

SWEET SIXTEEN

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lighter. In the 1950's and 1960's, the Winchester Model 59 12-gauge autoloader featured an alloy receiver and a fiberglass barrel reinforced with a steel sleeve so light that a standard walnut buttstock made it butt heavy. The Browning "Double Automatic" was a two-shot 12-gauge autoloader whose "Twentyweight" model challenged contemporary 20 bores in weight and handling characteristics. The 12 gauge was knocking on the door of the 20-gauge weight class.

Advancing ammo manufacturing techniques found more ways to squeeze more shot into small cases. Plastic wrappers and shotcup wads protected the elongated shot columns from excessive pellet deformation during their passage up the bore, making these bigger payloads more efficient. The 20 bore benefitted enormously from all this. The 7/8-ounce load became the 20-gauge skeet standard; a 1-ounce load became the field standard. A 1 1/4-ounce 2 1/2-inch magnum and a 1 1/2-ounce, 3-inch load boosted 20-bore versatility tremendously.

Regarding the demise of the 16, much has been made of the fact that skeet shooting has 12, 20, 28 and .410 bore classes and nothing for the 16. To be sure, this had a considerable effect on the 16 gauge's fall from grace. But perhaps just as important, continued load development to please the finicky target-shooting crowd was not extended to the 16.

Another consideration was that the best virtues of the 16 bore, in its light-middleweight status, were best seen in

side-by-side guns. Many of the the better quality double gun makers used different frame sizes for different gauges. (Parker used seven different frame sizes.) Thus, for "light, upland" use, a set of 16-bore barrels could be factory fitted atop what amounted to a 20-gauge frame. This resulted in an exceptionally sleek and slick-handling bird gun. This option does not translate to over/unders (where the lower barrel must sit inside the frame) nor to the efficient assembly lines of repeaters which built 16 gauges on 12-gauge-size frames. That the decline in popularity in the 16 bore and the sad fortunes of the fine American doubles after WWII paralleled each other may be more than coincidence.

However, in the main, the beloved 16 gauge was simply caught in the middle of the collision between lightweight 12 gauges and high-performance 20 bores in the upland hunting fields. It did not take cost-conscious gun makers long to figure out that American hunters didn't really need three different gauges that all did about the same thing equally well.

Jack O'Connor saw this coming in *The Shotgun Book*, published in 1968. He wrote, "... the 20 gauge seems to be slowly gaining on the 16." "Slowly" became rapidly through the 1970's and 1980's. More and more manufacturers quietly ceased new development on 16-gauge loads, focused on improving the 20 and began dropping the 16 bore from their cataloged offerings. The U.S. shotgun market has become virtually a 12- or 20-gauge selection in the 1990's.

However, the 16 gauge is more of a lame duck, than a dead one. Thousands

of 16 bores, including some very high-quality ones, are out there and still shooting. The 16-gauge ammo supply, which is not exceedingly diverse or exciting, is unlikely to dry up.



The reloader can dramatically improve 16-gauge load performance and versatility. The use of "hard," high-antimony shot provides a real advantage in the field.

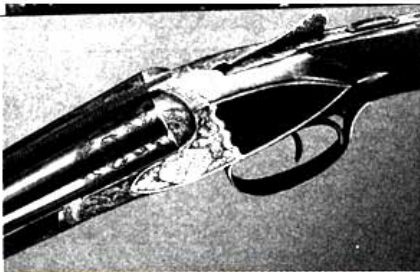
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In new 16-gauge guns themselves, the current American-made factory market is nearly non-existent. No American-made over/unders or repeaters are currently cataloged in 16 gauge. A few years ago, Browning tested the waters with a Citori model in 16 bore, but that model is no longer cataloged. Parker Reproductions listed a 16 gauge as a custom-fit option but has now ceased production. The new A.H. Fox reproductions by Connecticut Shotgun Manufacturing Co. list a 16 bore as a built-to-order gun and a beauty it is.

However, the 16 gauge was and remains popular in Europe, particularly in Germany, Austria, France and Belgium. Merkel imports several 16-gauge

ington and Winchester catalog 16-gauge loads, though the load diversity isn't great. The 16 got in under the wire for plastic hulls and plastic shotcups which are available, but you won't find any high-performance target loads for the 16.

In retrospect, the old 16 ain't what she used to be on American shores. Her "Queen of the Uplands" role has been eclipsed by ultra-lightweight 12s and high-performance 20 bores and her market value is down. At the same time, the 16 gauge is as good as ever she was for light upland shooting. Whether it be a popple-patch "pa'tridge" or a covey of breaking bobwhites, the 16 gauge will still put a perfectly adequate load of shot downrange and that's all it really has to do to make the shot a success. If fine guns, particularly classic American side-by-sides, and grouse, woodcock and quail are your addictions, the 16 bore is still a "Queen of the Uplands" with a rich tradition. ■



In 1995 the A.H. Fox reproductions by the Connecticut Shotgun Manufacturing Company became available in 16, 28 and .410 bore. This finely built gun won the prestigious Shotgun Of The Year Award in 1994 with its 20-gauge version.

