I first got the word on the Internet: Herstal Group, the Belgian company that owns Winchester, has decided to close that firm’s historic New Haven factory. After March of 2006, there will be no more new Winchester Models 94, 70 and 1300. It’s the end of an era, and the end of a firm that once typified America’s industrial primacy.

In 1981, the ad agency where I worked took on the U.S. Repeating Arms account. I didn’t know it at the time, but this was the start of a whole new chapter in my life. Although I’d been a gun enthusiast since childhood, this was my first opportunity to put my writing skills to work on behalf of the firearms industry. My first assignment was to write an ad introducing Winchester’s new Model 70 Featherweight. We had received a prototype for photography, and it was, quite frankly, one ugly little mutt. The wood sported an opaque Dijon mustard-colored finish, and looked like what some dog had left on the curb. I called the factory and explained that we needed something a bit more photogenic. I was told that this was the only prototype, the Custom Shop was too busy, and we’d have to punt. I took the gun to my good buddy Fred Richardson, a gunsmith who specialized in fine English doubles. He stripped the stock of its hideous finish, and we discovered a beautiful tiger-stripe grain underneath. He refinished the stock, and we photographed the gun on an old-fashioned kitchen scale, to emphasize its light weight. Since the rifle couldn’t be sold as a factory original, I got the chance to buy it for $173.49, and I still have it, unfired, to this day.

During the early 1980s, commemorative firearms were an important profit center for U.S. Repeating Arms. Basically, they’d take a standard Model 94 and dress it up with higher grade wood, some special stamping and “gold” inlay and perhaps a commemorative medallion inlaid in the buttstock. The best-selling of these efforts was, of course, the John Wayne Commemorative. They cranked out 50,000 of these and sold them all, along with matching gun racks, saddle scabbards and cartridges. Other commemoratives achieved varying degrees of success. I recall one very elaborate package – the “Winchester/Colt Commemorative” – comprising a Model 94 rifle and a Colt Single Action Army, both in .44-40 WCF caliber. These highly ornate guns were accompanied by large medallions of Oliver Winchester and Samuel Colt, and encased in a fancy oak presentation box. The retail price was to be set at $4,440. Since I had to write the copy to sell this set, I innocently asked, “What is this commemorative supposed to commemorate?” The answer I got was basically, “Who knows? Just write the damn copy!” I did, and it was a very good-looking ad, but the wisdom of the marketplace was inescapable: only a few sets were sold. The rest were broken up and the individual guns, cases and medallions were remaindered through an Arizona gun distributor several years later.

There was one “sorta” commemorative that I really coveted. A small group of us were meeting in the sample room at the Winchester factory, and the marketing manager, Bob Morrison, grinning from ear to ear, took a prototype out of a box. It was an exact reproduction of Winchester’s Model 1904 bolt-action .22 Boy’s Rifle. It was perfect, and you couldn’t tell it from the original. Now, I have no self-restraint when it comes to .22 caliber…I currently have about 40 .22 rifles and pistols in my collection. I immediately exclaimed, “I want one! Actually, I want two! When are you gonna make this? When can I get one?” Bob just kept smiling, slid the rifle back into the box and said, “We’re thinking about it.” I never saw it again or heard another word about it.

Writing for U.S. Repeating Arms sometimes presented unexpected challenges. The client had just come up with a new stainless/chrome/nickel-