

The Golden Era of Exhibition Shooters
By
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For the better part of the 20th century the major United States munitions companies, such as Winchester and Remington, fielded exhibition shooters to flog their products at state fairs, large gun clubs, and like venues. They followed in the footsteps of famed western exhibition shooters that came of age during the 1880s.

It all started in 1874 when the Irish Rifle Team, the premier team in the British Isles, crossed the Atlantic to take on the upstart United States at Creedmoor. Some 8,000 spectators flowed out from nearby New York City to watch the event which was covered by all the major papers and the likes of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, which illustrated the event with elaborate woodcuts.

In the wake of this international competition, exhibition shooters were soon populating vaudeville theaters, circuses, and fair sites, all claiming to be the "World's Champion Rifle Shot." In most cases it was a charade as there was no governing body, or even competition, to regulate the shooting of ashes from a cigarette held in an assistant's mouth or buttons from his vest-tricks that were more often than not rigged by the charlatans on stage.

The first legitimate exhibition shooter to rise to prominence was a dentist by the name of William F. Carver who, much like controversial John "Doc" Holliday, gave up the chair and drill for the firearm and fame. Carver shot for six consecutive days in 1885 in New Haven, Connecticut, breaking 64,881 glass balls tossed into the air out of 60,000. Most importantly he established the rules for endurance exhibition shooting. To earn some side money he also developed a diving horse act. The act was continued by his family after his death and ran until pressure from animal rights groups forced its closure in the late 1970s.

Captain Adam H. Bogardus, a member of the National Trap Shooting Hall of Fame and author of *Field, Cover, and Trap Shooting*, was in heated competition with Carver for the world title and, in a series of 25 matches, was defeated by the dentist 19 times. Bogardus' was an excellent wing shooter and displayed that skill in Madison Square Garden by shooting at 5,000 glass balls in eight hours and 20 minutes, breaking 4,844 of them. His two guns were alternately cooled in buckets of ice water.

Young Phoebe Ann Mosey, better known as Annie Oakley or 'Little Sure Shot', and Frank Butler were the next of the famous exhibition shooters. The pair married and together toured for many years with William Cody's Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, performing before the crowned heads of Europe.

But all fade in comparison to the skill, showmanship, and longevity of the Topperweins. Adolph Toepperwein, whose name was later name Americanized to Topperwein, was the son of a gunsmith, born into the Schützen shooting culture of the central Texas hill country's German ethnic enclave that also gave us Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz and another famous shooter, of sorts, Bonnie Parker. Early on Ad was handling firearms and

after seeing Doc Carver perform at Buffalo Bill's show there was no stopping him. Ad apprenticed in vaudeville and the circus until 1901 when he was hired by the Winchester Repeating Arms Company as an exhibition shooter when he was 32. He would retire in 1951, aged 82, an amazing half century of performing, still at the top of the game.

Ad's greatest claim to fame came in San Antonio, Texas, between December 13 and December 22, 1907 when, following Carver's rules, he used three 1903 model Winchester .22 semiautomatic to shoot at 72,000 2½ inch square hand thrown wooden blocks, missing only nine. His longest run without a miss was 14,540.

Perhaps his second greatest claim to fame involved breaking through the somber facade of President 'Silent Cal' Coolidge. The 30th president was known for being, in typical New England fashion, taciturn. It has been said that at a reception a society matron said to him, "Mr. President! I have a bet that I can make you say three words." The president replied. "You lose."

Coolidge was in the audience when Ad placed his rifle on the ground, tossed two eggs into the air, did a somersault, picked up the rifle, and shot the eggs before they hit the ground. "The president not only laughed, he threw up his arms, clapped his hands and roared" reported Ad.

While taking a walk on the New Haven Green during a visit to the Winchester plant in 1902 Ad met Elizabeth Servaty, who happened to work at Winchester as a 22 caliber cartridge assembler. He was smitten and they soon married. The new Mrs. Topperwein had never handled a firearm but didn't want to remain at home while Ad was on the road. He began teaching her how to shoot and she soon excelled. It was during her early shooting lessons that she acquired her nickname. As the story goes, when she began learning how to shoot tin cans were the targets of choice. When she scored a hit there was a "plinking" sound and she would confirm the hit with a joyous, "I plinked it," and quickly Ad began calling her "Plinky."

It wasn't long before, like Oakley and Butler, they were touring together, making their professional debut as husband and wife in an appearance at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. The Topperweins showcased their shooting prowess with rifles, shotguns, and pistols at a variety of targets. Ad reminisced,

"I taught her to shoot and soon after we were married Elizabeth was part of my act on my tours, shooting one-inch pieces of chalk from between my fingers, shooting empty shells off my fingers, and other feats of skill. Later on, she won the title of world's champion woman marksman. Winchester signed her too and we became widely known as the world's greatest shooting team - The Famous Topperweins. Man, those were the days! Whole towns turned out to see us perform; schools were closed in order that the kids might come and witness the crack shooting exhibitions."

Plinky was an accomplished shotgun shooter, inducted into the Trapshooting Hall of Fame in its inaugural class along with Annie Oakley, who once told her, "Mrs. Top, you're the greatest shot I've ever seen." In 1904 she became the first woman to break 100 straight at trap, a feat she would repeat another 199 times. During exhibitions she would use a semiautomatic shotgun to break four targets thrown in the air simultaneously.

Ad and Plinky would shoot standing on their feet, heads, backs, or back on their feet after doing a roll along the ground. The marbles, chalk, metal discs, assorted vegetables, and eggs tossed into the air never stood a chance. Plinky's specialty was shooting a pistol over her shoulder and sighting by looking into the mirror of her compact. Ad, a talented amateur artist, famously closed the act by sitting on a wooden ammunition crate and, using a 22 rifle as a brush, draw the profile of an Indian's head, Uncle Sam, or some other figure on an unmarked board or sheet of tin with bullet holes.

Plinky took time off from the act during the 1920s to raise their son, Laurence, later returning to the road. They toured military installation during World War II to raise moral, making their last tour together in 1943. Plinky passed away on January 27, 1945. At the time Ad was asked as to which Topperwein was the better shot Ad diplomatically responded: "Well, I was best at some feats and she was best at others. Reckon it was a toss-up between us."

Ad went back on tour after Plinky's passing until retiring in 1951 when Winchester kept him on the payroll as an advisor. In his retirement he kept himself busy with long daily walks, running a shooting camp, and giving free shooting lessons. Age crept up on him, his hearing succumbing to a lifetime of firearm reports as his eyesight dimmed. Ad Topperwein died on March 4, 1962, and was laid to rest next to Plinky under a head stone engraved "Keep Your Powder Dry."

Others have followed in their very large footsteps, Herb Parsons was Topperweins' protégé and successor, promoting Winchester product for 30 years. A member of the Trapshooting Hall of Fame, he was noted for being able to toss seven clay targets into the air and dust them all before they hit the ground with a 12 gauge Winchester Model 12 pump action shotgun.

Parsons started with Winchester in 1929 as a salesman and was giving exhibitions at military bases early in World War II but soon found himself in the US Army Air Corps as a gunnery instructor. After being demobilized he quickly returned to Winchester. When Topperwein began looking for a successor he selected Parsons. The two men worked together, both believing that realism, not rigged acts, was the best way to please a crowd.

Parson's was a hunter, credited with originating the popular, "Go hunting with your boy today and you won't have to hunt for him tomorrow," and an international duck-calling champion. Taking a bit of time away from the road he won the Grand American in 1954. His shows were lively with lots of pizzazz as he crisscrossed the country in a red Pontiac station wagon stuffed with his show supplies giving as many as 130 shows a year. A PA system was hidden in a giant Winchester shotshell attached to the roof from which he

announced his coming shows. Unfortunately this remarkable showman's man's life was altogether too short for, on July 19, 1959, he suffered a heart attack and died at the age 51.

Soon after World War II Remington hired Thomas Frye, a former Ohio State Policeman and Army Air Corps gunnery instructor as a field representative. He was an outstanding trap and skeet shooter who went on to win eight Grand Americans and induction into the Trap Shooting Hall of Fame.

Fry made an assault on Topperwein's endurance record in October of 1959, using three of the newly introduced Remington Nylon 66 .22 semiautomatic rifles to hit 100,004 out of 100,010 wooden block over a period of 14 straight days in October of 1959. Crusty and combative Colonel Charles Askins Jr., well-known firearms writer, examined photos of Frye's attempt and noted that the man tossing the blocks was standing just off Frye's left shoulder, a more advantageous position as Topperwein's block tossers stood 25 to 30 feet ahead in accordance with Carver's dictates. Never the less his remarkable display of endurance, timing, and accuracy was recognized by the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

It was also reported that Frye had taken muscle relaxants to ease him through his marathon. Topperwein's only relief for his sore muscles was having Plinky help him dress and occasionally bathe his face with cool water during shooting while a barber shaved him each morning. . Even though he did not follow Carver's rules Frye received a gracious letter of congratulations from Topperwein who lauded him for, "wonderful endurance and accuracy."

Most recently Tom Knapp, sponsored by CZ-USA Benelli and the Federal Ammunition Company, would put on 100 live shows a year and made numerous TV appearances. Knapp's claim to fame is that he could hand toss nine clay targets into the air and using his sponsor's semi-automatic shotgun break them all in less than two seconds. He followed that by breaking Parson's record of seven dusted clay discs by breaking eight hand tossed clays with a pump shotgun in 1.87 seconds. Using a 12-ga. semi-auto shotgun with extended magazine he broke ten hand tossed clays in 2.2 seconds. He was active in person and on television through the mid 2010s and, like Parsons, died entirely too young at 63 in 2013.

There were others worthy of mention, Ed McGivern, author of the still in print *Fast and Fancy Revolver Shooting*, was sponsored by Smith and Wesson. His *Guinness Book of Records* feat of firing five shots in 0.57 seconds from a revolver set in 1932, when he was 57, still stands. Billy Hill of Remington, Dave Flanningan of Peters, and a third husband and wife team Ernie and Dot Lind represented Winchester-Western and for a while they carried on the great tradition but by the late 1960s exhibition shooting was a memory.

The great exhibition shooters of the 20th century are now all gone. Today Smith and Wesson, Colt, Shell Shock, Springfield, Eley, and Lapua sponsor competitive teams to popularize and promote their products making it unlikely we shall ever see the likes of the great exhibition shooters of the past again.