Too tight or too loose a fit will cause loading and accuracy problems. What you want is a balance of tight fit that loads easily on the second shot. Bullet weight should be based on the type of game, but generally, a bullet of .50 caliber — around 260 grains — will take anything here in the Northeast.

THE LITTLE THINGS

Thirty-six years of shooting muzzleloaders has taught me a few things about accessories. You need just a few essentials to make a day afield successful, and those are based on 200 years of muzzleloading history. The Mountain Man carried what he needed for hunting and defense in a small bag slung over his shoulder. Modern technology has made it possible to carry the basics in just your pocket.

Start with speed loaders: They carry both powder and bullet in a waterproof tube. Two should be enough, with one shot already loaded in the gun. Primers like 209s or percussion caps should be carried in two places, one for a quick convenient reloading and a few stored in a sealed bag. (This way, if some get wet, you can get into your dry reserve.) Also, keep some type of tool that easily removes stuck primers from your brand of rifle. Trust me, trying to remove a stuck primer for a second shot can be a frustrating experience. Another good tool is a wrench to remove the nipple or breach plug, because all of us inadvertently load a bullet without powder from time to time. Finally, carry a spare ramrod that fits your gun. A broken or lost rod could put you out of the hunt. On the same note, carry enough powder and bullets for your trip, especially if you travel to remote areas.

Muzzleloading has traveled a long road. Three centuries have improved the ignition, the parts and the powder, but not the shooter. Those early shooters in Ohio may have said it best when they believed muzzleloaders “could show the present-day crop of riflemen a thing or two.” Something inside a person draws them to this ancient ritual of powder and ball in a world of high tech. If you have never tried it, you don't know what you're missing. 

Charlie Chalk lives in Merrimack and hunts in the Northeast and Canada with muzzleloading firearms. He lectures on the history and use of the muzzleloader and is a member of the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association. Charlie is a professional writer and Past President of the New England Outdoor Writers Association.

New Hampshire's special muzzleloader hunting season for deer is Oct. 28 - Nov. 7, 2006; to participate, pick up a muzzleloader license — \$16 resident, \$41 nonresident — in addition to your valid N.H. hunting license. No deer tag is issued with the muzzleloader license (use the firearm deer tag issued with the regular hunting license). A muzzleloader may also be used during the *regular* hunting seasons, including for deer, with just the N.H. hunting license. For details, see the *N.H. Hunting Digest*.

If muzzleloading sounds interesting to you, here's how to find out more.

Muzzleloader contacts in N.H.:

- John Richardson, Gilmanton, (603) 267-8921
- Doug Morse, Harrisville, (603) 827-3372, NMLRA Field Rep.
- Bill Bevans, Boscawen, (603) 796-2483, NMLRA Field Rep.
- Arthur Fletcher Sr., Antrim, (603) 588-2786, NMLRA Field Rep.

National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association:

Visit www.nmlra.org. The NMLRA's new Basic Muzzleloading Manual is available by calling 1-800-745-1493.



The challenge of muzzleloader hunting and the appeal of classic gear draw a growing number of people to this time-honored pursuit.

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