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Old West lives on in Cowboy Shooting Action

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The fun of dressing like cowboys or Old West outlaws and having mock shootouts does not have to end when you become an adult.

Cowboy Action Shooting (CAS) is a grown-up version of Old West make-believe -- but the skills involved in the game all are real.

On the first Sunday of each month, the Bessemer Vigilance Committee meets to enjoy creative target practice on a set complete with a corral and a saloon. The shooters create a scenario with a series of targets.

They stay true to the theme by using old, single-action revolvers, pistol-caliber lever action rifles and old-time shotguns. They act out scenarios from historical incidents, famous films or anything that those who make the scenes can imagine.

Each one is different. In the "Buffalo Hunter" scenario, some "scoundrels," represented by targets, are trying to steal participants' buffalo hides.

Shooters must take out the thieves after hitting the buffalo and then move on to the next challenge. Electronic recorders track speed and accuracy at every shooting point.

Participants dress in Old West style, and use aliases from history, western literature and films, or Old West themes. Smokewagon Bill, a.k.a. Bill Hoover, is president of the Bessemer Bend Cowboy Action Shooting Club.

The club is named after Bessemer, an old ghost town long since disappeared, which once was to be the seat of the county if it had enough voters.

The bluffs overlooking Bessemer Bend was where John Wayne filmed "Hellfighters" in 1968.

The participants in the Bessemer Vigilance Committee are members of the Wyoming Single Action Shooters, or WSAS.

WSAS is the state's association that provides coordination between the Wyoming clubs and the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS,) the national association.

Membership in the Bessemer Vigilance Committee, or any Wyoming CAS club, includes membership in WSAS. SASS outlines the game play rules and safety procedures in their handbook, and organizes the END



of TRAIL, the World Championship of Cowboy Action Shooting.

They also strive to preserve Old West history and Second Amendment rights.

How it got started

According to the SASS Web site, Harper Creigh, an avid shooter in Soldier of Fortune and IPSC-type action shooting matches, watched old westerns on TV on a rainy Saturday afternoon.

Afterward, Creigh called shooting buddies Gordon Davis and Bill Hahn about his idea to shoot their next match using western-type guns.

Since that day in 1981, more than 500 CAS clubs have sprung up all over the nation. SASS has more than 75,000 members. Europe and Australia also have Single Action Shooting clubs.

In Wyoming, Wheatland, Gillette, Cheyenne, Buffalo and Cody all have a CAS club. The Bessemer Vigilance Committee formed in 1996.

Per the national rules, guns used in the competitions must be 1898 or earlier single-action models or reproductions, according to Bessemer Vigilance Committee Vice President Eaton Flowers, a.k.a. Tom Michel.

The single action refers to the reloading of the gun's chamber after each shot by pulling the hammer back in order to fire again.

Who can join?

Anyone over the age of 12 can participate in the Bessemer Vigilance Committee. They meet at the Cowboy Shooters' Range at the Stuckenhoff Sport Shooting Complex, just northeast of Casper.

The mandatory shooter/safety meeting begins after registration at 10:45 a.m. Cowboy shooting may be a game, but the CAS club does not play around when it comes to safety.

The Stuckenhoff shooting range and SASS enforce strict rules and precautions.

Four stages of Old West fun begin at 11 a.m. Shooters from beginning levels to experts fully can participate in the games. For beginners, it is a way to learn the basics of shooting from encouraging experts who are eager to teach.

The club encourages women to get involved in the sport. About one-fourth of regular participants are female, and they would like more to join.

Lawdogs vs. Cowboys

Regular practice with CAS improves shooting speed and accuracy skills.

In the annual Lawdogs vs. Cowboys competition held in the summer, local, County, State and Federal law officers of Natrona County face off in a friendly competition with the Cowboy Action Shooters.

The cowboys stick to their single-action guns, while the law officers sometimes use new firearms, including semi-automatic weapons.

Yet in four of the last six years, the Cowboys have bested the Lawdogs in competitions, which are based on time and accuracy, according to the Bessemer Vigilance Committee members.

Michel attributes this to the fact that regular practice in targets and speed hones shooting skills. He also mentioned proudly that old style guns can perform as well as new ones when used well.

Proceeds from the Lawdogs vs. Cowboys match goes to the 4-H shooting sports to help them buy equipment.

The Cheyenne regional shooting event is another much anticipated annual match. It is held in July and

around 400 shooters compete.

Blizzards and windy conditions have prevented the Cowboy Action Shooters from holding their monthly match in December. However, they will shoot in all weather as long as it is not a health or safety issue.

To join or for more information about the Bessemer Vigilance Committee and Cowboy Action Shooting, call Smokewagon Bill at 472-1926, or go to sassnet.com.