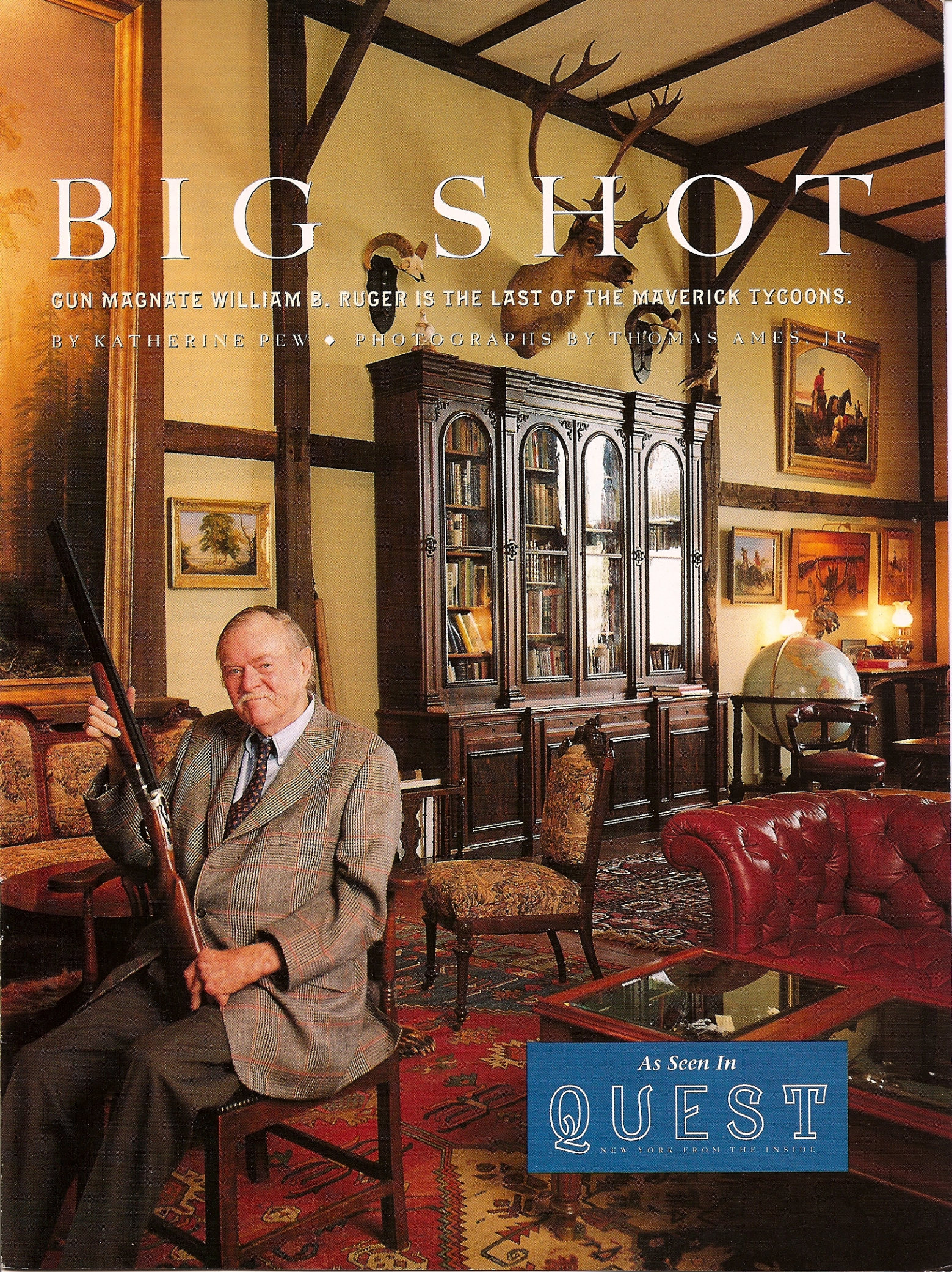


BIG SHOT

GUN MAGNATE WILLIAM B. RUGER IS THE LAST OF THE MAVERICK TYCOONS.

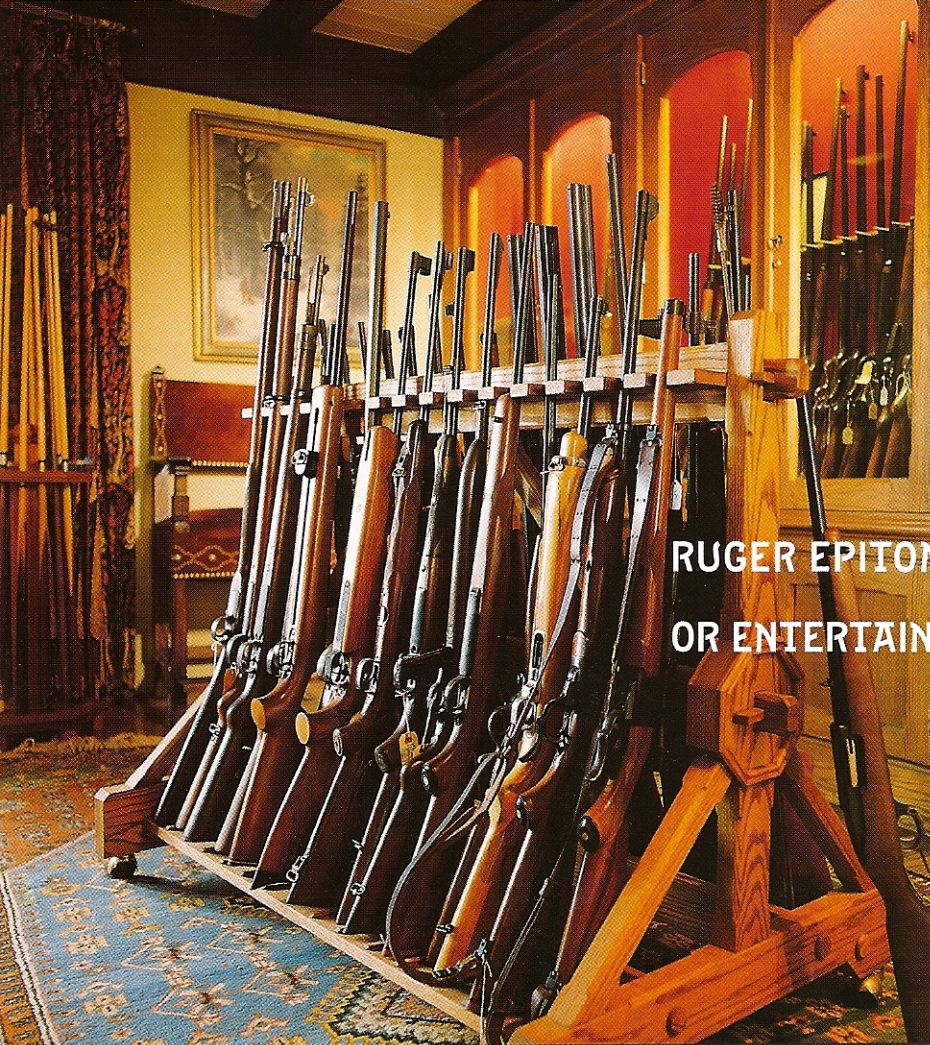
BY KATHERINE PEW ♦ PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS AMES, JR.



As Seen In

QUEST

NEW YORK FROM THE INSIDE



Former presidents Bush, Reagan and Carter treasure their customized shotguns from Sturm, Ruger, the Tiffany of firearms. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sean Connery and John Travolta have brandished the firm's state-of-the-art pistols in their films. Gun collectors the world over count their carved-ivory-handled Ruger revolvers and "old model" engraved Single-Sixes among their most prized possessions.

Since this country was first settled by musket-wielding Puritans, guns have played an integral role in the American way of life. Yet few everyday subjects are as controversial, and few individuals have championed guns not just as a legal right, but as works of art. William Batteredman Ruger, founder of Sturm, Ruger & Company, has devoted his life to designing, marketing and promoting firearms. A New York-born collector, yachtsman, race-car enthusiast and world-class hunter, Ruger epitomizes the larger-than-life personality of a vanishing breed of self-made men. Whether hunting big game in Africa or entertaining friends at the '21' Club, Ruger has always tackled life with a fierce tenacity. Amassing a museum-quality collection of Frederic Remingtons and Winslow Homers that dominates his estates in New Hampshire, Arizona and Connecticut, he has also filled a warehouse with classic Rolls-Royces, Bentleys, Duesenbergs, Stutzes and Bugattis. In his quest for the ultimate automobile, he even designed his own, the Ruger Sports Tourer. Cut from the same flamboyant cloth as Ernest Hemingway and John Huston, Ruger is an anomaly in today's politically correct times. With his burly mustache, ruddy complexion and brusque, take-no-prisoners manner, he bears more than a passing resemblance to Teddy Roosevelt.

Yet for all his worldliness, Ruger has been essentially a recluse, avoiding the limelight to pursue a highly singular vision. His low profile has allowed him to live life his own way, out of the media's glare. Now, as this publicity-shy tycoon

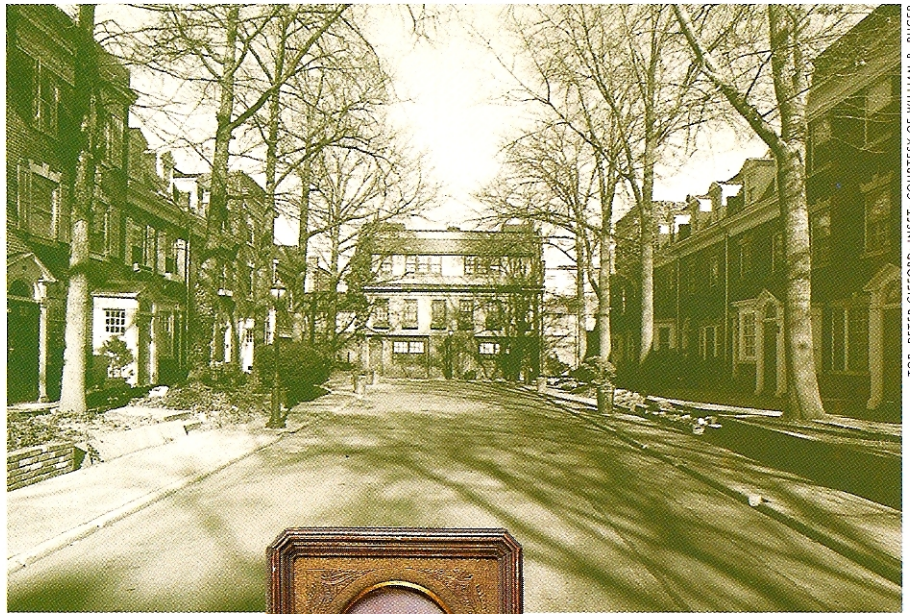
RUGER EPITOMIZES A VANISHING BREED OF OR ENTERTAINING FRIENDS AT THE '21' CLUB,

nears his 81st birthday in June, he is being catapulted into the public eye. Simon & Schuster recently published a coffee table book, *Ruger & His Guns*, by R. L. Wilson, chronicling the man and his accomplishments, without overlooking the inevitable controversies his career has generated. Holland & Holland Ltd., the newly

opened sporting emporium on Fifty-seventh Street (where Ruger's grandson Charlie is a sales associate), features his gleaming Red Label and Woodside over-and-under shotguns, prized by sportsmen. Prices range from \$1,200 to \$1,700.

Consistently answering critics on the op-ed page, Ruger forthrightly upholds the American gun-making tradition, presiding over an enterprise which employs nearly 2,000 workers in five plants across the country, and produces three-quarters of a million firearms a year. Sturm, Ruger's net sales for the first three quarters of 1996 were \$180 million. After taking his company public in 1969 and moving it to the NYSE in 1990, Ruger has seen his stock fly high, quadrupling in value from 1991 to 1996. The Ruger family's 43% stake is worth well over \$100 million, according to *Forbes* magazine in 1992.

I first met Bill Ruger through my father, the former editor and publisher of *American West* magazine, and now an advertising executive whose firm, Merlin, has handled Sturm, Ruger's account since 1987. Over the years, I heard innumerable tales about Ruger, but until recently, the man behind the myths eluded me. This winter, passing through Prescott, Arizona, on my way to Lake Havasu, I stopped in to interview him. I found the old chief puffing on his morning cigar, seated beneath *Cloud World*, a skyscape by Maynard Dixon. Years of rheumatoid arthritis and diabetes have robbed him of his physical exuberance; nowadays he often resorts to a motorized wheelchair. But there's no loss of vitality in his eyes, all the more remarkable considering he has just had a harrowing experience in the private jet that brought him to Arizona. As his pilot was preparing to land in Kansas to refuel, a warning light indicated that the landing gear wasn't going down. For-



TOP: PETER GIFFORD; INSET: COURTESY OF WILLIAM B. RUGER



a similar amount of gusto and romance. "I always had an interest in the looks of a gun," he says, gesturing to the coveted models lining his shelves. "There are handsome guns and there are homely ones. This is true whether you're talking about shotguns, pistols or rifles—and it's the same with automobiles. Throughout my life, I've had a continuous connection with the aesthetic of whatever I'm interested in. That's always been my guiding principle."

Ruger's unique aesthetic sense may have roots in the architecture and cultural atmosphere of his childhood home on Albemarle Terrace, an elegant cul-de-sac of Georgian brick houses in Flatbush, Brooklyn. "There was a good bunch of people there," he recalls. "On the corner leading into Albemarle Terrace was a family named Tilieu. George Tilieu was the proprietor of the biggest attraction at

Brooklyn's Albemarle Terrace, Ruger's boyhood home, above; a young Ruger, left, around the time his father taught him to shoot. Opposite: drawing room of the New Hampshire estate, top; regal rifle display, bottom.

nels under the leaves."

May Batterman, Ruger's mother, was from a prominent New York family that founded Batterman's department store—the "Bloomingdale's of Brooklyn," where brides-to-be registered for china and silver. His father, Adolph, was a trial lawyer. Ruger's fascination with firearms goes back several generations. "My great-grandfather," he says, "was a drummer boy in von Blücher's army at the Battle of Waterloo, who immigrated to America in the 1840s." Ruger's grandfather fought in the Civil War and settled in Brooklyn to become a portrait painter. His five great-uncles—"the Ruger Brothers"—owned a fleet of clipper ships.

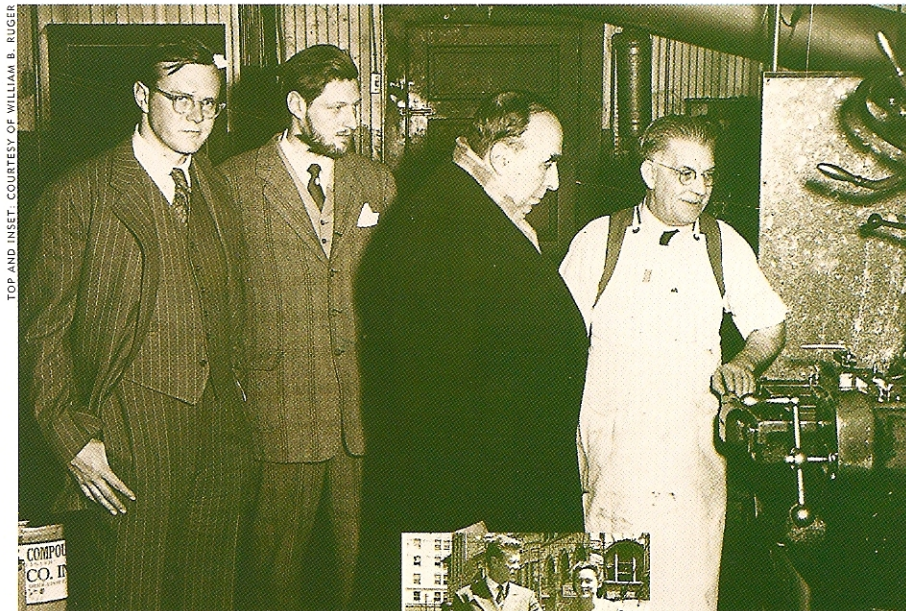
As a child, Ruger often went with his mother to the Brooklyn Museum and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Ruger explored his native borough and lower Manhattan on roller skates, and one of his favorite haunts was Bannerman's Emporium, a military surplus store on Broadway near Broome Street. He would spend all day poring through relics. "You could get all the bits and pieces of a Serbian Army uniform: the buttons and ribbons; the belts and buck-

SELF-MADE MEN. WHETHER HUNTING BIG GAME IN AFRICA RUGER ALWAYS TACKLES LIFE WITH A FIERCE TENACITY.

unately, it proved a false alarm. Asked if he'd feared for his life, Ruger dismisses the thought with a wave of his hand: "Pilots in World War II survived many a belly-landing. We would've managed just fine without the wheels."

Ruger has always treated firearms with

Coney Island—Tilieu's Steeple Chase—a theme park with mechanical horses that ran around the perimeter. Flatbush was beautiful in those days—there were long streets, large wooden houses well-separated from each other, and big rows of trees. In summer, the streets were tun-



Ruger, Sturm and Brazil's ambassador with a factory worker, 1950, above; Bill and Mary in New York, 1942, right. Opposite: a Remington bronze faces a Parrish, top, in New Hampshire, home to his vintage fleet, bottom.



les," Ruger recalls. "There were old flags, swords and scabbards, helmets, epaulets and all the other troops' accouterments; 5,000 unused canteens left over from the Spanish American War." Ruger's prize purchase was a wheeled artillery piece called a Hotchkiss mountain gun, "a portable cannon," Ruger explains, "that you could strap onto the back of a mule."

When Ruger was 10, his parents divorced, and he and his mother moved into his grandfather Batterman's house, also in Brooklyn. Ruger admired his independent maiden aunt, who maintained separate living quarters on the house's top floor. "She was a Red Cross nurse in World War I," he says, "who was caught up in a number of historical events in Europe—once she was torpedoed in the Adriatic." She was stern and irascible, but she had a soft spot for her nephew. "We all think you have a little more brains than most people,' she would tell me, 'and you've got to use them.' That bucked me up a bit. That's all it takes sometimes—one big, solid, important kind of encouragement."

The first time Ruger shot a gun was in the 1920s, on the North Fork of Long Is-

land. His family spent summers in Southold, on a farm with cornfields behind the house. One day, when his father was trying out a .22-caliber pistol, he offered his son a chance.

William proved to be a natural shot, and when the boy was 12, his father gave him his own gun, a Remington Model 12 pump-action rifle. "I often did things adults couldn't do," says Ruger, "like hitting a small object at some distance. 'Show them what you can hit,' my father would say. And I'd raise the damn thing and usually hit whatever it was I was aiming at." His father's early death shortly thereafter spurred him to prove himself to the world.

Even as an adolescent, Ruger's grasp of engineering was difficult to overlook. His scout troop master, a chemistry professor at NYU, also recognized his potential. "He paid some attention to me," Ruger says. "So I'd make little things or

chemistry building into a machine shop. In his free time, he experimented with assembling different machine parts, "the way a lot of people would play checkers or bridge," Ruger recalls. While he was tinkering, he came up with the initial designs for what would eventually become the groundbreaking Ruger machine gun.

Soon after, though, his scholastic work fell apart when he met Mary Carolyn Thompson from Greensboro, North Carolina. "We decided very quickly to get married—the whole process couldn't have taken more than two or three weeks." Ruger dropped out of school at the end of his sophomore year, and the newlyweds set off on a three-month honeymoon to Europe. As the Second World War began, Ruger was unable to enlist, due to his diabetes. Instead, he landed a job designing machine guns for the War Department at the Springfield Armory, but quickly grew dissatisfied with his \$32.50-per-week salary. He quit and moved back to Greensboro, where he set to work fine-tuning his new machine gun for the Army in his in-laws' dining room. Despite an offer from Smith & Wesson, Ruger joined Auto-Ordinance, a Bridgeport-based outfit that built military weapons and was also known for manufacturing the notorious "tommy gun," a submachine gun popular with gangsters in the '20s and '30s. "One of the things I liked about the job," says Ruger, "was that it was close to Westport, which in those days still had a lot of a country town atmosphere. An artists' colony, it had a lively social world—with parties banging away every weekend—from one house to the other."

During one of those parties, he met the man who would change his life. Alexander McCormick Sturm was a wealthy Westport eccentric with a wild reputation. A writer and painter, Sturm had studied her-

IN THOSE EARLY DAYS SETTING UP SHOP, RUGER SAYS, WITH A LIVELY SOCIAL WORLD—PARTIES BANGING AWAY

try little projects that were sort of off the beaten track—like the time I built a printing press." After attending Alexander Hamilton High School in New York, Ruger enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he obtained permission to turn an empty room in the

aldry at Yale (he would later design the firm's red eagle trademark), then served in the OSS during World War II, with a top-secret assignment second-guessing Hitler's actions. His wife, Paulina, was the daughter of Alice Longworth and granddaughter of Theodore Roosevelt. Sturm

put up the initial \$50,000 that got the company off the ground in 1949. Meanwhile, Ruger consulted the heads of Colt and High Standard, who told him he was foolhardy to embark on such a difficult endeavor with so few resources. But Ruger was dead set on success.

In 1951, Ruger set off on a hunting trip to Canada, and when he returned, he found Sturm hospitalized with hepatitis. To everyone's shock, he died less than two weeks later. In mourning, Ruger changed the red eagle insignia to black. Sturm's father, Justin, tried briefly to take over the company, but Paulina stood by Ruger.

Ruger went on alone, now without his wife, Mary, whom he had divorced in 1947. (True to his unconventional ways, Ruger would remarry her ten years later.) Ruger has always managed to survive, even in the face of hardship, and he views setbacks as challenges. Despite the premature death of his son Tom from cancer at 48, and his own frail health, he channeled his iron will into his work, deriving satisfaction from his award-winning designs and the rewards of his ever-expanding empire.

Under his leadership, Sturm, Ruger acquired the most extensive client base of any firearms firm in the world. Military and police forces across the nation carry Ruger law-enforcement pistols, bolt-action rifles and auto-loading rifles. He further increased revenues by developing the popular "Great Big Bertha" line of high-tech titanium clubs for Callaway Golf. Although Ruger is still CEO and chairman of the board, he appointed his son Bill, Jr., president in 1991.

In every venture he undertakes, Ruger insists on excellence. The *Titania*, an 88-foot yacht Ruger designed, was launched in 1979. "I have often thought," he muses, "that if I hadn't fallen into designing firearms, I'd have loved to be an architect or a marine designer." The ship had a cockpit at the rear with a fighting chair, into which Ruger or his fisherman friends could strap while trolling. The salon was paneled in mahogany and birch, modeled after the 1816 yacht *Cleopatra's Barge*, owned by George Crownin-



"WESTPORT WAS STILL AN ARTISTS' COLONY

EVERY WEEKEND—ONE HOUSE TO THE OTHER."

shield. "It was a grand fusion of motor yacht and old-time sailor's yacht," Ruger says of the *Titania*, "because it had a great deal of outdoor space. It wasn't a houseboat, unlike most yachts today." The *Titania* was a glamorous presence at the New York Yacht Club's regattas during the '80s, and an official (Continued on page 70)

Ruger (Continued from page 63)

NYYC observer ship at the 1984 America's Cup in Newport, with Ruger himself onboard.

As for his cars, his favorites include two Bentleys from the '20s, both with British racing green touring bodies, and a pair of Bugattis, a '20s Type 43 grand tourer and a '30s Type 57 Ventoux coupé, named after the French mountain, site of the famous hill-climb race. Ruger is also a prime sponsor of Johnny Unser's Indianapolis racing car.

A perfectionist, Ruger demands the same of others. "I often used to classify people as useless or interesting," he says. He can be a tyrant, but he's deeply loyal. He is also an articulate defender of the right of Americans to bear firearms. When Colin Ferguson went on a lethal rampage in a Long Island Railroad car in 1993, he used a Ruger P89 pistol. The incident sparked a national outcry to banish firearms, but Ruger took to the airwaves, arguing that it is "the violent criminal," not guns, that is "the enemy of civilization." Nevertheless, long before it was law, Ruger restricted the number of rounds that can be fired from his auto-loading rifles, infuriating NRA activists and provoking some Texas gun dealers to boycott his guns. The firm's attitude is summed up in its motto: "Arms makers for responsible citizens."

Everyone who crosses paths with Ruger is affected by his gruff enthusiasm, and I am no exception. As I rise to continue on my journey to Lake Havasu, Ruger advises me to take the back road toward Wickenburg. "I've always believed in exploring along the way," he muses, "rather than just taking the shortest possible route." Movement is painful. He has difficulty grasping my hand to say good-bye. "I wish I were going with you," he says, wistfully, as he lights another cigar. ♦

Katherine Pew, a freelance writer, lives in Brooklyn and contributes frequently to Time Out New York.