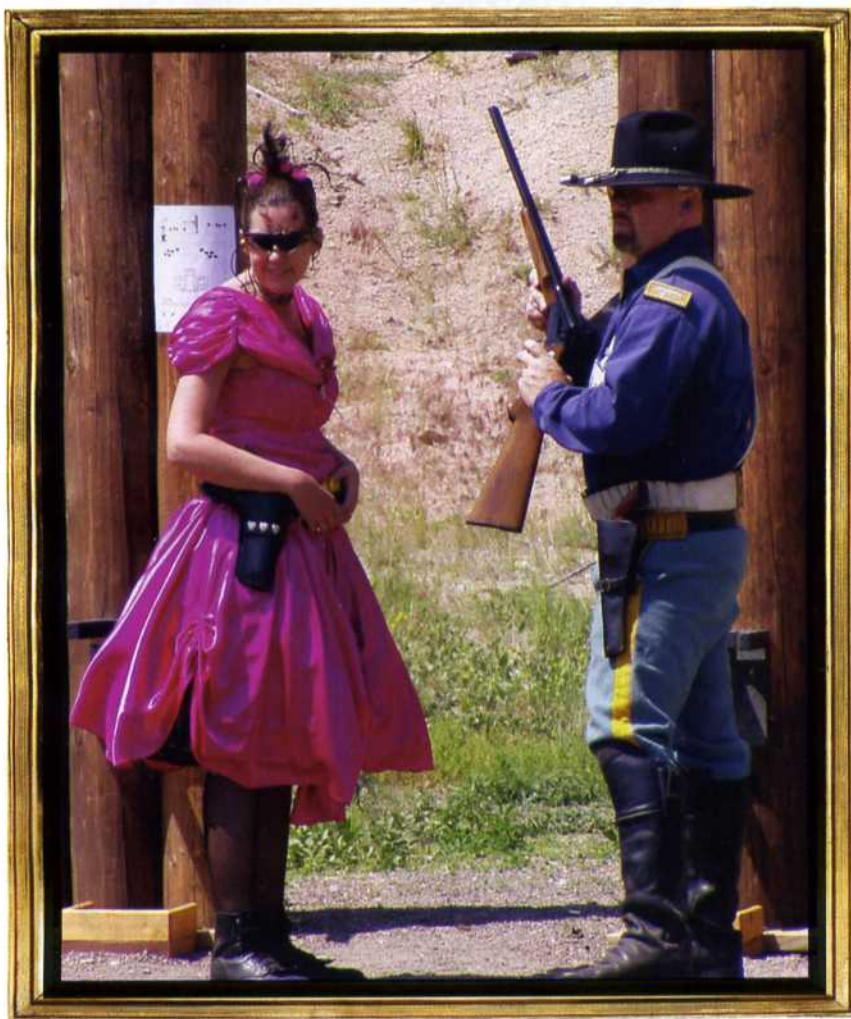


TRIGGER HAPPY

MEMBERS OF THIS EXCLUSIVE CLUB FIND JOY
IN THE SPORT OF SHOOTING



Many rifle club members dress in authentic-looking period costumes for the club's cowboy-action shooting contests.

By Michael Whiteman-Jones

It's no secret that Americans like guns. Although the United States accounts for less than 6 percent of the world's population, Americans own about 42 percent of the 650 million small firearms in circulation worldwide, according to the annual Small Arms Survey. That's about 270 million guns, or nine guns for every 10 people in the U.S. And it's estimated that we buy well over half of the 8 million new firearms manufactured worldwide every year.

But "gun" is a bit of a four-letter word in Boulder County, which is known more for its support of peacemakers like the Dalai Lama than for conservative spokesmen like Chuck Norris.

So some people might be more than a little surprised to learn that the Boulder Rifle Club is one of Boulder County's oldest, most respected and most sought-after private organizations.

"Hey, this is Boulder. Guns are bad," club president Grant Von Letkemann says with a chuckle. "Most of Boulder doesn't know we exist because we keep a low profile. A lot of those people who do know we're here look at us as a bunch of redneck, beer-swilling Bambi shooters. But the club's membership includes people from all walks of life—lawyers, judges, doctors, engineers, professors, truck drivers, laborers, men, women and children. It is probably more representative of the county as a whole than any other single organization."

TAKING AIM AT HISTORY

The Boulder Rifle Club traces its history to the turn of the last century. That's when a group of local gun enthusiasts gathered informally on Sunday mornings just east of Arapahoe Avenue and Folsom Street to practice target shooting against the creek bank. They included local resident C.W. Rowland, a world-famous benchrest marksman who once owned a private shooting range south of Chautauqua Park and set a 200-yard world target-shooting record in 1901 that stood, incredibly, for more than 100 years. His record-setting rifle—a .33-40 Pope Ballard custom-made Schuetzen rifle with a custom-made 20-power Stevens scope—was sold at auction this year for \$57,500, and was described by the auctioneer in New Hampshire as "the most important single-shot rifle to come to market."

PHOTO COURTESY ROGER BRIDEN

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— Boulder Rifle Club president Grant Von Letkemann



World-class action shooter Henning Wallgren says it was worth waiting seven years to become a member of the BRC, one of the area's most exclusive clubs.

Rowland was a founding member of the Boulder Rifle Club, which, according to the club's original NRA charter, officially formed Sept. 4, 1923, at the former state armory on the University of Colorado campus. The building now houses CU's School of Journalism and Mass Communication, but its basement then held an eight-station, 75-foot firing range that rifle club members

could use one night a week until the mid-1940s. Fifty members attended the club's first meeting, including two future police chiefs, a future dean of CU's School of Business Administration, and a former county coroner.

Club members practiced their craft at some interesting venues over the years: inside a bowling alley on Pearl Street, in the basement of a long-gone department store and on a 50-foot range built for CU's ROTC. At one time, they even shared a range about two miles north of Boulder with Company F of the 157th Infantry of the Colorado National Guard.

The club finally purchased a permanent range in 1952, and a second one in 1976. The first is called the North Range, and it's located north of Nelson Road and west of 51st Street. It's strictly for club members. The second is called the South Range, and it's open to the public on the first weekend of the month from April through August, and every weekend in September and October. It's a well-maintained facility just north of Boulder near Boulder Valley Ranch, on a barren patch of land with an expansive view of the foothills. It includes five shooting ranges of varying lengths plus a 50-foot, 12-position indoor range.

COWBOYS AND VARMINTS

The club tries to serve everybody by featuring a wide variety of activities for shooters of all ages and interests. Police-style action shooting sanctioned by the United States Practical Shooting Association is popular, and so are Informal Varmint for Score Benchrest Matches, in which competitors practice accurate long-range target shooting with rifles. Those looking for more colorful exploits enjoy the club's cowboy action contests, in which shooters dress up in turn-of-the-century Western costumes costing up to \$2,000 and plug away at targets with turn-of-the-century pistols and rifles. The club also features an active junior division that teaches children how to handle guns safely and introduces them to the sport of shooting.


Erie resident Belinda Elzinga admits feeling some trepidation about enrolling her 10-year-old daughter, Anneke, in the junior program last December. "I'm not a shooter or a hunter myself and I would've thought of a 100 other things before this," she says. "But Anneke's just a driven young girl. She decided she wants to be a K-9 officer when she grows up, and thought she'd better learn to shoot." A friend mentioned the club's youth program, and Elzinga decided to let Anneke give it a try. Nervous at first, Elzinga found herself impressed and relieved by the thoroughness of the club's training program. It included step-by-step classroom education followed by one-on-one, shot-by-shot teaching with a safety expert using a small-caliber rifle.

Now, Elzinga says, her daughter has graduated to using a handgun and is enjoying the discipline and challenge of competitive shooting with other kids. It's been such a positive experience that Elzinga is considering letting her younger sons enroll in the program once she thinks they're old enough. "I guess the thing that's been a pleasant surprise is that it's not training for hunting," she says. "It's a sport, a mental exercise, a way to be with other kids and make friends."

THE SEVEN-YEAR LIST

Membership in the club isn't expensive—only \$50 a year for adults, and every member has to volunteer one eight-hour workday. Unfortunately for many shooting enthusiasts, however, enrollment is limited. The club has kept its rolls to just 500 members since 1989. Spouses and club members who are over 65 aren't counted, raising the unofficial count to about 800 members, but it's still one of the area's hardest organizations to get into.

PHOTO BY SANDER MICHELSON



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Aspiring policewoman Anneke Elzinga, 10, enrolled in BRC's junior training program and says it's a great way to have fun and make friends.

"The Boulder Rifle Club must be one of the world's most exclusive shooting clubs," says Henning Wallgren, a Norwegian-born, internationally renowned professional marksman who moved to Boulder in 1999 and waited a typical seven years to become a member despite his status and reputation. He still cherishes the date when he was "taken in out of the cold," as he puts it. "You may attempt bribery, extortion or whatever creative method you can think of to get in," he says. "The only thing that will get you in someday is to wait for current members to drop their membership when they move, get tired of shooting, hit the age of 65 or die."

Despite the club's popularity, its members are acutely aware that their passion for guns is controversial, especially in a community with liberal leanings. Board member Roger Briden, for example, moved to Colorado about 13 years ago and joined the club about three years ago. He's proud to own guns: He grew up shooting them, and is an NRA-authorized trainer and a reserve officer in the Boulder County Sheriff's Department. He believes guns are both fun and useful, but he admits that he's careful about openly discussing his hobby at cocktail parties.

Longtime member and board member Gary Fisher agrees, noting "there's a bunch of people around here who'd shut the club down in a minute. They claim they don't like the noise, but I think they hate guns."

FIREARMS OWNERSHIP: 'A UNIVERSAL THING'

Von Letkemann believes the Boulder Rifle Club serves a vital role in the community, especially since the Forest Service closed a 30-acre public shooting area in Left Hand Canyon in March. Now there are only two public places to practice shooting in Boulder County: in the Roosevelt and Arapahoe National Forests, where it's restricted but legal unless otherwise posted; and at the club on occasions when it's open to the public. Von Letkemann would like to expand the club onto 18 acres of land that it owns just west of the existing club, and the club has offered to let local law-enforcement officers train there free at least four days a week. But the proposal has encountered stiff resistance from some city and county officials. He blames their opposition on ignorance, fear and a misguided political agenda, pointing out that gun ownership is more widespread in Boulder County than some people might want to believe, and is probably equally spread among political conservatives, libertarians and liberals.

"Firearms ownership is a universal thing," Von Letkemann says. "Half the people in Boulder own guns, but you don't know it. It's not politically correct, so people don't talk about it." ♦

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