

THOMPSON/CENTER'S
CONTENDER JUST
TURNED 50 AND IS STILL
GOING STRONG!

WORDS BY CRAIG BODDINGTON

MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES



LET'S START WITH A RIDDLE: What commercial firearm can be a handgun, a carbine, a full-up long rifle ... or a shotgun? And what commercial firearm can be a muzzleloader, centerfire or rimfire ... and easily changed to one of several dozen cartridges?

I submit there is just *one*, the Thompson/Center (T/C) Contender. During the past half-century, this firearm has progressed from Contender to Encore to G2 Contender. It's still faithful to Warren Center's design and is still offered in a myriad of variations with almost innumerable interchangeable barrels. If there's a more versatile platform, I simply don't know what it might be.

Beginnings In 1945, Kenneth W. Thompson started a machine shop in his garage in Long Island, New York. In time it became the K.W. Thompson Tool Company Inc., with slow but steady growth over the next two decades. The company was not a firearms manufacturer, but they were making parts for several gun companies. Ken Thompson and his management team felt they needed their own branded product. In 1965, veteran (and genius) firearms engineer Warren Center joined the company, by then relocated to Rochester, New Hampshire. Center was a gun guy, a private custom gunmaker who had also worked for Iver Johnson and Harrington & Richardson (H&R). He had a great reputation, but it turned out that his thinking was way out of the box for the traditional American firearms industry. He had a concept for a very different single-shot pistol, years in development from his basement shop.



Veteran firearms engineer and custom gunmaker Warren Center came to Thompson Tool Company in 1965 with a prototype for a switch-barrel pistol. His Contender soon became the company's primary focus. Courtesy Smith & Wesson Archives

How difficult the sales job and who did the selling is not known. Maybe Warren Center; maybe Ken Thompson and his team, including Bob Gustafson, who would succeed him as president. But shortly after Center joined K.W. Thompson Tool

Company it became Thompson/Center Arms, with the primary goal to produce and market Warren Center's single-shot pistol. The first Contenders went out the door in 1967.

Setting Trends Not all would agree, but I'd rate Guns & Ammo's Elmer Keith as one of the godfathers of handgun hunting. A decade earlier (1955), Remington's Keith-inspired .44 Magnum gave handgunners a practical and powerful handgun hunting platform. The sport started to grow, but it wasn't widespread, and legal concessions (in terms of seasons and authorized methods of take) were rare. Handgun competition was primarily bullseye, which is all about accuracy. Practical pistol shooting was in its infancy, and years would pass before Elgin Gates pioneered handgun silhouette and the International Handgun Metallic Silhouette

Association (IHMSA) was founded (1976).

Long-eye-relief (LER) scopes were rare but did exist, although their primary purpose was for top-ejecting lever actions and only occasionally handguns. Another 15 years would pass before Jeff Cooper formally defined his Scout Rifle concept.

The shooting world was a bit different in the mid-'60s, and Warren Center's original concept for his Contender was not as it became. He was indeed thinking versatility — and also accuracy.

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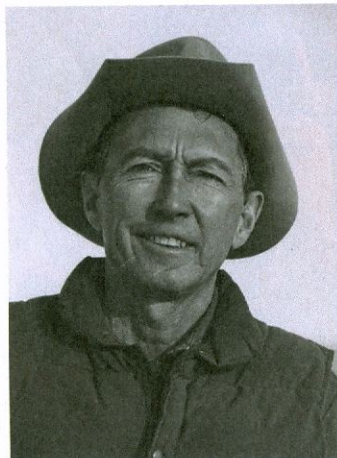
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These very early advertisements from 1967 show the initial barrel offerings. The .30-30 and .44 Magnum would follow very soon, but right out of the starting gate it appears that big-game and long-range handgunning weren't the initial focus.

Gunwriter Bob Milek was an early Contender fan and among the early leaders in long-range handgunning. Milek worked with his buddy Steve Herrett on the development of the .30 and .357 Herrett wildcat cartridges.



Though less common than today, switch-barrel firearms weren't new, and certainly break-open firearms were far from new, but a firearm specifically designed to be switch-barrel was unusual. The design of Warren Center's Contender was based on a massive but easily removed hinge pin forward on the action, held in place by the forend and mated to an opening in the locking lug below the barrel, with the lug dropping into a recess in the bottom of the receiver. This meant that virtually any barrel with appropriate outside dimensions and the proper-sized lug and hinge-pin receptacle could be dropped into the action.

There was one exceptionally brilliant difference: The exposed-hammer, single-action Contender contained two firing pins, one for centerfire primers and a second for rimfires. Exactly how the rimfire or centerfire pins are selected changed several times, but the concept was original. The Contender could be centerfire or rimfire simply by attaching an appropriate barrel and selecting the firing pin. In 1965, the handgun's primary purposes were personal defense and target shooting. The former was unlikely for a single-shot, but Center's massive barrel, ability to accept any sighting equipment and rigid lockup were obviously conducive to greater accuracy (and more powerful cartridges) than was

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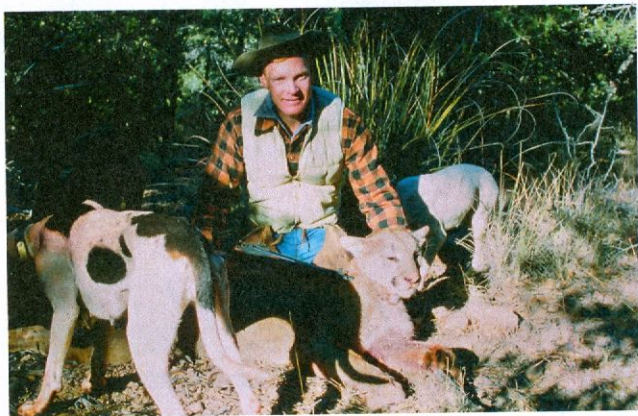
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G&A's Dave Hetzler was an early Contender fan. Here, according to the MTM cartridge box, Hetzler has a .257 Roberts barrel on his Contender.

likely with any revolver or semiautomatic design. Reflecting this, legend has it that Center's original prototype was barreled to .22LR and .38 Special. This changed quickly. Offered from the start as a switch-barrel pistol, early barrel offerings (from 1967 ads) included .22LR and .22WMR, the long-forgotten .22 Remington Jet, and the .22 Hornet, .38 Special and .357 Magnum. Initially, it appears that big game wasn't on the radar scope, but it wasn't long before .44 Magnum, .45 Colt/.410 shotshell and .30-30 Winchester were added. Suddenly a handgun existed that could be readily scoped and had greater range and power than previously existed in an over-the-counter pistol. Long-range handgunning was born, and handgun hunting took on a whole new aspect. Designing a tool-room model was one thing; manufacturing was another. The Contender would have a cast receiver, pioneered in firearms by Bill Ruger. In 1965, Thompson Tool's factory was mostly foundry and was soon expanded to 20,000 square feet as T/C geared up to produce the new pistol. It was not



The first game animal the author took with a T/C Contender was this Arizona cougar in February 1979 with a J.D. Jones .45-70 on an early Contender action.



J.D. Jones brought down this Montana whitetail about 1995 using his T/C Contender with 10-inch .300 Whisper barrel.

just a new handgun; it was an altogether new concept, created with much faith in unknown public acceptance.

Barrel offerings (in both cartridges and lengths) grew apace, but in the original Contender, T/C stopped at 48,000 pounds per square inch (psi), their concept of a sensibly conservative pressure limit for the action. Immediately seeing the potential but also a dearth of rifle-like cartridges that performed well in handgun-length barrels, wildcatters went to work. Principal early developments included the .30 and .357 Herrett, both using the .30-30 case shortened with body taper removed. The

intent was to maximize performance with fast-burning powders in the 10-inch Contender barrel, the .30 Herrett for long-range shooting and deer-sized game; the .357 Herrett for heavier game. The cartridges were developed in 1972 by gunsmith and stockmaker Steve Herrett and his lifelong buddy, gunwriter Bob Milek. Although the Herrett cartridges were always wildcats, T/C offered them as standard barrel options just a year later in 1973. This was the early stages of wildcat cartridge development for the Contender, and a whole new class of accurate long-range pistols that followed came to be called "specialty pistols."

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At that time, Milek was primarily writing for Shooting Times. He came to write for Guns & Ammo later, but in G&A the torch was taken up by Dave Hetzler, also a buddy of both Milek and Herrett and an early disciple of long-range handgunning. Famed handgunner J.D. Jones was right there at the beginning as well, working with Contenders as early as 1969. Jones not only created wildcat cartridges, his company, SSK Industries, was an early producer of aftermarket Contender barrels. His signature cartridge (of many) is probably the .375 JDJ, used in Contender pistols to take the world's largest game. For many years now the .45-70 has been a standard T/C barrel offering, but Jones was there first; I used one of his .45-70 barrels on a T/C action clear back in 1978.

The Contender grew rapidly in popularity, but it had its limits in both size and strength. The visually similar Encore is a beefed



Left to right: 7x57 Mauser, .30-30 Win., .30 Herrett, .308 Win., .357 Herrett, .35 Rem. The Herrett wildcat cartridges, based on the .30-30 case shortened with body taper reduced, were designed to maximize performance with fast-burning powders in 10-inch Contender barrels.

up action with more options, now including .308-based, .30-'06-based and belted magnum cartridges. It would be great fun to include a complete list of cartridges Contender barrels have been chambered to, but considering standard T/C offerings, factory custom barrels and aftermarket options, it is unlikely that such a list could ever be complete. The smallest cartridge known is probably the rimfire .17 Mach III (I have one!); the largest (not counting 12 gauge) was at least one custom barrel in .600 Nitro Express.

The Contender greatly expanded the world of handgun hunting, both in participation and concept, and was an early catalyst for handgun metallic silhouette shooting. Warren Center may not have initially envisioned these uses, but his pistol enabled them. And then again he may have, because he was truly a visionary. While I want to focus on the Contender in this article, it's important to

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Comparing the .44 Magnums: A Contender pistol (top) and a Smith & Wesson Model 29 Hunter, both in .44 Mag. The revolver has capacity, but with a longer barrel and fixed breech, the Contender can be more accurate and easily adaptable to optical sights.

recognize that Warren Center played at least one more key role in shaping America's hunting and shooting culture as we know it today. With his Contender well-launched and making headlines, Warren Center turned to another project: Creating an accurate and dependable muzzleloader, manufactured with modern techniques and carrying an unheard of lifetime warranty. In 1970, his Thompson/Center Hawken muzzleloader was launched. Still in the line in both caplock and flintlock, as the Contender did for handgun hunting, so did the Hawken for hunting with muzzleloaders. Later, T/C became a leader in in-line muzzleloaders, and muzzleloaders (and barrels) became standard Contender and Encore offerings, solving the most obvious problem by using 209 shotgun primers.



The .45 Winchester Magnum was introduced in 1980 and died a quick death, but T/C offered barrels for a short time. It was a hard-hitting little cartridge, and the author hog hunted with it during the early 1980s.

Legal Considerations The Contender was originally a handgun, but the action is equally suitable for carbines and rifles. The Contender Carbine, the first long gun on the Contender action, was introduced in 1985. In more recent years, both the Encore and the G2 Contender became available as either rifles or pistols. With fully 50 years of production and now multiple versions (i.e., generations) still in use, interchangeability is not complete across the board, but the action is the only serialized part. Stocks, barrels and forends can be switched out at will, thus turned into any configuration desirable.

There are specific rules involved, so local and federal legalities must be observed. One such rule is that long guns with barrels shorter than 16 inches have been illegal since the enactment of the National Firearms Act (NFA) in 1934. In the late 1980s, T/C ran afoul of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), which insisted that mere possession of a Contender handgun and a buttstock and rifle barrel constituted intent to use the buttstock and the pistol barrel to create an illegal short-barreled rifle (SBR). In 1992, T/C made legal history when *United States vs. Thompson/Center Arms Company*



Left to right: .308 Win., .30 T/C and the .30-'06. The .30 T/C, a joint project with Hornady, uses a shortened .308 Win. case but, thanks to efficiency and new propellants, produces higher velocity than standard .308 Win. loads.

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went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, who ruled in T/C's favor. It remains illegal to assemble the parts into a shoulder-stocked firearm with a barrel less than 16 inches, but so long as one has enough components to assemble a legal firearm, there is no implied intent and no violation. Interestingly, one of the arguments used was that most farmers possess fertilizer and diesel fuel, which can be made into an explosive, but possession of *both* hardly constitutes intent. Per ATF rules, a Contender sold as a pistol may be legally reconfigured as a rifle with barrel longer than 16 inches, but it is *not* legal to reconfigure a firearm first sold as a rifle into a handgun.

Accuracy, Operation & Interchangeability Break-open actions have a natural tendency to try to unhinge during firing. Mechanically, this means that break-open actions are generally neither as strong nor, at least theoretically, as accurate as fixed-breech actions. In the handgun world, the Contender is both stronger *and* more rigid than either revolvers or semiautomatics. In the rifle world, break-open actions are generally not as strong or as rigid as forward-locking actions (such as most bolt actions). Strength is what it is. Today's Encore barrels are chambered to high-intensity cartridges such as the 7mm Remington Magnum and .300 Winchester Magnum, and barrels up to .416 Rigby have been manufactured. Obviously, the strength is quite adequate.

As for accuracy, quality of barrels (and, for that matter, consistency and quality of ammo) is more important than action design. Also, something that Warren Center undoubtedly knew and guys like Jones, Herrett, Hetzler and Milek quickly discovered, is that there are accuracy benefits from short, stiff barrels. Contender handguns, especially in heavy barrel configuration, are often *spectacularly* accurate, and I've been extremely satisfied with accuracy from rifles based on this action.

Operation is extremely simple: Upward pressure on the curved triggerguard unlocks the action, allowing the barrel to drop down, exposing the chamber for loading and unloading. The same lever action also pushes the hammer back to the safety position from which it can be cocked for firing. The only complexity whatsoever is, with a Contender, it's essential to make sure the hammer is appropriately set for rimfire or centerfire and is *not* in the neutral or "safe" position.

Changing barrels is only slightly more complicated: The forend attaches to the barrel by two screws. With the rifle unloaded, remove the screws, open the action, drive out the hinge pin and remove the barrel. Reverse the process to switch barrels. The hinge pin is held in place by wings at the rear of the forend and usually requires little force to remove.

Through a half-century of production there have been subtle revisions, but the two major evolutionary changes were the Encore, introduced in 1998, and the G2 Contender introduced five years later. Although operation is essentially the same, the Encore uses a larger frame and has a different trigger group, stronger and easier to open. The Encore is not the same firearm as the Contender. Offered as rifle,

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pistol, muzzleloader and shotgun, T/C has manufactured at least 86 Encore barrel options. However, Encore barrels are not interchangeable with either the original Contender or the G2 — the underbarrel lug is considerably larger. Unlike the Contender, the Encore is centerfire or muzzleloader, without a rimfire option.

The Generation Two Contender (G2 Contender), introduced in 2003, uses an action that is dimensionally the same as the original Contender (now called Generation One or G1) but with the Encore trigger group. Barrel interchangeability is pretty much universal between G1 and G2 Contenders, except G2 muzzle-loading barrels cannot be used on G1 frames, and the older


Herrett barrels are intended for G1 frames. Buttstocks, pistol grips and forends are also generally not interchangeable between G1 and G2 Contenders. The primary difference in operation is that the G2 should be dry-fired only with the hammer set in the safety position.

Contenders Afield The various Contenders have been used literally throughout the world and on all imaginable game: smallest to largest; furred, feathered and, I suppose, scaled. My first use of a Contender afield was on a cougar hunt in Arizona in 1979. The choice was perhaps unlikely, one of J.D. Jones' early .45-70 barrels. Even with its integral muzzlebrake,

it was a beast to shoot, but it worked just fine. Shortly thereafter, I used a Contender pistol in the short-lived (and long forgotten) .45 Winchester Magnum to do some pig hunting. Think of a moderate-pressure cartridge, and somebody made a Contender barrel for it!

Since then, I've used G1s, G2s and Encores in a wide variety of cartridges and configurations, certainly never exclusively but definitely eclectically: Turkey barrels, muzzleloading barrels, rifle barrels, pistol barrels. I don't believe there is such a thing as one firearm for all seasons and all reasons, but start with a Contender and add some barrels, stocks and sight options, and there isn't much you can't do.

Today's Encore & G2 In January 2007, Thompson/Center Arms was acquired by Smith & Wesson, with headquarters currently in Springfield, Massachusetts. The Encore Pro Hunter is available in at least nine configurations, counting rifle, pistol, shotgun, muzzleloader and platform action, stock and forend to build your own configuration. All Encore models are synthetic-stocked, and T/C currently catalogs more than 50 barrel configurations.

The G2 Contender is currently offered in six walnut-stocked configurations, including complete rifles and pistols, "build your own" and compact (i.e., youth) models. Barrel options are not as robust as they once were, but both blue and stainless options run from .17 HMR to .45-70, with barrel lengths of 12, 14 and 23 inches. Don't despair, there are many thousands of previously owned barrels out there, and aftermarket barrels are still manufactured new. SSK Industries (sskindustries.com) remains a major source. Fifty years later, Warren Center's Contender remains as it was in 1967: The world's most versatile firearms platform. 

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