WHERE WAGES ARE UP, JOBS ARE PLENTIFUL, AND SOARING FIREARM SALES ARE NOTHING BUT GOOD NEWS.

BY NEIL SWIDEB

FORMER DAY-CARE WORKER LAURINDA PUDLO AT THE SAVAGE ARMS FACTORY, WESTFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

NEW GLOBE E-BOOK: SEEING BOSTON FROM THE AIR

WHY SOME SMALL COLLEGES ARE IN BIG TROUBLE

GREETINGS FROM GUN VALLEY
Before joining Westfield gun maker Savage Arms, Rich Goss Jr. managed a Dollar Tree store. He says his job now is “easier than dealing with complaining customers in retail.”
GREETINGS FROM GUN VALLEY
BOOMING SALES. GOOD-PAYING FACTORY JOBS. TAX BREAKS FOR EMPLOYERS. WITH LITTLE FANFARE, GUN MANUFACTURING IS THRIVING IN OUR BLUE, BLUE STATE.

BY NEIL SWIDENEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY WEBB CHAPPELL

Lenny Larivee has spent 68 percent of his 69 years on this planet doing the same thing: making guns. And he's made them all for one company, Savage Arms in Westfield, just off Exit 3 on the Mass. Pike. He's tall and bald, with a voice that is low and a speaking style that is John Wayne-slow. He is also a cantankerous character. Newcomers who stop by his bench expecting to find a senior statesman are usually startled to hear his opening line: “You don't like what I say? Stay the eff away.”

Today, as he repairs the damaged crown on a rifle, the factory around him is humming. Savage Arms, the century-old pioneer that had deteriorated to the point where it was mocked as “Salvage Arms” and left for dead, now can't keep up with demand. Its year-over-year growth was 50 percent in 2011, 40 percent in 2012, and is on pace to pack on another 40 percent in 2013. The company is running round-the-clock shifts on weekdays and has added one on Saturdays. It has about 415 employees in Westfield, nearly double the number from just three years ago and part of a companywide workforce of 740. And it is racing to hire more. The Westfield factory made and shipped more than 350,000 guns in 2012, while also distributing another 300,000 that were made at Savage's Canadian plant or by the vendors in China and Turkey that produce the company's cheaper Stevens brand weapons. One company projection calls for the Westfield plant to be producing 650,000 guns by 2015 and distributing more than 1 million in total.

While Larivee's machinist's union wage hasn’t returned to its 1971 peak, it has climbed back up to $17.10 an hour. It's enough, he says, to afford “a new car every four years and have my house paid for,” something for which he has thanked Coburn, who just retired as CEO, every year at Christmas. Base hourly wages on the factory floor now range from $14 for sub-assembly work to $25 for licensed electricians. And depending on how profitably the factory was able to turn out its product in the previous month—posting high production numbers with low scrap and limited overtime—employees can see their monthly pay goosed by 4, 5, or even 9 percent.

Larivee confidently answers all questions, except for one. How can a company like Savage be thriving these days? “Don't cash your check until I say the money's in the bank.” Looking back on it now, Larivee admits, “I never thought we'd make it.”

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Larivee confidently answers all questions, except for one. How can a company like Savage be thriving in high-cost unionized Massachusetts, when we were all led to believe manufacturing was firmly in New England’s past? “I don’t understand why it’s happening,” he says. “No, I don’t.”

Savage is probably the most dramatic example of what's going on in “Gun Valley,” the swath of Western Massachusetts and Connecticut where industrial gun making in America began. Anchored by Colt in Hartford and Smith & Wesson in Springfield, the Connecticut River Valley remains home to dozens of firearms manufacturers and suppliers. Gun sales are soaring across the nation, with many manufactur-ers having posted record profits in 2012. And no matter where you fall on the gun debate, there’s no argument that this expansion has very real economic implications for a struggling region. There’s even a chance that the current boom could see guns reprise their role from two centuries ago, powering the growth of other high-skill manufacturing throughout the area.

Although California and Texas are home to more gun-related jobs, Connecticut and Massachusetts rank fourth and fifth in total economic output from this industry, according to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, the firearms trade association. And when it comes to average pay packages for those in the industry, Connecticut and Massachusetts occupy the No. 1 and No. 2 spots, at $71,123 and $65,386, boosted by all the executive salaries at those corporate headquarters. The fact that the foundation is based in Newtown, Connecticut, speaks to both the region’s historic connection to guns and the way the school massacre could reshape the future. The carnage in Newtown came at the end of an assault rifle, and Connecticut expanded its ban on those weapons as part of its sweeping new gun measures passed earlier in April. Even though Savage produces rifles

EVEN AS SALES SOAR, ONLY ABOUT ONE-THIRD OF US HOUSEHOLDS HAVE GUNS, DOWN FROM ABOUT HALF IN THE 1970S.
and shotguns for hunting and target shooting and does not make assault rifles or handguns, it is subject to the same winds blowing around the wider gun world.

After chewing it over for a while, Larivee offers a partial explanation for the boom. “I think it’s because of our president and what happened down in Connecticut,” he says, talking over the roar of machines and the horns of forklifts. “Everybody’s nervous that Obama’s going to pass some law that you’re not going to be able to buy ammo or guns, or that he’s going to go in your house.”

Nonsense, Larivee says. “He ain’t gonna go in your house. I wouldn’t let him in my house, and I don’t even own a gun.”

That last comment surprises me, so I want to make sure I heard him right. “You don’t own a gun?”

“No,” he says. “I never have.”

As it turns out, most of the people I will encounter in my three days roaming the factory floor at Savage don’t own or use guns. The company estimates that only about one-quarter of the employees in Westfield do.

Despite producing more guns than he can count over the years, Larivee tells me he hasn’t used one since he was a 12-year-old kid shooting a .22-caliber with a friend. “I don’t like hunting. I don’t care about hunting,” he says. “Savage gives me a job, pays my bills. Thank you very much.”

When you really think about it, it shouldn’t be a revelation that most of the people building the guns don’t also collect and shoot them. We wouldn’t expect all the people who stitch together Rawlings baseball gloves to be fielding grounders after they’ve punched out for the night. But, of course, guns are different. They’re such a political fault-line issue that there’s not much meaningful interaction between the sides.

Those of us who don’t own guns are less likely to have many gun owners in our circles of friends and family, given trends in firearms ownership. Hunters, in particular, are harder to find. Federal statistics show that the number of them has fallen from its peak of 19.1 million in 1975 to 13.7 million in 2011 (with a slight uptick in recent years). Hunters make up a small subset of all gun owners, a number that has also been falling. Even as sales soar, only about one-third of US households have guns, down from about half in the 1970s, according to the 2012 General Social Survey, produced by an independent research center at the University of Chicago. Most of us are at least two generations removed from the farm, and our meat arrives in rectangular plastic-wrapped packages.

On the other side, responsible gun owners have often let the loudest, most extreme voices do the talking. When National Rifle Association CEO Wayne LaPierre took to the airwaves amidst the fresh tears of Newtown, he sounded not just insensitive but close to unhinged, refusing to cede an inch. Meanwhile, a Johns Hopkins University poll found that three-quarters of NRA members support universal background checks for all gun purchases, as do 85 percent of people in households with an NRA member, according to a New York Times/CBS News poll.

Economic development is an area that may provide even more fertile common ground. That’s why you find Governor Deval Patrick, a prominent gun control advocate, pushing through $6 million in tax breaks in 2010 for Smith & Wesson to move 225 jobs from New Hampshire to Springfield. It’s why you find Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno, an outspoken member of Mayors Against Illegal Guns—“Are you going to shoot a deer or shred a deer?” he once said in support of an assault rifle ban—securing another $600,000 in incentives for the company. And it’s why you find that Joe Lieberman during his time in the US Senate worked to advance tough gun control measures while lobbying behind the scenes to keep a certain Colt firearm off the Clinton-era list of banned assault weapons.

In Springfield, where the unemployment rate tops 10 percent, Smith & Wesson is a success story. It has invested more than $80 million since 2009 to expand and modernize its sprawling plant there, according to vice president Liz Sharp, and plans to spend another $40 million in 2013. It has employed multiple generations of the same families, and its Massachusetts full-time workforce has grown to nearly 1,300. Politicians who cheer those job numbers tend not to mention one of the important drivers of S&W’s recent growth: its manufacture of assault rifles. (The industry prefers the term “modern sporting rifles.”)

There’s more nuance to the gun issue than the locked-in debate usually allows. The search for fresh insight is how I ended up on the Savage factory floor at 7 o’clock on a recent Tuesday morning, being handed goggles, gloves, and an apron and told to build my own gun.

It all begins with a piece of steel. Rifles get their name from the rifling in the barrel—the grooved interior you look through at the beginning of a James
Bond film. To make that rifling, I apply some grease to the end of a dipstick-like “button,” which is just a hair wider than the caliber, or diameter, of the hole that’s been predrilled in that piece of steel. Then I lay the 20-inch-long steel barrel down flat on a conveyor-belt-type machine, insert the button into the end of it, and press start. Eight seconds later, the button has rotated all the way through the barrel. What’s surprising is that there’s no cutting involved. The 1,250 pounds of pressure move the button through the barrel, displacing or spreading steel to the side while making the grooves. Although there’s no scrap to worry about, there is quite a bit of mess, with all the gunk that comes from using a 45-year-old machine.

Rich Goss Jr., the chatty goateed operator who guides me through the process, is a decade younger than the machine he runs. He’s worked at Savage for two years — part of a big class of employees hired in 2011 — and his father, sister, half brother, and nephew are also on the payroll. Before building guns, he’d been a manager at a Dollar Tree store. He’s expected to produce more than 400 button-rifled barrels every shift. “I can do this with my eyes closed,” he says. “But I like factory work. It’s easier than dealing with complaining customers in retail.”

If button-rifling feels like a holdover from the 19th century, the next step — barrel turning — feels firmly in the 21st. With the help of this station’s tech, I insert the barrel into a CNC — or computer numerical control — machine. OK, since each pair of these Japanese machines costs half a million bucks, everyone’s more comfortable if I mostly just look on as the tech, 57-year-old Bruce Moore, handles this step. This programmable CNC looks like a flight simulator — fitting since Moore came out of the aerospace industry. He clamps the barrel in place and hits a few keystrokes. The doors close. From behind thick glass, liquid coolant starts spraying as the barrel rotates. About 2½ minutes later, the barrel — which had gone into the machine as a pipe that was the same diameter for its entire length — comes out transformed. It is perfectly tapered on the outside and has a crown affixed to the end, where the rounds will exit after being fired.

With that, we jump way back, to a process that actually does date to the 19th century. Despite all the advances, it still takes a trained eye to peer down a barrel and know how to spot and fix even tiny imperfections. Reinaldo “Ray” Silva has been doing this barrel straightening for 10 years. We position my barrel at eye level in an ancient wheel-press straightening device, which looks a bit like one of those coin-operated telescopes you find at tourist attractions. Above is a steel circle with grooves. Although there’s no scrap involved, it still takes a trained eye to determine where the barrel isn’t perfectly straight and then how to spin that steel circle to get things right. It’s an art, but the process is so tedious and the distinctions are so tiny that my eye hurts after trying to spot the flaws in just this one. Silva straightens more than 700 barrels a shift.

Born in Puerto Rico, he came to Savage 11 years ago after losing his job as a sheet-metal mechanic pulling down $17 an hour. He prayed to the Lord and went as far as Rhode Island looking for a new job. When his brother, who worked at Savage, called offering a position that paid only $10.30 an hour, he jumped at it. Silva is 64 now, a diminutive grandfather of three, and he admits he’s counting the days until retirement. But he takes immense pride in the quality of his work, how more than a few satisfied Savage customers have gone so far as to track him down, determined to offer personal thanks to “the guy who got my barrel so straight.”

Silva has occasionally been called out by members of his church, who

**WHERE GUNS ARE MADE**

“Gun Valley” in Massachusetts and Connecticut, where America’s gun industry was born, is humming once again. Each red dot on the map represents a company licensed to manufacture firearms and ammunition; a blue dot means it can also produce bombs and other so-called destructive devices. To see an interactive map for all of New England, go to bostonglobe.com/magazine.

- **SAVAGE ARMS**
  - WESTFIELD
  - Produces rifles for hunting and target shooting.

- **SMITH & WESSON**
  - SPRINGFIELD
  - Long famous for its Dirty Harry Model 29 revolver. Produces full line of handguns and rifles, including its M&P polymer pistols and military-style assault rifles.

- **COLT**
  - WEST HARTFORD
  - Famous for inventing the six-shooter revolver that “won the West.” Produces wide range of firearms for consumers and the military, including AR15 assault rifles.
want to know how he can build weapons for a living. “I make guns. I don’t use them,” he replies. “This is my bread and my milk. This is how I put them on the table for my family.”

The average rifle has about 100 parts, according to Bob Brown- ing, Savage’s director of supply chain. The most important com- ponents are made at the Westfield plant. These include the barrel, of course, and the receiver—the metal housing for the working parts of the action. The receiver is also the spot where the serial number is stamped, since as far as the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is concerned, that is the gun. The stocks—or handles—as well as many smaller parts are brought in from suppliers, the bulk of them from within a three-hour drive of the plant.

Savage managers tell me I’m the first real outsider they’ve allowed in to build a gun. Previous BYOGers have been members of their extended tribe—representatives of hunting TV shows and publications like Guns magazine. Because my interest lies less in the rifles than the people who make them, I forget about trying to make sure that every component I produce ends up in the same gun.

I skip the CNC-heavy step of producing the receiver and head straight for subassembly. This area involves putting tiny springs, ball bearings, washers, and baffles together to make the bolt and firing mechanism. The work, which requires fine motor skills and lots of patience, is dominated by middle-aged female workers, who wisely switch stations every four hours to break up the monotony. Laurinda Pudlo came to Savage about a year ago, after having worked with toddlers at a day-care center. She finds this work less stressful. Better wages brought Inez Otero, a 12-year employee who had worked at Walmart, and Gail Smith, who came from a plastics factory 10 years ago. “I sit on my fanny,” Smith says, “and my hands do the work.”

For years, it was a common complaint across the gun-owning public that trigger pulls were too heavy. While gun manufacturers were inclined to respond to those criticisms, Savage vice president of sales and marketing Brian Herrick tells me the lawyers wouldn’t let them. That’s because a weapon with a lighter, more responsive trigger pull was more likely to go off accidentally if bumped or dropped. The Accu-Trigger, the solution that Savage introduced in 2003, involves a release bar, or sort of trigger within a trigger. The added safety pleased the lawyers. The added responsiveness and accuracy—some requiring as little as 6 ounces of pressure to pull the trigger—pleased the gun-buying public, which promptly began buying more. But after Sandy Mol- lory shows me how to assemble this innovative trigger, I’m stunned at how simple it is—basically a spring and a pin here, a sear stop there.

The efficiency of the process is something Savage focuses on intensely. When the company introduces a new gun, the engineering team heads to the factory floor with stopwatchs, working to shave off extra steps to keep costs low.

It’s only when I move to what’s called “swinging” that the thing begins to look like an actual rifle. Miguel Cardona, a 38-year-old father of four from Springfield, instructs me on how to put the main components together—bolt, receiver, and barrel. After the entire factory floor shuts down at noon for a half-hour lunch, I meet up with a 29-year-old former Marine named William Barkyoub. He guides me through final assembly, which involves the most complicated sequence of steps of the day.

The next benches over are for “rework,” a sort of isle of misfit guns where weapons go for repair. This area is staffed by the two most senior guys on the floor, Lenny Lari- ve and Rudy Wargo, who both started at Savage in 1965 and have been bickering with each other ever since. Wargo is more easygoing, but even he finds that the spar-
time, the armory spawned a loose network of small manufacturers and suppliers who shared knowledge and staff. Most of all, it created a highly skilled workforce across the valley.

In mill cities like Lowell, Lawrence, and Fall River, the work was textiles and the workers were low-skilled. That left their pay so meager that they needed their kids’ wages to keep their families afloat. In contrast, Springfield became “the City of Homes,” grand Victorian mansions for the well-to-do but, more important, huge tracts of single-family homes for the average—but highly skilled—workers.

Other industries, from automotive to aerospace, came to the region precisely because of all that skilled labor and those networks of manufacturers and suppliers. Rolls-Royce chose Springfield as the home for its American operation (and would have stayed longer had it not been for the Depression).

Skilled labor is one of the reasons many gun manufacturers stayed even when other industries left for cheaper labor. But the region lost its beehive when the Pentagon shut down the Army’s gun making fully to the private sector. Yet that loose network of small manufacturers and suppliers remained, and it’s now benefiting greatly from the latest gun boom.

Bob Forrant worked as a machinist in Springfield before returning to school in the early 1990s. He’s now a UMass Lowell professor of history and regional economic development. He says that if these small companies in the valley are smart, they’ll use the surge in gun business to branch out into other advanced manufacturing work.

That’s exactly what’s happening at a company in Greenfield called VSS. In the early 1990s, when Steve Capshaw was studying political science at Boston College, his family’s company was stuck in the past. It did mind-numbing manual-labor machine work making the steel marking tools used to stamp brand names onto hand tools. Basically, they were waiting with dread for their jobs to disappear. The company did only about $500,000 in annual sales. When Capshaw took over the company, he bet big on the future, bringing in CNC machines and skilled workers to be able to handle advanced manufacturing jobs for the firearms and aerospace industries. Four years ago, VSS was doing only a few thousand dollars in business for Savage. In 2013, his immaculate shop is on pace to do $3 million with Savage alone. Capshaw, who is 41, says his customer base breaks down to 30 percent from Savage; 10 percent from other gun makers (mainly Smith & Wesson and Sturm, Ruger & Co. in New Hampshire); 30 percent from aerospace; and 30 percent from the old marking tool business. He expects VSS to do between $9 million and $10 million in business in 2013.

What’s more, he says he’s leaving a lot of money on the table because he can’t find enough skilled workers to hire, the result of the region’s long disinvestment in vocational and technical training. “I have an 18-year-old just out of technical high school making $55,000 a year,” Capshaw says. “A 27-year-old making $90,000.” He now has more than 40 employees and says the vast majority of them own their own homes. He provides full medical coverage—no deductible—and a full 401(k) match. Yet he’s pretty much stopped advertising job openings because there are so few qualified applicants.

Over the summer, he interviewed three recent liberal arts grads from UMass Amherst, one who had $45,000 in college debt. “They were great kids,” Capshaw says, “but I couldn’t touch them because they had zero discernible skills.” He’d be willing to train them, he says, but his workers need to have IT skills and be mechanically inclined. A generation or two ago, even many liberal arts kids learned about engines by messing around under the hood of their cars. But that doesn’t happen anymore. So we have the crazy situation of runaway college debt, a persistently high unemployment rate, and a bunch of well-paying jobs with nobody qualified to fill them.

Why is the gun business in par-

WHEN SAVAGE ARMS INTRODUCES A NEW GUN, THE ENGINEERING TEAM HEADS TO THE FACTORY FLOOR WITH STOPWATCHES, WORKING TO SHAVE OFF EXTRA STEPS TO KEEP COSTS LOW.
Capshaw says the fears around President Obama are only part of the answer. A big driver is how automation and other technological innovations have dramatically lowered the costs of making guns. When labor is a smaller piece of the cost structure, that allows companies in high-cost places like Massachusetts to be more competitive with cheap-labor areas.

That leads to more “reshoring,” producing items locally that used to be made overseas. That also allows gun makers to sell their products at much lower price points, which encourages existing gun owners and collectors to buy more of them.

A huge part of Savage’s growth, for instance, has come from the Axis rifle line it introduced three years ago, carefully engineered to be low-cost without sacrificing accuracy. (With Savage price points that run as high as $2,500, marketing director Bill Dermody calls the roughly $300 Axis their “gateway drug.”) And when more of the gun parts are made locally, that allows companies to quicken the pace at which they design and roll out new products, which also gives gun owners additional reasons to buy more. Savage specializes in producing guns in a host of styles and calibers for a long list of niche markets — right down to lefthanded women who hunt bears — and producing them profitably. On top of all these industry trends, Capshaw says, Savage has shown a lot of savvy in picking up market share when its competitors suffer missteps. “That,” he says, “is how they went from a company that was almost bankrupt to the number one maker of sports rifles.”

Even though Capshaw isn’t a gun owner, he occasionally gets grief for doing the kind of work he does. When he once volunteered to speak about his job to his kid’s Montessori preschool class, the teacher told him, “No, I don’t think that would be appropriate.” One of his liberal friends hectors him all the time about working for the dark side. “Unless there are deer manning the gates of heaven,” he replies, “I think I’ll be OK.”

Still, for as much work as he does with the gun industry, he has his personal no-go lines. He recently turned down a million-dollar job to supply parts for a military-style assault rifle. “When I hear about something like Newtown,” he says, “I don’t want to have to rush to find out if it was something I had a hand in making. And I don’t think that’s ever going to happen making mostly bolt-action hunting rifles.”

“Do you have much experience shooting?” the soft-spoken voice asks me. It belongs to Carlos Flores. “No,” I reply. “Not unless shooting BB guns as a kid counts.”

“That’s OK,” he says. “We can take care of that.”

Flores speaks so gently and soothingly that I could mistake him for someone who runs an ashram rather than Savage’s 100-yard test range. He fell in love with guns at age 7, when he read a history book about them that he found in his hometown library in Holyoke,
Guns at Savage Arms await repair (facing page, top); Carlos Flores (facing page, bottom) works in the 100-yard test range; the plant (right) made and shipped more than 350,000 guns last year.

and then realized that history had been made just a few miles from his house. He badgered his mother to take him to the armory. “My parents were hippies,” he says.

These days, in addition to working at Savage, the 39-year-old of Puerto Rican heritage gives advanced firearms training and is a competitive target shooter. When he travels to meets and gun shows, he says, “I’m often the only person with brown skin there.” Still, he sometimes feels less at home in his own neighborhood. He admits that he winces when people ask what he does for a living, preparing himself to hear disapproval masked in a compliment, such as “You’re such an intelligent guy. Why don’t you put that brain to work doing something else?”

Flores may be soft-spoken, but he’s hard-core in his beliefs about guns. He started training his daughter in firearms when she was 5 years old, and his son when he was just 3. To him, it’s all about proper instruction, like teaching your kids how to use scissors or a knife. As for horrors like Newtown, he repeats the gun enthusiasts’ refrain: “It’s not the gun. It’s the person.”

Yet Savage employees are not immune to the pain of gun violence, which costs an estimated 31,000 American lives each year, about 60 percent of them suicides. One employee I met on the factory floor told me why he’d never have a gun in his house: “My brother-in-law took his own life with an Uzi at a gun show in Westfield. But it’s also true that hunting accidents are down historically and that the vast majority of gun deaths involve handguns rather than rifles.

That’s why Massachusetts’s most prominent gun control advocate, John Rosenthal of Stop Handgun Violence, tells me he thinks the state was wrong to give Smith & Wesson tax breaks, since it makes assault rifles and handguns, even though he wouldn’t have a problem with them for a company like Savage. “Hunting rifles and sports rifles are not the problem,” he says. “Easily concealed handguns and military-style assault weapons capable of accepting large ammunition magazines are the problem.” Rosenthal, by the way, is a longtime skeet-shooter and owner of a shotgun.

Because space is at such a premium at the Savage factory, the 100-yard test range that Flores runs is actually a big, black tube of reinforced steel that is strung along a second-story height, directly above the workers on the factory floor.

I put on protective earmuffs and sit down beside the rifle I will be shooting. It’s a sleek Trophy Hunter center-fire rifle, .223 caliber, with an attached Nikon scope, retailing for about $550.

When I notice that it’s a right-handed rifle, I break the news that I’m a lefty.

But Flores tells me to hold my arms out, using my fingers to make a diamond around an object in the distance. “Now blink one eye, and then blink the other,” he says. “With which eye open is that object centered?”

With my left eye open, the object shifts. But with my right eye, it remains in the middle of the diamond. “Then you’re right-eye dominant,” he says, teaching me something about myself. “So you’re going to shoot with your right eye and use your right arm.”

I peer down the scope to try to bring my target into focus. It’s a 1-inch-by-1-inch orange box. He hands me the ammo. “This will travel at least 3,000 feet a second,” he says, “so lightning fast.”

Since I’m shooting for the first time, and essentially over the heads of factory workers, I get nervous. “I’m not going to take anybody out on the line, am I?”

Assured that I can do no harm, I lean my cheek close to the scope. Flores tells me to slowly squeeze the AccuTrigger in a continuous motion, rather than jerking it. “You want the shot to go off and scare you. If it startles you, that’s good,” he says. “If it doesn’t, that means you’re anticipating the boom and you’re never going to hit.”

I do as he says, and slowly pull. It startles me, so I guess that’s good. When I look back in the scope, to see where it hit, I’m embarrassed that I can’t see it. But Flores comes over and points out that I hit at the bottom right-hand corner of that 1-inch box 100 yards away. My next three shots land half an inch to an inch from that first one.

While I’m just relieved not to have done any damage, Flores is pleased. He tells me my 1-inch group was great for a first-time shooter.

Maybe it was. Or maybe he was hoping to line up another customer for the future. After all, even he realizes this current boom can’t last forever. ■

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