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PHOTOS BY DWIGHT DYKE

**A SHOTGUN
MAY BE JUST
A HUNTING
TOOL, BUT A
CLASSIC
DOUBLE
BARREL IS
LIKE MONEY
IN THE BANK.**

When my father opened the door under the stairs that led down to the dirt basement in our old house, his setter Rex, who spent most of his time lying around dreaming dog dreams, would spring to life and start doing a four-legged cha-cha. If my dad returned with his Lefever side-by-side shotgun, that dog became a whirling, furry tornado. On one particular Saturday morning that setter and I became dance partners. I was now 10 and old enough to shoot. I had followed my father and his setter before, watched them team up and bring home a few quail for supper. My father was the epitome of grace on a covey rise. Everything seemed unhurried and precise as he brought down a quail. And because he shot so well and looked so good doing it, I knew automatically I would be a natural at this game and how proud my father would be of how grown up I had become when I duplicated his actions in the field.

When Rex started looking birdy, my father motioned me to stay close to him. When the setter froze on point I was handed his 20 gauge and told to walk slowly towards the four-legged statue his dog had become. Walking toward Rex as one would walk through a mine-field, expecting an explosion under my feet with each step, I was wound tighter than a spring when I reached the dog. Nothing happened. My father motioned me to walk past the dog and in the middle of my second step the earth seemed to come apart beneath me. I mounted the gun and tried to look down one of the bar-

SIDE-BY-S





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A standard five-man squad using a variety of vintage double barrel shotguns takes aim during a sporting clays shoot. Below: Jim Rice, of Charlottesville, an admirer of fine classic shotguns, organizes the Virginia Side-by-Side Shoot each year to promote not only the collecting of antique shotguns, but also the art of shooting them.

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rels and then the other as quail crisscrossed in front of me. Just as I would site a bird down one barrel another would whiz by and distract me. I knew I was losing precious time as my eyes kept jumping from one barrel to the next and then one bird to the next. In desperation I fired. It was not good. The ill-fitted lightweight gun's recoil drove deep into my shoulder and the gun's stock rose to meet my jaw with such force I didn't remember hitting the ground. I lay there confused and deeply embarrassed. It would be 15 to 20 years before I picked up another doubled barreled shotgun and it was not a side-by-side.

My experience was probably not uncommon. Back in the 1950s if there was a shotgun in the household it was probably a side-by-side, and if it was a 20 gauge, it was more than like-

ly a lightweight gun and the shot loads were normally heavier than those used today. Lightweight, ill-fitted guns with heavy shot loads usually meant a painful surprise to an unsuspecting pre-teen. Add that to the shooting plane a side-by-side shotgun presents and you can easily speculate as to why the side-by-side shotgun entered into a state of decline and over and under shotguns for many years had become the shotgun of choice for hunters and recreational shooters alike.

Over the last decade, however, there has been a resurgence of the side-by-side shotgun by more than the occasional collector of antique guns. Americans tend to have a strong affection for anything classic or nostalgic. And though we are drawn on one hand to high technology, our passion for things classical and rare has led us to old decoys, cars and fine wines. We also learn the



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Made in 1906, this Churchill Imperial Grade side-by-side is a good example of the quality workmanship that went into producing a classic shotgun. The fine hand carved scroll along the receiver and barrel was typical of this time period.

value of these items tend to rise before we can get into the collection game or sometimes even know there was a game to get into. An old classic side-by-side shotgun seems to be the next "new thing" for collectors and shooting sportsmen. There was very little argument among shotgun enthusiasts as to the beauty of design of a Parker, L. C. Smith, or A.H. Fox shotgun. However, for most homes in rural America from the late 1800s to World War II a shotgun was looked upon as a tool, not something bought



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There are many people across the country who find collecting classic shotguns a great investment. There are also those who derive great pleasure by actually going out and putting them to good use.

for its aesthetic good looks. During the two World Wars, however, Americans became aware that the English and Germans made superior or "Best" shotguns.

Unlike some antiques that just sit after their purchase, vintage shotguns over a hundred years old are shot at side-by-side tournaments across the country. Jim Rice of Charlottesville, an appraiser and importer of fine European shotguns holds the Virginia Side-by-Side Shoot each year. Jim is passionate about the shotgun and its history, and has done much to promote the revival of the side-by-side shotgun in Virginia. At shoots such as these one can not only

shoot but also view rare shotguns that either your grandfather or great-grandfather used or had been used by European royalty. Guns at these shoots could be anything from a 1925 Parker or a 1906 Churchill Imperial, one of only two ever made.

When asked about the revival of the side-by-side shotgun, one shooter from Richmond, who participates in these national side-by-side shoots replied, "These guns are investments you can use for two to three years and then turn around and sell them for more than what you paid for them. Try doing that with the next boat you buy." Indeed some of these shotguns can be an investment when you consider there is still a great deal of handwork in a fine European gun where the scroll work alone could range upwards to \$10,000 and have a waiting period of 5 to 6 years from the date of your order. Other side-by-side shoot-



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This scarce Parker DHE Grade, 20-gauge side-by-side was made in 1925 and is valued today at around \$10,000.

ers, Zeb Holt from Tidewater and Dick Livingston from Lynchburg, probably say it best when speaking of the increased interest in these guns. "The popularity of these guns has come about as a result of improved lightweight loads that takes the pain out of shooting and the baby boomer's interest in things classic and well made. These older guns offer an opportunity to own something fine, like a great wine, that one can use and enjoy as opposed to have it sit in a cellar where you may visit it from time to time."

For some owners these guns have a deeper personal meaning. As one gentleman explained "This gun belonged to my grandfather, a man I only knew from pictures of him in an old felt hat and tall leather boots holding this gun. It sort of gives me a chance to maybe feel a little what he may have felt every time I hold it." Whether it came from a Sears catalog in the early 1900s or from the finest gunsmiths in Europe, collectors and shooters of these shotguns all agree there is something special about owning a side-by-side. And like many things we choose to own, it more than any other gun, says something about what we value. In our ever changing world of technogear these guns are a link to a nostalgic past where things could be simple but elegant. They offer the owner an appreciating investment of a useable yet timeless antique. As so often happens old things become new again and that old shotgun you may have stored in the attic or garage and have long forgotten may have steadily increased in value. Before parting with or shooting it have it examined and appraised by a knowledgeable and reputable appraiser of shotguns. At the very least obtain a copy of *The Blue Book of Gun Values*. □

Clarke C. Jones is a freelance writer who spends most of his spare time with his black lab Luke, hunting for a good story.

Collecting firearms is a great way to learn more about shooting sports, the history behind the guns, and the people who made them famous.



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