

Reach for the sky! Everyday folks become gunfighters monthly to preserve cowboy ways

By ALMA BOWEN
The Times

Cowboys, cowgirls and buckaroos ride into Gainesville once a month, form posses, shoot it out, gab, have lunch and quietly ride away.

About 80 showed up a week ago and gathered on 115 acres in a secured wooded area. Soon a pleasant odor of burnt black gunpowder filled the air with sounds of gunfire and bullets hitting metal: BlamPing. BlamPing.

They came from many North Georgia towns, including Marietta, Covington, Lawrenceville, Snellville and others. At least one family was there from South Carolina.

They were only about two miles off Interstate 985, but a whole world away from the routine of their everyday lives.

"I'm a real estate agent, and I come here each month to unload my stress and tension," said a well-holstered young woman.

It was the monthly fourth-Saturday shooting match of the Cherokee Cowboys, an eight-year-old club owned by the Cherokee Gun Club. It is part of the Single Action Shooting Society founded in California in 1987, an international organization "devoted to preserving and promoting the sport of cowboy action shooting." The shootouts take place in six different stages and involve various disciplines with pistols, rifles and shotguns.

SASS also is devoted to preserving the traditions and lore of the Old West where guns in the hands of honest, clean-living individuals kept the marauding intruders and desperados away. It has more than 60,000 members in all 50 states and 18 foreign countries.

Georgia has 11 SASS organizations including Gainesville's Cherokee Cowboys and the River Bend Rough Riders of Dawson County.

Members of a SASS organization must select an alias that would have been appropriate to a 19th century historical character or a main figure in Western films or literature. The selected alias must be unique and must be approved and registered with the headquarters office. It also must be printable before a wide audience.



Is it Doc Holliday, the nerviest, fastest, deadliest man with a six-gun? Actually, it's Braveheart Bill, a.k.a. Bill Wallace of Marietta.

The Gainesville Times

Members also are required to appear at meetings attired in costume appropriate to their alias, clothing seen in Western B-movies or a television series. They can portray a banker, gunslinger, railroad engineer, schoolmarm, saloon girl, etc., and are advised to research proper attire to make sure it is accurate

New clothing items can be purchased or old clothing items can be altered to reflect the period. Outlawed items include designer jeans, any type athletic shoe or combat boot, short sleeves shirts, visible plastic, nylon or Velcro and manufacturer or sponsor logos.

A Hall County couple found at the Cherokee Cowboys recent shooting match was Bea Itchin' and Rolan Kraps. They are known in other circles as Carol and Dave Steier from Candler. Their son, Shootin' Kraps, or Dan, also is a member.

"This is something the family can do together, and the biggest part is the camaraderie. We're all the same here. We go by aliases, and we don't know if we're standing next to a doctor or a lawyer. It's equal opportunity harassment," Itchin' said with a smile.

Each member appeared to have been serious about the required costuming, and that apparently is half the fun. Two-gun holsters were the order of the day, and first-time visitors thought they had entered the world of "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" or maybe "The Magnificent Seven."

While the world of SASS and the Cherokee Cowboys is make-believe, the list of rules and regulations is deadly real. Failure to abide by the strict rules results in being kicked out of membership.

Alcohol is not permitted on the premises; lighted cigarettes are not permitted and protective eyeglasses and earplugs must be worn at all times on the shooting stages.

Loading and unloading of guns are supervised at different tables. Emptying the guns of spent shells must be done at the unloading table where empty cartridges are carefully placed in a bag for either recycling or proper discard. Long guns must be kept open unless shooting, and barrels of loaded long guns must be pointed upward unless firing in competition.



Cheeky Girl helps Hot Shot Lightning with his vest. Teri Rush and her son, Connor, are from Simpsonville, S.C.



Alma Bowen The Times

Hogleg Smith or Neal Spruill, a Gainesville gunsmith, is a dualist shooter, which means he holds his pistol with one hand.

The Gainesville Times

The types of both the firearms and the ammunitions are highly restricted. Ammunition "bounce-back" from the metal target can result in instant dismissal, and the shooter can be held responsible for damage to a target or injury to another person.

Competition is based on timing; all members are safety officers, and shooters can be penalized for safety violations. Firing takes place in six different stages and scores from each stage form the final place or rank.

Shooting categories are based on age and gender with the "buckaroos" being age 12 or younger. The Elder Statesman/Grand Dame category is for those ages 70 or older.

The rules are tough, and the make-believe never ends, with a different dramatic scenario at each stage. On Stage No. 1 at the recent gathering, the participants were coming in from a long hard cattle drive. The only task remaining before a hot bath and a shave was depositing the payroll. That's where the storyline begins:

"As you reach for the saddlebags, you notice a rowdy bunch eyeing you. It looks like you are going to have to fight your way to the bank.

"Procedure: Stand at the horse with saddlebags in both hands.

When ready say, 'You boys don't come any closer.' At the beep, drop the saddlebags and pick up your shotgun. Loading from your person, engage the shotgun targets in any order; place open and empty shotgun back on the horse. Pick up your rifle and engage the rifle targets by sweeping left to right 3 times, no double taps. Place empty and open rifle back on the horse. Draw your 1st pistol and engage the pistol targets from left to right with a Nevada sweep; holster. Draw your 2nd pistol and engage the pistol targets left to right in a Nevada sweep; holster."

It's all in the spirit of the game.

Contact: abowen@gainesvilletimes.com, (770) 718-3403



Alma Bowen The Times

Is it the Lone Ranger and his faithful companion Tonto? No it's Georgia Plainsman and Bandana Red, or Don Jarvis of Lilburn and W.D. Jones of Lawrenceville.



Cherokee Cowboys

- **Territorial Governor:** Silver City Rebel, a.k.a. Johnny Thomas of Dawson County, owner of Thomas Engines in Cumming.
- **Shooting Coordinator:** Southern Breeze, a.k.a. Charles "Breezy" Head of Cumming, (770) 889-2434
- **Membership dues:** \$25 a year
- **Shooting fees:** \$15 for members, \$20 for nonmembers