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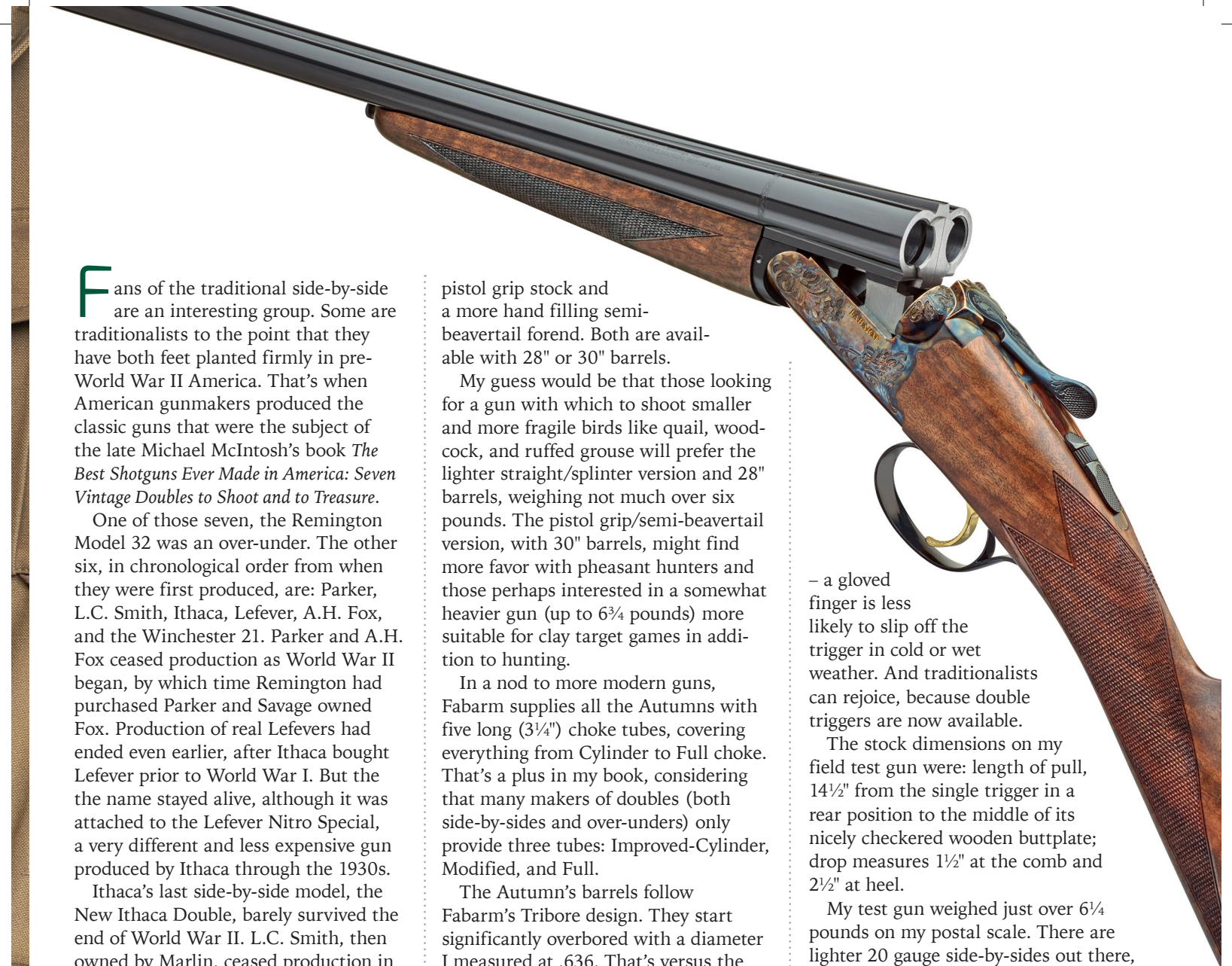
by Lou Pasqua



Fabarm's Autumn 20-Gauge Side-by-Side

Something old, something new

by Larry Brown



Fans of the traditional side-by-side are an interesting group. Some are traditionalists to the point that they have both feet planted firmly in pre-World War II America. That's when American gunmakers produced the classic guns that were the subject of the late Michael McIntosh's book *The Best Shotguns Ever Made in America: Seven Vintage Doubles to Shoot and to Treasure*.

One of those seven, the Remington Model 32 was an over-under. The other six, in chronological order from when they were first produced, are: Parker, L.C. Smith, Ithaca, Lefever, A.H. Fox, and the Winchester 21. Parker and A.H. Fox ceased production as World War II began, by which time Remington had purchased Parker and Savage owned Fox. Production of real Lefevers had ended even earlier, after Ithaca bought Lefever prior to World War I. But the name stayed alive, although it was attached to the Lefever Nitro Special, a very different and less expensive gun produced by Ithaca through the 1930s.

Ithaca's last side-by-side model, the New Ithaca Double, barely survived the end of World War II. L.C. Smith, then owned by Marlin, ceased production in 1950. Winchester's Model 21 survived the longest. It remained a production line gun until 1959, after which it was made only in the factory's custom shop.

The majority of those guns had double triggers, and many featured plain extractors rather than automatic ejectors, although single triggers and ejectors were available as options on all of them. My Parker 16-gauge, made in 1904 with double triggers and plain extractors, looks very much like most side-by-sides made today, although most of the latter are more likely to have a single trigger and ejectors.

Fabarm's new Autumn side-by-side pays tribute to its predecessors, albeit with more modern features. Two different versions are available; the more traditional of the two has a straight ("English") stock and sleek splinter forend. The other version features a

pistol grip stock and a more hand filling semi-beavertail forend. Both are available with 28" or 30" barrels.

My guess would be that those looking for a gun with which to shoot smaller and more fragile birds like quail, woodcock, and ruffed grouse will prefer the lighter straight/splinter version and 28" barrels, weighing not much over six pounds. The pistol grip/semi-beavertail version, with 30" barrels, might find more favor with pheasant hunters and those perhaps interested in a somewhat heavier gun (up to 6¾ pounds) more suitable for clay target games in addition to hunting.

In a nod to more modern guns, Fabarm supplies all the Autumns with five long (¾") choke tubes, covering everything from Cylinder to Full choke. That's a plus in my book, considering that many makers of doubles (both side-by-sides and over-unders) only provide three tubes: Improved-Cylinder, Modified, and Full.

The Autumn's barrels follow Fabarm's Tribore design. They start significantly overbored with a diameter I measured at .636. That's versus the standard 20-gauge bore diameter of .615. But farther down the barrels, the bore narrows. The theory is that the Tribore will both improve patterns and reduce recoil.

In another nod to modern times and nontoxic shot, the Autumn has 3" chambers and is steel shot proof. The gun can certainly handle anything you push down those barrels. However, especially on the lighter guns, some shooters may find the recoil from a heavy magnum load to be uncomfortable.

The gun I field tested came equipped with a single selective trigger – and a nice one. My gauge measured the pull at just a couple ounces past four pounds – crisp. That's very good for a gun in the Autumn's weight range of six to seven pounds. The surface of the trigger is also knurled, which is a nice touch

– a gloved finger is less likely to slip off the trigger in cold or wet weather. And traditionalists can rejoice, because double triggers are now available.

The stock dimensions on my field test gun were: length of pull, 14½" from the single trigger in a rear position to the middle of its nicely checkered wooden buttplate; drop measures 1½" at the comb and 2½" at heel.

My test gun weighed just over 6¼ pounds on my postal scale. There are lighter 20 gauge side-by-sides out there, but I found the Autumn comfortable to carry in the field. There's enough weight that the gun doesn't feel whippy when you swing it.

The single trigger operates via the inertia system, the recoil of the first shot shifting the mechanism to fire the second barrel. I tried my test gun with a box of ¾-ounce reloads that I often shoot at skeet. The trigger worked perfectly with those, which means that it will certainly function with anything from standard ⅞-ounce target loads on up to heavy field loads.

The Autumn comes with a manual safety, which surprised me a bit. While target shooters often prefer a safety that does not reset automatically, most modern hunting guns are equipped with automatic safeties. Not that there's anything wrong with a manual safety, but you do need to reset it on safe when



you reload. This safety is also where you'll find the barrel selector. Barrel selection is via a button in the middle of the safety slide that moves left and

right; it's stiff enough that you're not going to move it by accident, nor will it get stuck in the middle so that neither barrel will fire.

The rib on the Autumn is interesting. It starts high over the breech, then angles down to the ends of the chambers and continues below the tops of the barrels out to the front bead. It's not unusual to find swamped ribs like this on side-by-sides, but it may require some adjustment on the shooter's part if you're used to high ribs – or especially the raised ventilated ribs typically seen on over-unders and occasional side-by-sides.

The Autumn is equipped with a safety feature more often seen on higher-dollar guns, especially sidelocks: intercepting sears. If you drop a gun that does not have intercepting sears, it can suffer enough of a jolt – even with the safety engaged – that the gun will fire. Intercepting sears prevent that from happening.

The lockup on the Autumn is very interesting. It's a four-lug system, which is a departure from what you typically find on a side-by-side. Fabarm used the same system on a side-by-side they pro-



duced for Heckler and Koch a number of years ago, but the Autumn is the first side-by-side they've made specifically for the American market. I can't imagine what you'd need to do to an Autumn to cause it to shoot loose, but in case the action should need tightening, the forend includes a steel insert where it contacts the barrel lug. Result: It's easy for Fabarm technicians to tighten the action. And Fabarm is part of the Guerini conglomerate, which has an enviable reputation for customer service.

How about overall appearance? A real estate broker might say that the Autumn has real "curb appeal." I was impressed just looking at the magazine ads Fabarm has been running, and giving it a close look once I had the gun in my hands didn't change that impression. The stock and forearm are of deluxe grade Turkish walnut. The wood is given a hand-oiled matte finish, which, personally, I prefer that to the glossier finish you see on some side-by-sides. The rounded action is color case hardened and features bold scroll engraving. There are a couple of gold touches – the name "FABARM" on either side of the receiver, and a gold lion on the bottom of the trigger guard. Just the right amount of "bling" for me. And the barrels and trigger guard are finished in a deep, shiny blue; however, the rib has a dull finish to avoid picking up glare.

Wood-to-metal fit is excellent. The receiver is scalloped rather than having a straight back, and the wood is just slightly proud of the metal where the head of the stock meets the action. Leaving just a little extra wood will allow refinishing should the stock ever require it.

The stock has neutral cast, so whether you're right-handed or a southpaw, the Autumn will likely fit you pretty well. I find myself looking right down the rib when I mount it.

The stock is connected to the action by means of a through bolt, which provides a very solid link. The result is a somewhat thicker wrist than you'll find on doubles that use screws between top and bottom tangs to hold everything together. On the Autumn, there is no bottom tang extending from the trigger guard. Some traditionalists might prefer that Fabarm had put one there, even though it would be strictly ornamental.

Those used to guns that use tang screws might think the bottom line of the stock looks a bit naked without a tang.

This is a gun that, in my opinion, will stand out when you see it on a rack. I think most side-by-side fans would definitely want to pick it up and take a closer look, and I don't think they'll be disappointed when they do.

How does the gun perform? I usually shoot several rounds of "recreational" skeet every week. I put the Autumn through its paces. It's a good fit for me, and all misses were due to operator error. Whether I used my light reloads or 7/8-ounce factory target loads, the gun performed flawlessly, and the ejectors worked perfectly.

I took the Fabarm into the northern Wisconsin woods in search of grouse and woodcock. My dogs did their part, and we came home with a grouse and a brace of woodcock. The Autumn carries nicely in the thick places where those challenging birds live. The checkering on the wrist is very well done and provided a reliable grip when I had to resort to one-handed carry, using my other hand to part the brush. My go-to grouse and woodcock gun is a 16-gauge Parker VH on the light 0 frame, and is about a quarter of a pound lighter than the Autumn. But I don't think that I'd notice much difference – other than the double triggers and plain extractors on the century-old Parker – if I were to carry the Autumn for a full day in the woods.

I also own an AyA 4/53 20-gauge. Although a 21st century product, it's essentially a copy of a British boxlock that might have been made in the early 20th century. It has double triggers, fixed chokes, and the slimmer wrist (and slightly less weight) of a faithful copy of a gun from that period. But the Fabarm gives you a combination of the old and the new, with choke tubes and steel shot proof, and an extra quarter pound of weight.

It comes down to whether you want pure tradition or a blend of the old and the new. I will point out that the Autumn's suggested retail is \$4,095 (and I've seen at least one dealer offering them for \$100 less). For a new 4/53, you'd need to spend at least \$1,000 more.

In my opinion, the Autumn represents a lot of gun for the money, and options that many of today's hunters and shooters will appreciate.

