

# Harry Selby's

# .416 Rigby

## Out of Africa.

Layne Simpson

When Harry Selby shot his first elephant in Kenya at the age of 18, it never dawned on him at the time that he would go on to become one of Africa's most famous professional hunters. But he did just that, and of all the famous people who hunted with him through the decades, one of the best known was Robert Ruark. In his "Earned and Collected" article in the February 1957 issue of *Field & Stream*, Ruark tells about his safari with Selby in the southern Masai area of Kenya. Depicting Selby with his .416 Rigby bolt gun and Ruark holding a .470-caliber double while confronting a herd of buffalo, the lead illustration was painted by a young artist by the name of Bob Kuhn. *Field & Stream* later presented the original painting to Selby. Ruark's experiences while on safari with Selby on several occasions inspired him to write *Horns of the Hunter* and *Something of Value*, two of his more successful books.

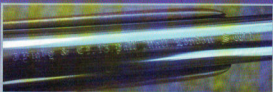
As I write this, Harry Selby is 74 years young and in his 54th year as a professional hunter, longer than anyone else who has had the same career. The entire story of Harry's life could fill a book, but this particular chapter is



Top, Rigby built Selby's .416 on a military 98 Mauser action during the 1940s. Above, Frank Lyon (left) and Harry Selby sighting in the famous .416 Rigby rifle in preparation for a 1996 elephant hunt in Botswana.

about one of his rifles. More specifically, it is about his Rigby-built, .416-caliber Mauser.

I discovered the Selby rifle quite by accident while hunting ducks as a guest of Federal Cartridge on a magnificent Louisiana plantation called Wingmead. A historical old place literally dripping with southern charm, I couldn't help but notice that some of the first entries in the guest register at the main house were dated all the way back to the 1830s, and of all the names I saw, that of Nash Buckingham stuck in my mind. Wingmead is now owned by Frank Lyon who bought the Rigby rifle from



*Above, engraving on the barrel identifies the rifle as a genuine Rigby. Right, when sending the rifle back to Rigby for a new barrel, Selby had its floorplate engraved.*



Selby around 1964, but I'm getting ahead of the story.

Harry Selby began his career as a professional hunter in 1945 with the famous safari company of Ker & Downey. At the time his backup rifle was a double in .470 Nitro Express, but he used that rifle for only about four years. While in the bush in the Fort Ikoma area of

time was one another customer had ordered but never picked up, a bolt gun in .416 caliber. Having no other choice, Harry bought the rifle and eventually became so fond of it that replacing it with another double was no longer a consideration.

While backing up a client on elephant during the early 1980s, Selby began to notice that all those rounds

cordite had washed the rifling from the barrel.

Selby returned his .416 directly to London to the attention of Paul Roberts (owner of Rigby) for a new barrel and also asked that his name and the year he purchased it be engraved on the floorplate. As has always seemed the case for those who work on special firearms, it took several years for Rigby to complete the job, so in the meantime Selby asked an American client who had booked a safari to purchase a Winchester Model 70 in .458 Magnum and get it to him as soon as possible. Selby immediately started using the Model 70 for backup and found it to be so effective on game (with his handloads), he never went back to the .416 once Rigby finally got around to shipping it back to him.



*Above, the front sight is an extremely low gold blade dovetailed and screwed to a small base, the latter integral with the barrel. Above right, brazed to the barrel, the rear sight has leaves regulated for 50, 200 and 300 yards.*

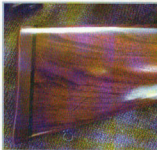


the western Serengeti in 1949, Harry laid his .470 on the ground in tall grass as he tended to a Cape buffalo killed by one of his clients. Donald Ker spotted them from a distance as they were busy working on the buffalo and decided to drive over to offer his assistance. While doing so, Ker ran over Harry's .470 with the wheels of his Land Rover and badly bent both barrels.

Finishing out the safari season without a backup rifle was out of the question for Harry, so he raced to Nairobi to purchase a new double. It was not to be. The only big-bore rifle the Rigby dealer had on hand at the

fired on numerous safaris and culling operations during the past three decades or so were finally beginning to take their toll on the barrel of the Rigby, and bullets tumbling rather than flying straight became too common an occurrence. Burning all that

*Below, the cavity in the steel trap-door grip cap holds a spare ivory night sight, probably carved from warthog tusk. Right, the stock has a Silvers red recoil pad.*



*Painted by then-illustrator Bob Kuhn, the lead illustration in Ruark's story in the February 1957 issue of Field & Stream depicted Ruark with a .470 double and Selby with his .416 Rigby rifle.*

Sometime after receiving his rifle from Rigby, Selby mentioned his desire to sell it to Joe Coogan. Having trained under Selby and at the time operating as a professional hunter with Safari South, Joe later mentioned this to one of his clients during a safari in Botswana. That client just happened to be Frank Lyon, and as fate would have it, the government of Botswana placed a ban on elephant hunting while he was out in the bush with Coogan. Later while on another safari, Lyon made Harry Selby an offer on the .416 Rigby with one stipulation – should Botswana ever reopen elephant hunting, he and the rifle would return for a go at collecting ivory.

That's exactly how it happened in June 1997. While on safari with Selby and Coogan, Lyon used the Rigby to down a great beast with a shot to the head from about 30 yards with Federal's 400-grain Sledgehammer solid. Its tusks weighed 84 and 77 pounds. Incidentally, along with the rifle Lyon also bought the Bob Kuhn painting of Selby and Ruark.

While examining the Selby rifle at



Wingmead, I noticed Rigby had chosen to build it around a military '98 Mauser action. Except for its excellent single-stage trigger, lowered bolt handle, dropped magazine with hinged floorplate, lengthened bolt throw and a clearance notch milled into the backside of the receiver ring to allow loaded .416 Rigby rounds to be ejected, serial number 5XX3 is pure military Mauser. That includes its safety, bolt release and thumb clearance notch in the left-hand side of the receiver wall. I could coax four of the big, fat cartridges into the magazine box, but the bolt would close on only three, making it a four-

shooter with one in the chamber. Unlike the original military version, the extractor will slip over the rim of a chambered cartridge when the bolt is closed.


The release button for the hinged magazine is located inside the trigger guard. I found it interesting that Selby had chosen to not make the hinged floorplate inoperative. I also found it interesting that Selby had installed a rather wide shoe on the trigger. As he had instructed Rigby to do when having the rifle rebarreled, the floorplate is engraved with rather nice scroll and "Harry

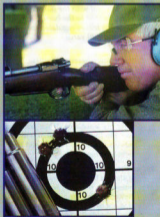
## Shooting Harry Selby's Rigby

While I was at Wingmead, Frank Lyon invited me to shoot the Selby Rigby, and I was most impressed by the way it handled from the offhand position. Not only did it fit me like an old glove, but the rifle also had the between-hands balance and feel of a fine English side-by-side shotgun. I have handled many custom-built bolt guns in my day, a few built to my specifications, but not a single one came close to feeling as nice as that off-the-shelf Rigby. Each time I shouldered the rifle, I found myself looking straight along the top of the barrel with front and rear sights in perfect alignment. What a great stopping rifle it is!

Its superb balance also made the

*Layne had the opportunity to shoot the Selby .416 Rigby at 50 yards with Federal factory ammunition.*

rifle feel much lighter than its actual weight, and to prove just that I asked several other people to handle it and estimate its heft. Most of the guesstimates ranged between 6 and 8 pounds, all well below its actual weight of 9½ pounds. While shooting the rifle, I found the fixed leaf of its express-style sight to be precisely on the money at 50 yards, and as the photo of the only three-shot group I fired from a sandbag rest serves to illustrate, accuracy was certainly more than adequate for a backup rifle chambered for so potent a cartridge as the .416 Rigby. The ammunition I used was Federal's Premium Safari loading of the 400-grain Trophy Bonded Bear Claw. 



Selby, 1949." Other markings include "Rigby .416 Big Game" atop the receiver ring and "Rigby & Co., 13 Pall Mall, London" on the barrel, just forward of the rear sight.

Length of pull for the extremely handsome classical-style stock is 14½ inches. Wood to metal fit is quite good but a notch or two below the best seen from today's top American stockmakers. Quite plain in figure is my description of the English walnut stock although the grain runs through the grip area exactly as it should on a rifle of heavy recoil. The stock has a reinforcing bolt located behind the recoil lug. It also has carrying sling eyes front and rear with the former an integral part of a barrel band and located 1½ inches beyond the tip of the forearm. Measuring 8¾ inches beyond the face of the receiver ring, the forearm is a bit shorter than commonly seen on the typical American-built rifle but long enough. The stock has no fore-

arm tip and the butt is capped off by a Silvers red rubber recoil pad. Appearing to have been totally refinished by Rigby at the time of the new barrel installation, the entire stock has a nice mellow satin finish. A large wear mark on the barrel indicating the rifle had been carried muzzle-forward on a shoulder by a rough hand for many miles seems proof enough the barreled action was not reblued.

Opening the hinged lid of the steel grip cap, I discovered an ivory night sight wrapped in oil cloth; the sight appeared to have never been used. My guess is it was carved from warthog tusk since it does not yellow with age as ivory from an elephant's tusk is prone to do. The entire front sight consists of an extremely low gold-colored blade dovetailed and screwed to a small base, the base integral with the barrel. Screwed and silver-soldered to the barrel, the barrel band-style ex-

press rear sight has one fixed leaf regulated for 50 yards and two flip-up leaves marked for 200 and 300 yards, all with extremely wide and shallow Vs. I like the rear sight, and while I'm sure the front sight blade (which measured only about  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch high) was purposely made extremely low for ruggedness, I'd take my chances in the bush with a bit taller blade. I also prefer a bead of slightly larger diameter.

According to my measurement, sight radius is 20 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches. The rifle measures 45 inches overall with a nicely tapered barrel measuring 23 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Muzzle diameter checked out at  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch. I really like the trigger. While some might consider its 7-pound pull weight to be a bit much, its smoothness and total absence of creep made it feel much lighter than it actually is.

Rigby listed the magazine rifle I have just described as a Model No. 5, and it was available only in .416 caliber. Also offered was a No. 2 rifle in .275 caliber (7x57mm Mauser) and a No. 4 in .350 Rigby Magnum. While I did not ask Selby what he paid for his rifle, a 1939 Rigby price list had it at just over 47 English pounds or \$375 U.S. The literature I have also states that "unlike other large bore magazine rifles on the market which are made from military actions designed for smaller cartridges and converted in various ways, the action of this rifle has been specially designed and manufactured." In other words, according to Rigby's catalog, the firm built all its bolt guns around commercial Mauser actions. We may never know why Selby's rifle was built on a military Mauser action, but my guess is it was built soon after World War II at a time when the commercial Mauser action had become unavailable. To me, that makes it even more interesting.

What a pleasure it was to not only examine but to also shoot such a grand, old rifle. My thanks to Frank Lyon who presently owns the rifle, to Joe Coogan from whom all the historical information came and to Harry Selby for being responsible for making what would otherwise be just another nice, old rifle something very special indeed. May it never be entirely retired from service in the bush. ■