

Gun clubs are becoming a way of life in America. BERWYN LEWIS reports from San Francisco SMH 20/10/1983

# The wealthy buy protection...ordinary people buy guns

GUNS in America are not just a way of life. They're a constitutional right, they fulfil a fantasy, they're part of this country's heritage and they're the only protection many people have in this fear and loathing-based society.

Guns can be a practical necessity, but for the so-called survivalists it's a case of living in the future — preparing for what might happen. They are equipping themselves in case of a major disaster, not just to protect against muggers and burglars.

But the survivalists are not the only Americans whose interest in guns has increased. Gun clubs and shooting as a sport are becoming more popular with paramilitarists, hunters, senior citizens, young couples, tourists and black-powder wild frontiers people. All subscribe to the illusion that security is a gun.

Chabot Gun Club in the East Bay Regional Park, California, is open to the public, has 1,400 members and offers "family attractions" such as pistol, rifle and shotgun ranges and clay and skeet target shooting.

"I've seen three-year-olds out here using their dad's .22 rifles," said 71-year-old Ray Bingelli, one of the 18 directors of Chabot.

"The laws are so lenient here," said Roger Garver, 73. "We could have gangsters out here practising with their weapons."

These old people are black powder muzzle-loader enthusiasts. Not exactly a gangster's choice of weapon.

One of Roger's first targets was a giraffe in Africa in 1930. He once shot a 3m bear, a Kodiak. It now hangs on the wall of his house in Alaska.

"When I found out how old he was I thought I was a murderer," said Roger. "He was between 35

and 40. He hadn't done anything to me. He might have been on his way to see his girlfriend."

That was the end of shooting to kill for Roger.

A few metres up the range 29-year-old Bill Bolton mounts his military gun on its tripod. It's an HK 91, made in Germany and converts to an automatic. Alongside lies his 9mm Smith and Wesson Model 559.

Bill's t-shirt, with its skull and cross bones over the hammer and sickle insignia, reads Better Dead Than Red.

"You can give the reds my name and address. Tell them to come and get me anytime," said Bill.

He works in a foundry and shoots every weekend. He buys all his ammunition in bulk, firing off an average of 40 rounds every 10 minutes. A box of 20 rounds costs \$17. Bill pays \$7 for 25 rounds.

"Boy, that baby's hot," he said, reloading the HK.

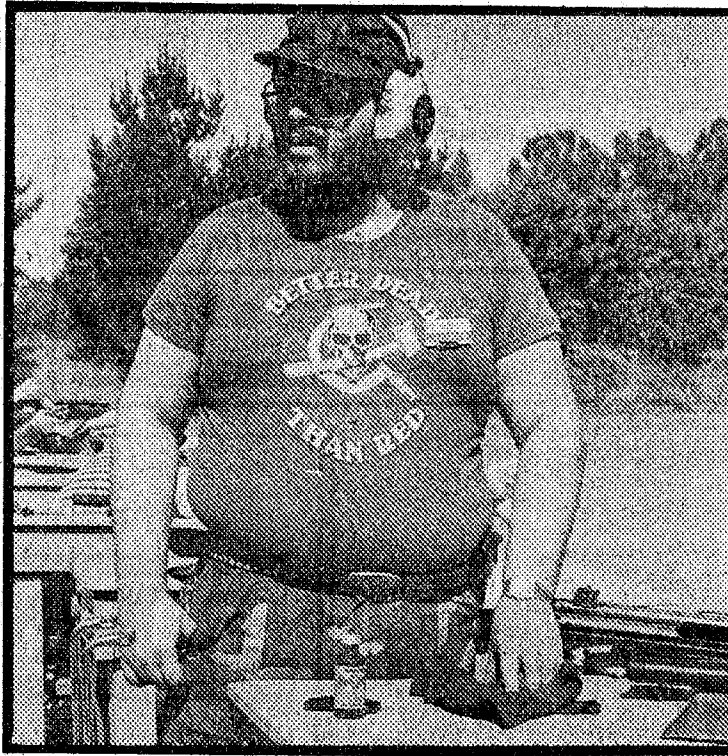
In his matching cammo (camouflage) gear of boots, pants and ammo pouch he is the portrait of the paramilitary survivalist on a hot Sunday at the range.

Nestling inside the velvet-lined interior of his custom-made ribbon mahogany trolley are Bill's guns, gun oils, cleaning rods and brushes. He carries a gun case for the HK too.

The adjoining booth houses John Metson, 36.

"I've got everything I need to survive the wilds," he said, patting the contents of his hide pouch which contains flint, lead rifle balls and a knife.

With his Davy Crockett-style buffalo skin hat, powder horn and muzzle loader he's like someone straight out of the civil war or a fur trade outpost.



Bill Bolton . . . "You can give the reds my name."

At the far end of the range, past the wild westers, old cronies and a lone Lone Ranger, a young couple in anonymous blue jeans, T-shirts and sunglasses aim, fire and check their targets with a strange and sinister urgency.

Down range from them the bank is littered with smashed clay targets. Along with silhouette shooting (cut-out metal animal targets), this is

the growth handgun sport in the US.

Across the Bay the San Leandro Rifle and Pistol Indoor-Outdoor Range is presided over by big Bill Osbourne.

According to his business card, he specialises in personal injuries, day or night.

Operated by The Optimist Club, the range is also the location of the

Security Training Academy and a rendezvous for He And She Shoots, Mountain Man and Squaw socials and Young Buck and Maiden costume parties.

A daily event is the arrival of Japanese tourists who come to California to go shooting like they do in Westerns.

For \$2.50 you can shoot from 9.30 am to 9 pm, minimum age 10 years.

"We don't screen anyone," said Bill.

An executive in a pinstripe suit and satin waistcoat removes his ear muffs and small calibre pistol from the padded depths of a briefcase. His coach, in baggy jeans, keys hanging off his waist, offers instructions. The executive aims, fires a few rounds into a bullet-riddled wall, corrects his accuracy, replaces the pistol and leaves.

A Golden West tourist limousine rolls up. Tour guides and Japanese tourists pour out carrying cases of handguns and boxes of rifles. The targets are set up and the firing begins.

For \$55 a day they have rented the limo driver, have access to 50 rounds of .38-calibre ammunition and 50 rounds of .22 calibre plus they get expert tuition.

The guns of California are not quiet. They represent big business and politics.

Robert Posner, 28, vice-president of his family's firearm business, The San Francisco Gun Exchange, successfully challenged San Francisco's Mayor Dianne Feinstein, in the State Supreme Court last year.

"She tried to outlaw private ownership of guns in San Francisco. We took her to court and we won. Under State law the City is not able to impose a stricter firearms law than the existing one. We

claimed the Mayor was 'out of bounds,' more or less, and she was," said Robert.

Many would claim guns are a necessity for life in the US. Despite the enormous amount of violent crime police are not obliged by law to respond to an appeal for help or to protect individuals.

"In California there is no suit which people can take up against the police for failure to provide protection or giving insufficient protection," said a criminologist, lawyer and legal writer, Don Kates.

"Politicians have guards assigned to them. The wealthy buy protection and ordinary people buy guns."

Dave Siegle, 37, is vice-president of Siegle's Hunting and Fishing Headquarters in Oakland. It recently celebrated its 40th anniversary with a huge gun show and sale.

They sell more than 1,600 handguns a year and almost double that amount in rifles and shotguns. Its range also includes hunting, fishing and cammo gear.

"Survivalists are really getting into cammo," said Dave. "It's become very popular since the St Helen's volcano disaster."

The cammo range includes clothing, make-up and matching accessories. Survivalists are people preparing for the worst.

"Volcanoes, earthquakes, the whole nuclear thing," said Dave. "They're people who buy guns and gear to put in their houses and shelters. They need guns to defend themselves against looters in the face of disaster. They buy military-style rifles and semi-automatics like M16s."

Dave recommends a double-action revolver for average home protection.

"It's fast and reliable," he said, "and it's easy to operate."