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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT | July 8, 2013, 2:10 p.m. ET

Showdown at the End of the Trail

By MARK YOST



Greg Nevitt/SASS

Keeping alive the memory of the lifestyle and guns of the Old West.

Edgewood, N.M.

If you were a young boy growing up in the 1950s and '60s, you probably played Cowboys and Indians. If you want to do it with real guns, you can come to this small town about 25 miles east of Albuquerque.

The Single Action Shooting Society exists, in the words of its website, "to preserve and promote the sport of Cowboy Action Shooting." Its aim, in addition to having a lot of fun, is to keep alive the memory of the lifestyle and guns of the Old West: replica Colt Peacemakers, Winchester lever-action rifles, and the short, double-barreled shotguns that stage-coach drivers carried to ward off robbers.

The group has 99,000 members from around the world, according to Misty Miller, the organization's 39-year-old chief executive officer who goes by the nom de cowgirl Misty

Moonshine. These enthusiasts participate in numerous state and local competitions almost every weekend. But every year about 500 of them—including a large contingent of Germans known as the Pooley Gang—come here, to the 480-acre Founders Ranch, to participate in the End of the Trail, the SASS world championships (or, in late August, the Four Corners Regional Championship, known as Outlaw Trail).

End of Trail is actually a weeklong gathering that, in addition to the shooting matches, features costume contests, dances, stage-coach rides and poker games. It all happens in a re-created Western town complete with a saloon, stable, general store and hitching posts. Shooting competitions include pocket pistol, shotgun and mounted matches, this last involving competitors on horseback racing around barrels firing their six guns at balloons.

But the main event is the three-gun posse shoot. Competitors form posses of about 20 shooters each and compete on four different courses per day over three days. Each course requires them to shoot 10 rounds from their revolvers, 10 from their rifles and four to six shells from their shotguns, as well as to simulate train robberies, hold-ups and stand-offs.

Some of the competitors are experienced shooters who have gravitated toward this particular niche; others had never fired a gun of any kind before.

"I was between hobbies," said 45-year-old Stephanie Logan, aka Panhandle Cowgirl, a sixth-grade history teacher from Texas. "I came to my first event six years ago with all the wrong guns, which everyone does at first," she said, noting that many beginners simply get cowboy-looking guns but don't understand the various nuances of the sport. "But," she added, "I got hooked on the people."

The competition is intense, with the best shooters firing all 24 rounds in about 15 seconds. But "99% of it is about having fun," said Scott Love, 54, a quality-control manager from Houston known as Texas Jack Daniels. He and his wife, Shot Glass, who makes her own clothes, have been doing this for more than 20 years. Legend has it SASS was founded in 1981 by Harper Craigh, aka Judge Roy Bean, after he watched a few television westerns. The first End of Trail was held in April 1982.

I followed Texas Jack's posse over the last day of competition, where I met Sarah Harp, a 19-year-old deadeye from Sunbury, Ohio, who calls herself Sage Chick. She's been competing since she was 11 and is a six-time world champion (five times in her category and once, in 2010, the overall women's champion). She shoots alongside her parents, Beth and Rod Harp, better known in these parts as Fowl Lady and Rowdy Bishop. (Mr. Harp's moniker is perhaps more accurate than most: "I'm a bishop in our church and I'm a little bit rowdy," he said between rounds.)

At this year's End of Trail the Harps hadn't missed a single target over the three-day posse shoot. Their prize: Each received a white-buffalo pin to stick on their cowboy hats.

"It's supposed to symbolize a white buffalo, which is pretty rare," Mr. Harp said.

While all three Harps shot perfectly, Sage Chick was the class of the field. In a standoff scenario that requires competitors fire 24 rounds at 14 targets after shouting "I'll not pay any blood money!" she turned in the best time of 16.24 seconds. She's particularly impressive when she fires her Winchester lever-action rifle. Standing under a yellow straw cowboy hat in her checkered shirt, blue jeans, boots and with a gun belt slung low on her hips, she works the lever-action rifle better than Chuck Connors in "The Rifleman."

The final event of the week was the Top Gun Showcase. It featured the 16 best shooters in a head-to-head, single-elimination three-gun target competition that was more for bragging rights than anything else. Sage Chick easily made the field and defeated Panhandle Cowgirl. But in the finals, the youngster came up against Holy Terror, the cowgirl name for Randi Rogers, a 10-time women's world champion from Houston. Sage Chick did her best, but lost by about one-tenth of a second. (Holy Terror was later defeated by men's winner Badlands Bud—real name: Steven Rubert—a multitime champion from San Diego, in the final shoot-off of the day.)

But Sage Chick got her due at the closing ceremonies, when the results of the main posse shoot were announced. She finished third overall but, more importantly, earned her second women's world championship, beating Holy Terror by nearly 20 seconds over the three days of competition. As for losing the Top Gun Showcase?

"We used the wrong load," Mr. Harp said, referring to the amount of gun powder in Sage Chick's bullets. "But we'll be back."

Mr. Yost is a writer in Houston.

A version of this article appeared July 9, 2013, on page D4 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Showdown at the End of the Trail.

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