



Shoot 'em Up

The romance of the Old West calls, and wannabe cowboys strap on their guns for a weekend of competition

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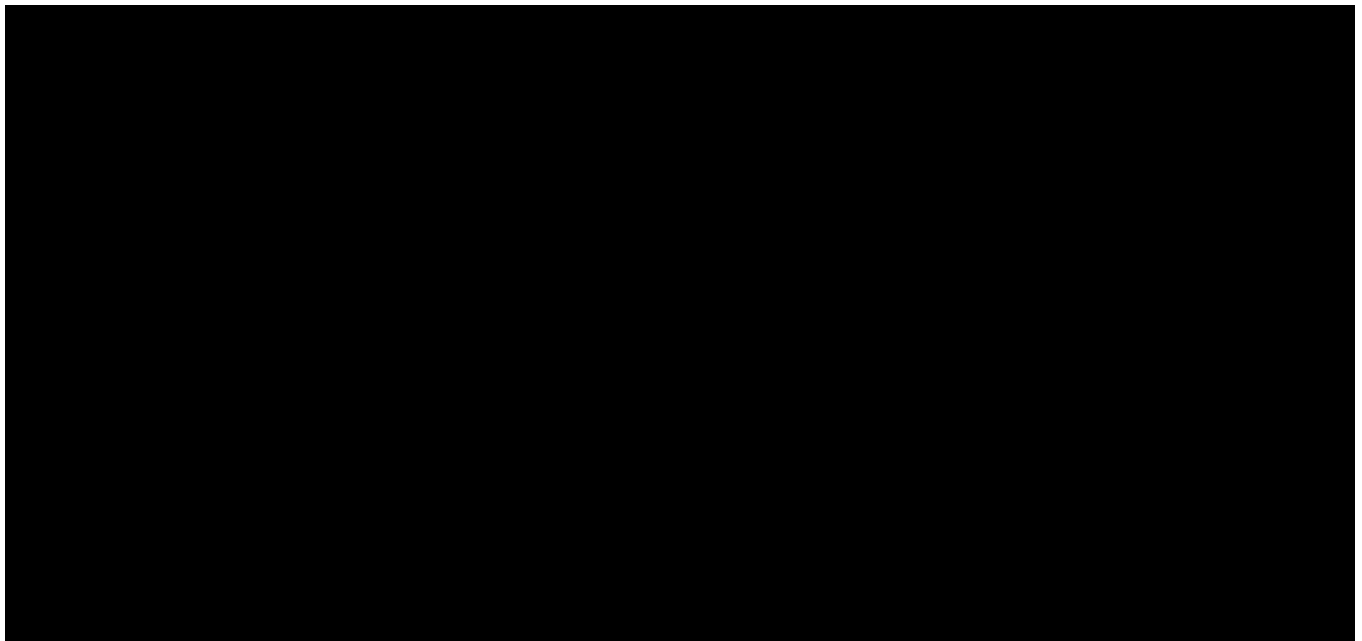
Lhanie Dickson, also known as "Island Girl" takes aim in the shooting competition. (Journal Photo by Jennifer Rotenizer)

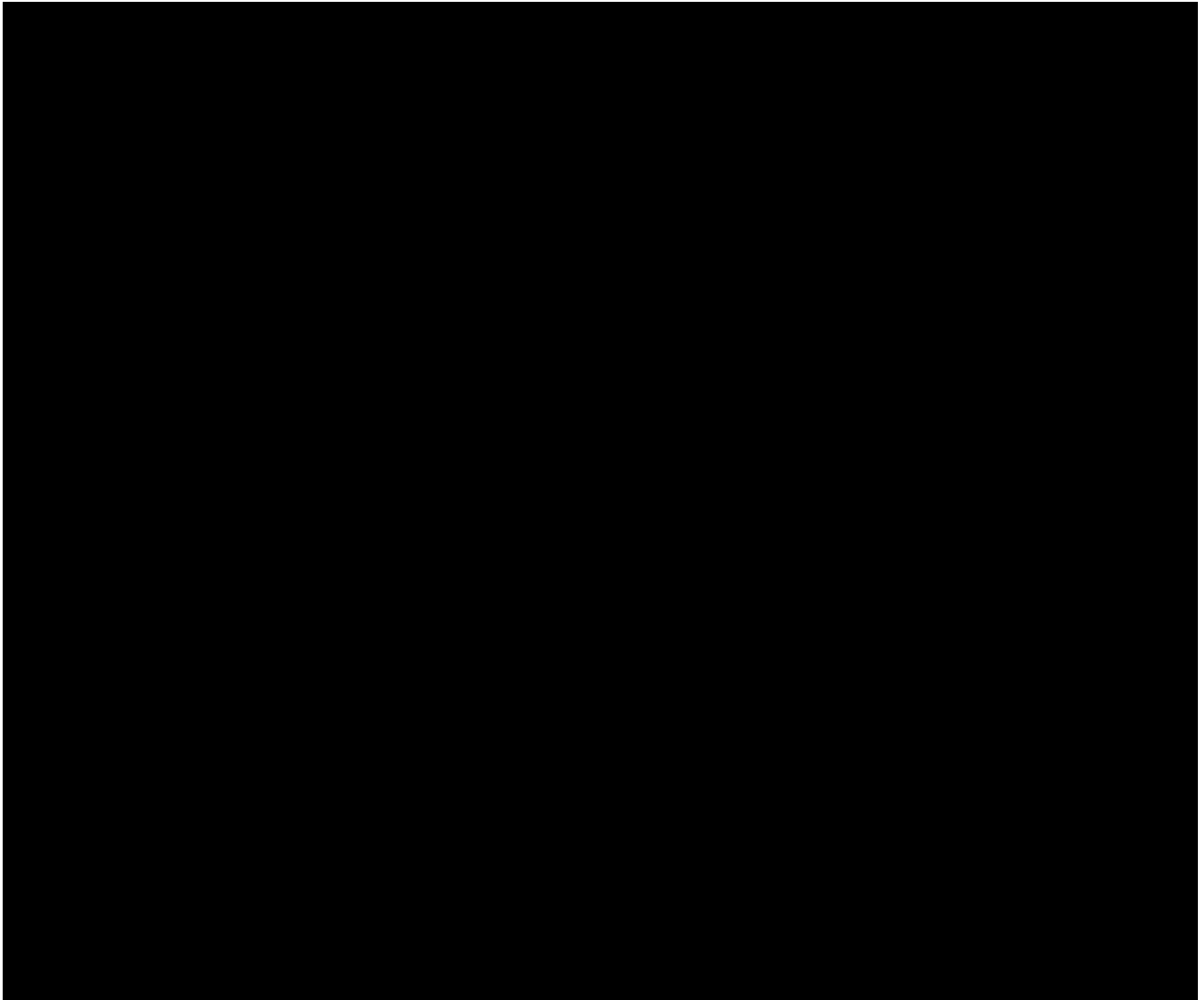
SALISBURY - Kill-'em-All-Kate, the vice president of an Albemarle pest-control company, juggles exterminator schedules and customer complaints Monday through Friday. "Wolfpack Pest Control - may I help you?". Her husband, Red River Ray, works in landscaping and owns a share in a commercial nursery. Their 13-year-old son, Grubby Hayes, just finished seventh grade at South Stanly Middle School.

Those are their weekday lives.

"I'm nice all day long," said Kate, whose real name is Tracie Rummage. "And I can be mean on the weekends and play cowboy.

"I decided when I come shoot, I want to be mean."





The Rummages, members of the Single Action Shooting Society, or SASS, meet up with a posse of like-minded gunslingers every weekend, complete with new names and old-fashioned clothes.

They wear the wide-brimmed hats and dust-covered-boot uniforms of Tombstone and television heroes such as Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger, competing to be the quickest and most accurate draw in the new Wild West. Or at least in Salisbury.

It's also their shot at re-creating childhood dreams of silver pistols and gunsmoke, when good and evil were as black and white as the horses flickering across television screens in the 1950s and '60s. It's a chance to be the outlaw - or the hero.

"I saw these guys dressed like cowboys," said Jim Henriksen, a retired Greensboro police officer who invested in his own set of walnut-handled Colts in 1999. "And I saw my chance to be Roy Rogers again."

Members claim that they're not just playing cowboy. They say that it is the fastest-

growing competitive-shooting sport. Many people who never imagined that they would pick up a gun find themselves strapping on holsters, Henriksen said, because older weapons are less intimidating than today's pistols. All cowboy action guns must have been made before 1897 -or at least be replicas from that era.

When Spencer Davis, alias Marshal Harland Wolff, took up the sport 10 years ago, his only option was to drive the 70 miles from Davidson County to the state's only club, in Eden. Now members can play cowboy somewhere in North Carolina every weekend if they want to. Web sites list more than a dozen clubs, from the Iredell Regulators to the Pitt County Cowboys.

Nationwide, the sport has 500 clubs and members from 18 countries and all 50 states. The membership of around 59,000 includes 5,000 to 10,000 new cowboys and cowgirls.

On weekdays, Henriksen pays for his cowboy habit by working behind the counter at the Gun Store in Lexington. Most Saturdays, he becomes Carolina Lucky, a cowhand who breaks horses in the summer and a deputy who chases criminals in the winter.

His persona is partly based on his grandfather, who was a part-time Chicago policeman, part-time cowboy, mixed with a dash of fantasy. "We're not trying to be historically correct," he said. "Cowboys are looking for things be simple again."

A sharp wit is appreciated along with swift shooting. There's Tumbleweed, a 17-year-old shooter from Cornelius who loves gymnastics and cheerleading. Shady Jim from Winston-Salem - at 73 one of the more senior shooters - didn't cast much of a shadow back in high school with his tall and lanky frame. And there's Doc Tetons, a plastic surgeon.

Grubby Hayes, 13, also known as John Rummage, took part of his name from the Western star Gabby Hayes and added his own twist. "When I was young," the just-turned-13-year-old said, "I didn't like to take baths."

"This whole thing's a fantasy," said Jim Tosco of Lexington. "It never happened. It's a thing from our childhood that we never were able to do. I just guess it was the little kid in me that never grew up."

At 69, Tosco knows that he's not as quick on the draw as the other cowboys. There is a lot of gray under his cowboy hat. But he remembers his mother taking him into town as a child, in Somerville, N.J., for weekend grocery shopping and 15-cent double features. There, Gary Cooper and Randolph Scott rode into his dreams and never left. Those childhood heroes fed the story behind his alias, Tosco, an Italian immigrant and now out-of-work scout for General Custer.

Toward the beginning of each month, local cowboys and cowgirls meet at the Rowan County Wildlife Park, a public shooting range outside Salisbury. They shoot live ammunition at a variety of targets set up in three shooting "stages" cut into a hillside and

separated by grass-covered banks. Their enemy is the timer, not Apache warriors or outlaws - seconds are added to each shooter's final time for each target missed. The bounty is silver and gold buckles, bragging rights and occasionally a six-pack.

On a recent Saturday morning, Oklahoma Charlie crouched in front of a Styrofoam cactus, drilling a carpet scrap into its base for stability. (The cactus would later tumble over anyway, toppled by a cowboy aiming for bonus points with his hat). Oklahoma Charlie is married to Lhanie (Island Girl) Dickson, a world champion in women's competition. As Island Girl adjusted her ammo, boots crunched on gravel in a nearby parking lot as cowboy and girls dismounted from Ford Tauruses and Chevy Silverados, shaking their spurs and adjusting their holsters.

After a safety meeting, the 60 cowboys registered for the day's competition split into three posses. A garden of beach umbrellas blossomed in front of each stage as they wheeled their wooden gun charts into safety zones. Squinty, alias Tim Wilmoth, adjusted a pair of prescription safety glasses, set their case under a banana and picked up his unloaded Winchester rifle.

At a loading table, cowboys took turns shoving lead bullets in brass jackets into each chamber. Here, gun lovers are more conscious of the stigma against them. They are quick to point out that they have never had a mishap - the penalty for even accidentally carrying around a loaded gun is disqualification from the day's match. Anyone shooting or watching the competition must wear protective eyewear. Earplugs are highly recommended.

The first cowboy moseyed up to the stage and raised his arms high in the air. A pair of pistols waited on a table in front of him. A herd of steel buffalo-shaped silhouettes loomed about 15 feet away. "Come on, baby," he said, reciting the phrase that told another cowboy standing at his shoulder to start the timer. "Light my fire."

At high noon, a few cowboys dipped into their coolers for Gatorade. Johnny Outlaw's 9-year-old grandson offered him a slice of leftover pizza.

Grubby Hayes stood at an unloading table, checking his shotgun and rifle for any undischarged ammunition. "Today I'm going to shoot slow and clean."

"I imagine before it's over you'll turn it loose," Tosco said. "You can't stand it. You got to let it go."

"Most likely," Hayes said. He squinted at the steel buffalo. The metal sang as another cowboy unloaded his pistols. "But if I do, I do but if I don't, I don't."

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- An online multimedia presentation featuring sights and sounds of the Single Action Shooting Society monthly match is available at <http://extras.journalnow.com/cowboy/>

This story can be found at: http://www.journalnow.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=WSJ/MGArticle/WSJ_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1031776040234&path=!localnews&s=1037645509099

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