



by Guy Nixon

# THE BIG OVER THE SLEDGEHAMMER OR THE TACK HAMMER Debate

A major question for the last 60 years has been whether a large-bore rifle or a high-velocity small-bore rifle is better for hunting.

The architects of this debate were Colonel Townsend Whelen, Elmer Keith, and Jack O'Connor.

During that time almost all “gun talk” was being generated by these three men and the hunting articles they wrote. I caught the tail end of this period but had access to much of their work.

To put it simply, I enjoy guns and shooting so I joined the US Navy as a Gunners Mate. I graduated top of both my Navy A and C School classes, because I enjoy this stuff! Once I was in the fleet, much of my time was on Knox-class frigates and, as luck would have it, my gun mount had at least 30 years’ worth of hunting magazines.

During my many months waiting in the gun mount I had the chance to read just about every article ever written by these three men in everything from *Outdoor Life and Sports Afield* to you name it. Basically it comes down to this, Elmer Keith hunted with handguns and rifles and was hunting in the Pacific Northwest whereas Colonel Townsend Whelen was hunting with rifles in Alaska and thick cover country. These two men had similar ideas. They took the .30/06 and necked it out to take bullets with a larger diameter. The .35 Whelen was created by the Colonel while the .357 Magnum and .44 Magnum were Elmer Keith’s projects. They were hunting big strong critters in thick country so they made the argument that large-bore rifles and powerful cartridges were the way to go.

Jack O'Connor was from Arizona and he was hunting for Coues deer and desert mule deer in the open desert and foothills and big horn sheep on the tops of

the desert mountains. He was responsible for the .243 and .270 and any number of .30/06 cartridges necked down to a smaller caliber. His argument was that super high-velocity, small caliber bullets were the way to go.

It was obvious to me that these men had their own types of hunting country. Elmer Keith would go to India or parts of Africa (think jungle and tall grass) to hunt big dangerous game, while Jack O'Connor was hunting with the Shah of Iran for sheep on top of the desert mountains around the Caspian Sea and Dall sheep on the tops of the Wrangell Mountains of Alaska.

These men all had tremendous experience but there was one profound difference. Colonel Townsend Whelen wrote like the Colonel he was; his writing reads like a US military manual because that is what he was. Elmer Keith, God love his soul, had the most insight and put the most thought into his work but wrote as though he may not have passed fourth grade. On the other hand, Jack O'Connor was an English teacher and it showed.

Jack O'Connor could write a great hunting story. They are works of art, works of literature, great fun to read. This also played into who got the most articles in the most magazines, and since Jack O'Connor was print ready and error-free his were the easiest to put into print. He sold magazines.

The reality was that while they were all arguing about which is the better way to go they were not arguing about the same job. Hunting pronghorn antelope is a very different job than hunting black bears. These two species alone require very different bullets. For example a bear hunter needs a rifle with a bullet that will go through a mud-covered, thick-furred, tough hide, then penetrate dense meat and muscle, and then a thick shoulder bone, likely having to break strong semi-over-

lapping ribs before ever reaching the lungs. The pronghorn, on the other hand, has a thick skin, a smaller and much lighter shoulder bone that is not usually in the way and delicate ribs before getting into the lungs.

Then there is the habitat. Bears usually do not hang around in the open prairies and pronghorn antelope do not live in a thick jungle of fir trees, vines and brush. So a whopper bear cartridge may not have the range at 300 yards like you might want for antelope and conversely, an itty bitty super high-velocity pill may not bust down a bear as it is likely to disintegrate on impact, never making it to the bear’s lungs.

Then there is the terrain and foliage to consider. In some places the cover is so thick that an open-sighted rifle is the best tool. Then there are places that require crawling, particularly pig hunting where an open-sighted handgun is the best tool. I read Elmer Keith’s stories and I could see why he was working on making more powerful handgun rounds. He was taking deer with his old single action Colt .45, but then so was our neighbor, Jay Bruce. If you have to handle dogs with one hand then a single action revolver is the safest, most reliable tool available. I say IS and I mean STILL IS the best tool for that kind of operation.

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