

Shooting comes naturally to Greg (Sixgun Shookster), safety officer for the Gunpowder Creek Regulators and a veteran of the Hickory Police Department.

It's a rite of passage for some youngsters that our grown-up selves still remember — getting that first pair of cowboy cap pistols for Christmas. After strapping on those guns, we adopted a code of honor known as The Cowboy Way: Be honest; be kind; protect the weak; and never draw your guns unless you intend to use them.

Some of us, at least 80,000 nationwide and several hundred in North Carolina, still strap on our guns and live The Cowboy Way.

Now we use real guns.

Cowboy action shooting, as sanctioned by the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS), is a combination hobby, sport, and game. North Carolina has 15 sanctioned clubs. One Saturday a month, cowboys and cowgirls meet at clubs like the state's oldest, Carolina Single Action Shooting Society in Eden, Old North State Posse in Salisbury, or Gunpowder Creek Regulators outside Lenoir, which has erected wooden facades of a western town from which the shooters compete.

Straight shooters

"We wanted the range to look real," says Mike (Ripshin) Woods, who



Quick DRAW

By Carolina Clint Johnson

Cowboys and cowgirls get together each month to strap on six shooters and live their childhood dreams.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENISE CLAY

built Gunpowder Creek on family land. Shooters, many of whom know each other only by the aliases they adopt when joining SASS, sort themselves into posses or groups to shoot at metal targets as fast as they can using authentic cartridge weapons that cowboys would have used between 1860 and 1899. Timers keep track to the hundredths of a second as three spotters watch and listen for the bullets to hit steel. Each shooter fires five bullets each from two pistols, 10 rounds from a rifle, and four shots from a shotgun. The shooter moves between the pistol and rifle targets, plus loads, fires, and ejects shotgun shells at those targets, adding an element of dexterity and agility to the hand-eye coordination that comes with any shooting sport.

Old West gunfighters like Wyatt Earp would run if they encountered some of North Carolina's weekend cowboys. The best shooters fire all 20 rifle and pistol rounds, plus four shotgun rounds in under 20 seconds — hitting every target.

Mike (Red River Mike) Serraino was the 350th person to join SASS when it started in California in 1991. He suggests newcomers go to several matches before buying weapons. "Most of the people will let you shoot their guns so you



Cowboy action shooters take their guns seriously.

learn what you can handle and like," Red River Mike says. "This is a sport where you can shoot with doctors, lawyers, military officers, dock workers, and farmers. The one constant is that everyone adheres to The Cowboy Way. Cowboys may have seemed rough and gruff, but they were still polite and generous. We want to emulate that."

Mitch (Fontana Vic) Cudd and his wife, Sheri (Cherokee Cass), were lured into cowboy shooting by their nephew, Steve (Diamondback) Dennis, and his wife, Beth (Carolina Gem) Dennis. "The bass boat hasn't been in the water in five years. This has become an obsession," says Fontana Vic. "A huge part of this game is mental preparation — analyzing the correct pattern to shoot the targets, knowing how you're going to lay down and pick up your shotgun and rifle."

Cherokee Cass, who had rarely even fired a gun, started shooting when someone asked her at a match if she was a groupie. "I was a little apprehensive starting because some are so competitive and I was starting on the bottom rung," she says. "But you soon realize that most everyone is out there to have fun and not out to win."

Cherokee Cass shoots .45-caliber pistols and rifles, the biggest caliber with the most potential recoil. Many women opt for .38 or .32 caliber in pistols because of the lighter recoil.

she has about 35 Victorian outfits with husband James (Barrelhead) having a large number of cowboy outfits varying from mountain man to town dude. "Many of the women try to be as elegant as we can without having a fabric that will get ruined by rain and mud," Catawba Kate says. She learned to sew so she could make her own shooting outfits and ball gowns.

> "This is a way to free your mind, to lose yourself in the cowboy outfits, the whole way of life."

Some shooters want those big .44s or .45s for authenticity's sake. "John Wayne didn't shoot .38s," says Dick (Old Rebel Red) Armstrong, who shoots in a class SASS calls Duelist, where the shooter cocks and fires a pistol with one hand. Most shooters choose traditional, using both hands to better aim and control the pistol.

"I may be slower than most shooters," Old Rebel Red says, "but in how many Western movies have you seen the cowboy shooting with two hands? John Wayne shot his pistol with one hand."

Dressed for the part

Most SASS members get into cowboy shooting with little more than jeans and a cowboy hat, but some spend hundreds of dollars perfecting the look of the last half of the 19th century. Several women shooters formed the Carolina Belles to showcase their many outfits and personas. One, Malinda (Fannie Kickinshoot) Butson, remembers the first thing she said to her husband, Bill (Bulls Head Bill) Butson, after they visited a match to see what the sport was about: "I can shoot and dress up? This is too cool!"

Kathy (Catawba Kate) Laughlin, who realized the costume potential when she saw a man dressed as Zorro at her first match, figures

Some shooters combine both the look and the speed. Harris (Red River Ray) Rummage, twice the North Carolina state champion and fifth in one world championship, wears chaps, wrist cuffs, a scarf, and spurs, even though he says all of the authentic gear "degrades" his time because of the extra weight. "You should look the part," Red River Ray says. He doesn't watch other shooters and hums to himself to drown out the noise of their bullets hitting the targets. "I don't want to see or hear how they're doing. If you think, 'My God, this guy is awesome,' you have just cut your own throat," Ray says. "I have enough speed to hold my own, but you can't get back 20-year-old reflexes."

That may be true, but Red River Ray once shot 20 rifle and pistol rounds and two shotgun rounds in 12.11 seconds. His wife, Tracie (Kill-Em-All Kate), twice a North Carolina state champion and third lady overall in the 2007 World Championship, estimates they shoot between 50,000 and 65,000 rounds a year, not counting their unorthodox practice methods. "We put a towel on the bed, put our guns down on it, and dry fire at the headboard," she says, laughing.

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Just as the Old West was populated by immigrants, so is North Carolina cowboy shooting. Lhanie (Island Girl) Acilo Dickson, a native of the Philippines, is a five-time world champion who has a pistol named after her marketed by a cowboy gun importer. Ben (Rabbi) Tielman was born in Holland and fought in the Yom Kippur War in 1973 while serving with Israeli Special Forces. He knows that he won't be winning any championships, but that's not the point of why he shoots. "You shoot to hit the targets. This game is a matter of concentration," Rabbi says.

Family fun

Shooting families find their children enjoy the group activities. Tim (12 Mile Bluff) Davis, his wife, Donna (Yukon Gal), and 17-year-old daughter, Lynne (Circle City Blondie), have been target shooting together since Blondie was a toddler. They discovered cowboy shooting three years ago. "I started shooting 70-second stages, and now I am down in the low 40s," says Yukon Gal. "This is a game that comes to you with practice, but the important thing is if we can get out with our daughter and do something as a family, it's a great day." Circle City Blondie adds: "It's so cool to be in a sport where I compete on the same level with my parents. Guys at school think it's a little weird that they know somebody who dances ballet, sings in church, and shoots all these guns."

Shooters who want to be totally authentic in their cartridges use black powder, which was not replaced by today's smokeless powder until the turn of the 20th century. Black powder shooters always draw admirers because rounds loaded with it are loud and produce dense, white smoke, which is what cowboys would've seen in the 1880s. The downside of using black powder is that it requires thorough cleaning to stop the sooty, corrosive residue from rusting the weapons.

Tim (Piece B. Steel) Hymes is a minister who says if the bad guys won't listen to "peace be still" (Mark 4:39), he switches to his black-powder pistols. He says, "I won't shoot the heathen (smokeless) powder, only the holy black. …







Shells and bullets (far right) fly as shooters like Randi (Fancy Pantaloons) Lowery (top right) compete in speed and accuracy with rifles, shotguns, and pistols while enjoying the fun that goes along with donning cowboy duds.

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This is a way to free your mind, to lose yourself in the cowboy outfits, the whole way of life. I get to step outside of the pressures of my job and relax with no finer people than these cowboys and cowgirls."

Some shooters interpret earlier stages of cowboy history. Kenneth (Hiem) Aldridge shoots an 1860 Henry rifle, developed before the Civil War, and open-top pistols, reproductions of Civil War-era Colts that were converted from percussion caps to self-contained cartridges. Most shooters use Colt Single Action Army revolvers, the "Peacemaker" developed in 1873 and most often seen in cowboy movies. Hiem also shoots brass shotgun shells, which drop to the ground with a satisfying "clunk," something you won't hear when modern plastic shotgun shells are ejected. Hiem shoots only black powder, rejecting the idea that it's messier than the smokeless powder. "I've been shooting black powder for 30 years," he says, "and I'll bet my guns are the cleanest ones on the range."

When Jay (Double Shot) Kelley moved into his cabin, one of the first things he did was mount on the wall the holster his parents gave him when he was 10. Double Shot has been cowboy shooting for only three years. He's 63 years old.

Young cowboys grow up into older cowboys, but they never grow too old to be a cowboy.

Carolina Clint will use his writing fee to buy a hammerless, double-barrel shotgun in an attempt to improve his miserable time scores.

to know more

For links to websites for the Single Action Shooting Society, which features a list of clubs, and the Carolina Belles, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."