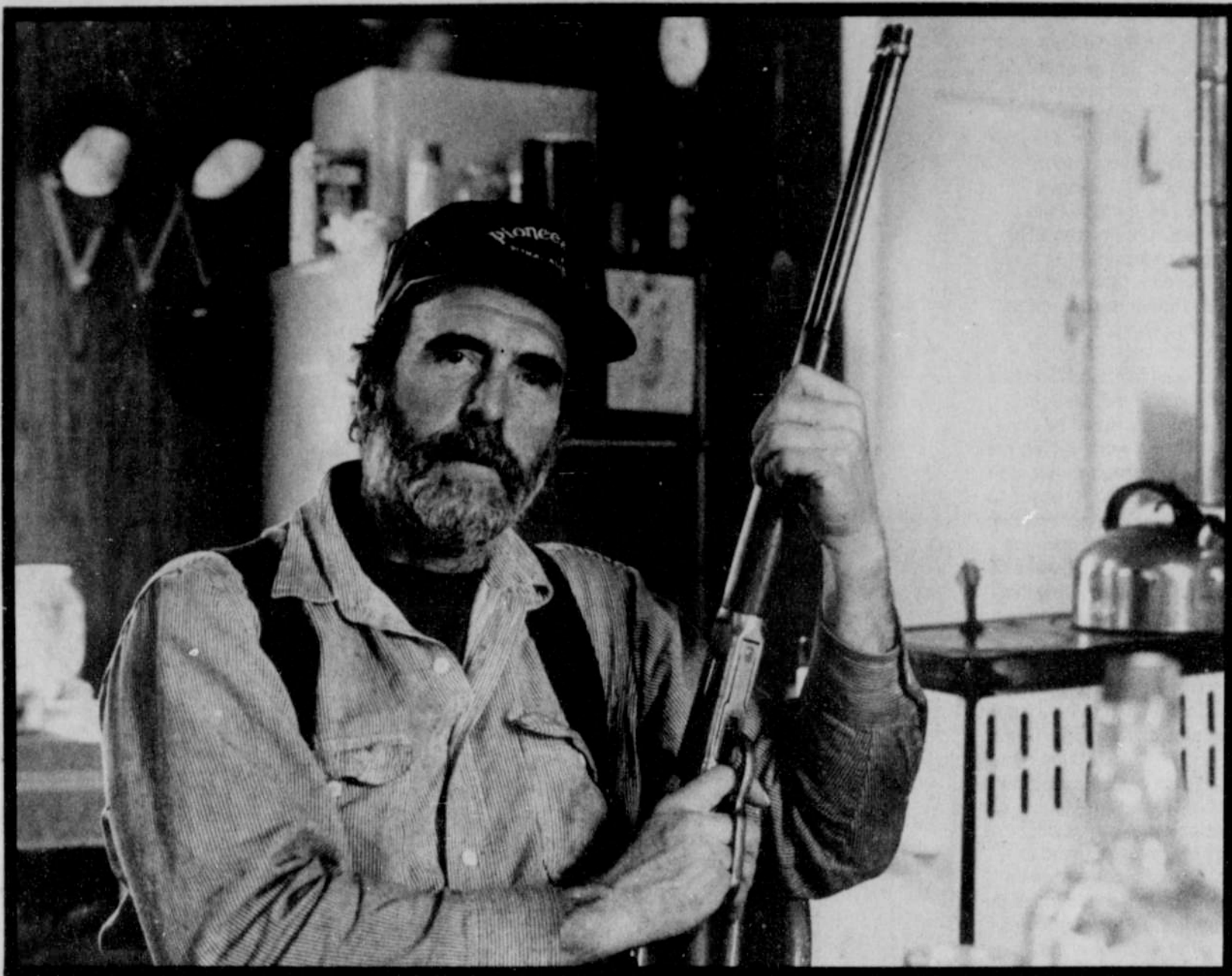




Mike Pitman: "My brother still has the first gun my dad owned. It is an octagon-barreled Winchester 25-20 (similar to what Mike is holding here, but an earlier model). They notched the does on one side and the bucks on the other. I shot my first deer with it."

GUYS & GUNS

STORY & PHOTOS BY JACK SCHARBACH

In the '40s and '50s when I was growing up, when the Willamette Valley was dotted with woods and forty acre farms, guns were common as cows. You would see them stacked in a corner or behind the back door, often loaded, so as to be ready in case that skunk or coyote was skulking around the chicken house. They were often old ones, handed down, with the bluing worn off and the screwheads bugged by home-gunsmithing with butter knives and ill-fitting screwdrivers. Browning shotguns stood cheek by jowl with lever-action Winchesters and Marlins, and nearly every kid over the twelve had a single-shot 22.

We used to think of guns as tools that put meat on the table and kept varmints at bay. Our attitudes have changed. As a nation of farmers with great pieces of the natural environment intact we felt we could thumb our noses at the powerful because we could feed our faces. Guns were a symbol and instrument of that freedom.

Guns were always a part of rural America. Now gun-makers have found a huge urban market, growing along with our anxiety about gangs, mugging, riots, and the feeling that we live among uncaring forces in uncertain times.

Americans — with the possible exception of native Americans — have always had more guns than they needed.

Westering emigrants probably caused more casualties among themselves than to Indians. More recently, a study of 500 gun-shot deaths in King County (Seattle) suggests that this is an American tradition. When asked, nearly all gun owners claimed to buy a handgun for self-defense against intruders. Of the 500 deaths, the biggest portion were suicides, closely followed by family members and friends, and so on. Two were intruders.

Research and statistics have little effect on the attitudes of gun owners. It is not what guns do in the hands of people but what guns do inside their heads that keep gunmakers in business.

In some circles there is still a measure of respect in being known as a good shot or a good hunter, but it is the gun that is more likely to get attention — those sleek, polished stocks, high-powered, flat trajectories, scope-mounted beauties that put five bench-rested shots in a group that can be covered with a quarter. We want a gun that has clout; if not accuracy, then authority — a look that shows rapid-fire, military, no-nonsense lead-slinging badness.

History will decide if we have gone dangerously crazy, or just plain silly: "You can have my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead fingers," the bumper sticker reads. Without ties to

the land a lot of us are less clear about the meaning of our lives. We hang onto those conservative icons that have always pulled us through uncertain times: God, guts and guns.* And we go on hoping that the earth will always have enough wildness to sustain more than atavistic fantasy.

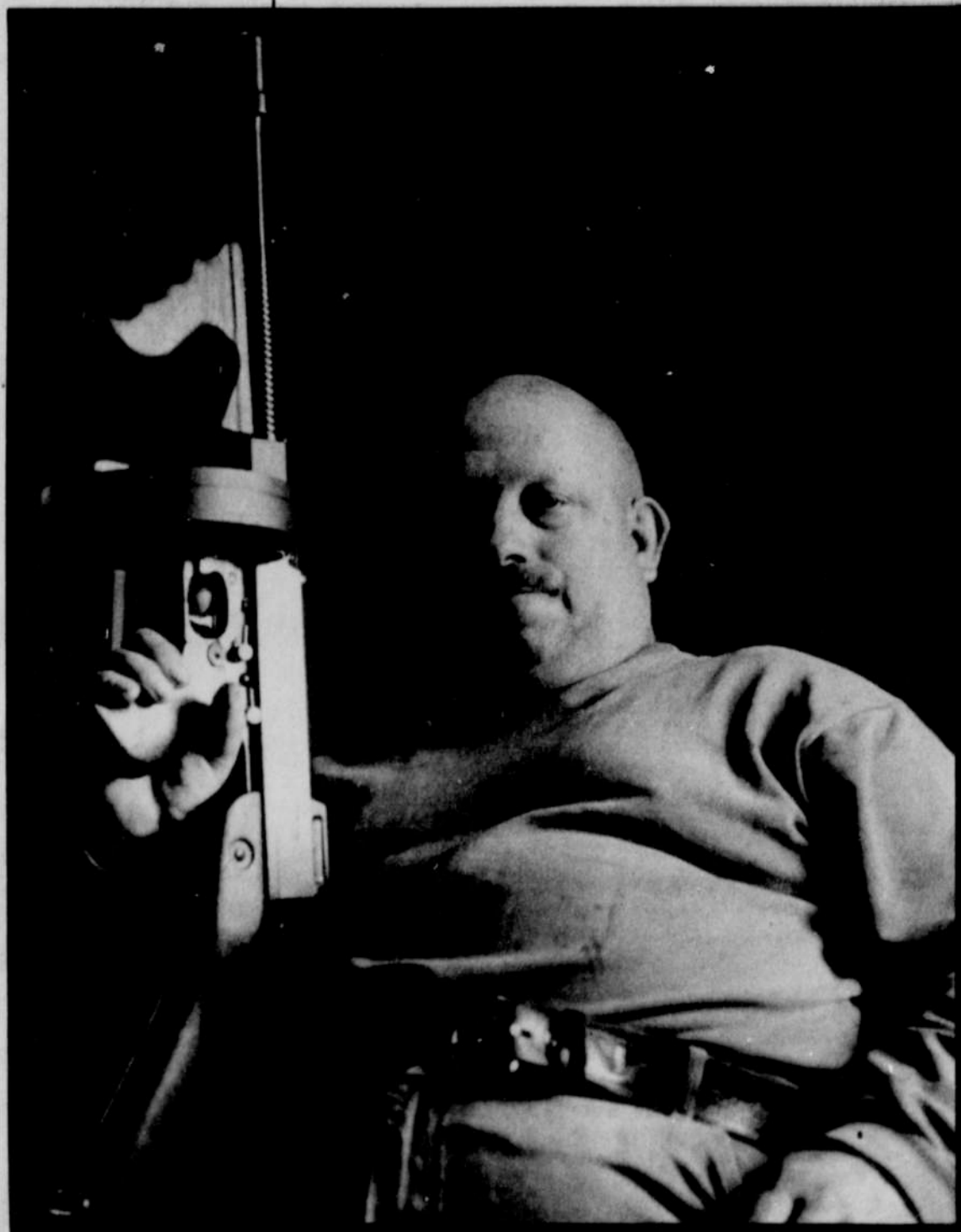
My kids grew up eating venison. When our fortunes improved I stopped hunting, but I remember walking home with a buck draped over my shoulders and my Winchester in my hand. I had the feeling that as much as I disliked killing, I had touched bases with something more elemental and real in that act of shooting than all the things I've ever done to bring home a paycheck.

Jack Scharbach lives in Naselle (Washington) and freelances as a photographer and writer. His most recent article for the NCTE, *Willapa Bay: Struggling To Retain Her Virtue*, appeared in the December '95 issue.

*See Peter Finch's book on the radical right, *God, Guts & Guns*.



Jim Webb: "I grew up in Alaska in a place that was remote enough that we used kerosene for light. We hunted for meat and stored it in a cache. My thinking is that guns are just tools — different ones for different jobs. If people break laws with them, they ought to put the people away, not go after guns."



Don Rosera: Twenty some years ago when he asked the local police chief what he would have to do to buy a Thompson submachine gun, the chief thought it was a rhetorical question. When she showed up with the paperwork he said, "Give 'em an inch and they'll go out and hang themselves."