Guns in the House

by DeWitt Henry

When we moved to the new house I was turning eight. My brothers here had gabled rooms on the third floor, with their own bathroom between them. My own room was in back on the second floor, and had been a nursery. I shared a bathroom with my sister, whose room was just off the front stairs. In front was a guest room, and then the master bed room, each with private bathrooms. On the first floor besides the living room, sun porch, and dining room in front, was Dad's den, next to a lavatory, then the kitchen, and in back Mom's study and painting room, and a maid's bedroom, which Mom used as a sewing room. Dad's den had built-in bookcases, with glass doors. My brother Jack appropriated this bookcase for a gun cabinet, building notches for
rifle stocks on the bottom shelf and cutting notches for the barrels from an upper shelf. He also put in hooks for pistols. By this time he had a double barrel 12 gauge shotgun, the .410 shotgun, and over/under .22/.410, a bolt-action Garand-style .22 rifle with a clip and scope, the .22 squirrel rifle, and his prize, the Mannlicher-Schoenaur .308 carbine with scope, a deer hunting rifle that he saved for and ordered from Germany; and four handguns: a Smith & Wesson .38 Snubby, a Smith and Wesson .357 magnum (for which he carved his own stocks, with a special thumb rest), an elaborate Ruger .22 target pistol, and an antique Colt ball-and-cap .44 with a six-chamber cylinder that he loaded from a powder horn, pushed in balls, tamped, and then fit with percussion caps.

In the furnace and laundry room side of our basement (across from the finished playroom with a fireplace and bar), Jack installed a workbench, with a small lathe, and metal-working tools. He also had a foot-operated drill press. He made his own .22 pistol here from a cut-down rifle action. He melted lead in an old toy kiln and molded bullets; then loaded spent casings with primers and black powder, mainly .308 shells, but also .38s for the pistols. He kept tins of black

powder the size of cookie jars on shelves in a closet alongside the massive oil furnace.

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The only local gunsmith was Hans Roeder, who ran a car repair garage, with the gun shop in back. During the war, Dad took Jack there when his
.22 had a bolt broken and the 410 a broken firing pin. Roeder fixed both guns, Jack got to know him, and later he'd let Jack mold bullets and reload ammo for customers. Roeder and his wife belonged to a vaudeville shooting team that included the world's fastest pistol shot; and Roeder would tell Jack to
put an unlit match in the shop's bullet trap and then he'd light it from twenty-five feet with one shot. In return for the apprentice work, he gave Jack two old guns, a muzzle-loading musket and a breech-loading Calvary rifle, the first to load with a shell. Jack got them both to shoot. I came with him to Roeder's when I was ten and Roeder himself in his seventies, hunched over and gnomish, in a cluttered basement shop, like a cobbler, except instead of shoes, were guns everywhere hanging from nails: revolvers, automatics, Lugers. Besides the guns, which had me wide-eyed, I was impressed that Jack sought him out and spoke to him as a craftsman, a master, regardless of the man's age, class, education, or the dinginess of the place. This was a point with Jack, in contrast to Dad; talent was what made people special.

I felt privileged to go shooting with Jack, or to watch him shoot. We went to Buddy Huggler's farm once--Buddy was more a shooting than a grease monkey buddy--where Jack let me shoot his new .22, modeled after a Garand carbine, with a clip; indeed, to shoot for my first time ever, except with BB guns. We were back in the woods, aiming for tin cans, and I fell in love with the smell of the gun, the oil, its weight, the noise and kick, the acrid gunpowder smell afterwards, and the kicking out of empty, shiny shells. Another place

Jack shot was a quarry back off Route 202, near Valley Forge, which was part of the construction that would end up being the Pennsylvania Turnpike. We drove there one Saturday, when I was in fifth grade, to shoot his .44 Civil War ball-and-cap revolver, which was in mint condition and he'd bought somewhere for $25. He'd had to mold ball-shaped bullets for it and buy caps; would have to tamp powder, a ball, and a wad into each of six chambers, then fit a percussion cap for each on the back of the cylinder; and when he'd shot it experimentally at home with just the powder and wad, it had gone off like a parade-ground cannon. At the quarry, we had just started down the edge and were getting ready to shoot, when Jack heard shots and saw kidsjumping around on the rocks in the distance. "What are they, shooting at each other?" he said, and told me stay down and in back of one boulder, and when one of the guyssaw us and came over, Jack met with him out in the open, then came back. "They must be on something," he said. "They're hopheads, shooting at each other for kicks. Kid asked me, did I want to join in? So I showed him the Colt and told him, when I shoot, I shoot to hit something. He took one look at this cannon, and said, okay, okay, and took off. But we don't want to stay around." And back in the pickup: "They're crazies," he repeated. "One guy had a .22 pistol; the other had a .32 automatic or something.”

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Jack would have felt betrayed, and my parents alarmed, had they ever suspected me of playing with Jack's guns, but I found the temptation overwhelming. The cabinet wasn't locked. When nobody was home, I only hefted the pistols, at first, flipping open their empty cylinders, cocking the heavy hammers, uncocking them. Peered down the rifled barrels. I may have opened a box of greasy .38 shells and slipped them into the chambers of the stubby, then clicked the cylinder shut, the way they did in realistic westerns. Then opened it again, and ejected all five shells smoothly at once. Later I would take the stubby and sneak around the house,

pretending I was a detective, the real gun heavy in my grip. I'd make my shooting sounds, aiming down the well of banisters at pretend crooks or spies. The .357 magnum was too heavy and ungainly to play with. I was never tempted to fire the .38, inside or outside the house, but I did fire the .22 carbine. There was a twenty-five foot line of sight from the furnace through the opened door into the playroom to the playroom's deep stone fireplace. I could fire safely into logs there, or even into the blackened stone recess behind them without fear of ricochets. I loved the ear-ringing report of firing inside. I would only fire two or three times, then irresistibly, once more. I would run to make sure that I covered up the logs that had bullet holes, collected flattened slugs, and smudged any impact scars on the stone. Then I'd put away the little box of bullets, hide the spent shells in my pockets, and return the rifle to the cabinet. This all seemed harmless to me then. Looking back, I have to wonder why I hadn't been instructed more strictly, allowing for temptation, and why the cabinet wasn‟t locked; why the bullets weren't locked away; and even more, why Mom and Dad were so permissive towards Jack's passions, bizarre as they were in our suburban world.