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## **My Day at the Gun Show**

### **Or, The Gangs that Shoot Straight Talk Turkey**

by Barry Friedman

It's not the guns you notice first, the antique pistols or Glocks or knives or captured AK47s on rows of tables under the banners *Bob's Guns*, *Lea's Guns*, *T.C.'s Guns*; nor is it the fathers and sons in matching camouflage vests and hunting rifles, walking like sentries through the crowd; nor the rows and rows of vendors that line Expo Square, selling everything from Nazi memorabilia to cutlery to wallets to *Beanie Babies*.

*It's all the men with canes.*

You notice them in the parking lot, getting out of vans and trucks and El Caminos; notice them at the front entrance to the Pavilion, walking past the *Point muzzle up and unloaded outside* sign and trying to manage the door with their good arm and leg; notice them walking, grimacing in pain with each step; and notice them sitting at picnic tables, staring at nothing in particular, their canes laying on tables. You'd like to think these men are Vietnam Vets or disabled police officers—you hope so, anyway--and not weekend hunters who inadvertently shot themselves or were shot in a drunken haze.

There are others here, too, in wheelchairs or sporting eye patches or both--perhaps not any more than you'd find at a Drillers' game—yet this infirmity (combined with all this firepower) gives gun shows the uneasy sadness of a Sean Penn film. A man with a missing hand on a cell phone, the stump of his arm holding the *Nokia* to his ear, is making a deal on a shotgun a few yards from where two women sporting exhibition stickers are selling barbecue sauce. A guy, wearing a *Grandpa 1* hat and eating a hotdog, with a gun in a holster and one in a shoulder strap, is talking on *his* cell, while a woman in cutoffs a few booths away shows a potential customer the features of a rifle.

According to the *Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms* (ATF), there are more than 2,000 gun shows held in the United States each year, but like most issues associated with them, even that is in dispute. *The National Association of Arms Show* estimates the number at more than 5,000, and that more than 5-million people attend such shows

each year.

Whatever the figures, R.D. Diener, wearing a purple shirt and talking to a woman in a pink dress is not happy. The numbers this August for his *Grand National Gun and Knife Show* are disappointing. Diener thinks it might be the heat or the fact that school's starting soon, but he's not worried about the success of this show—or gun shows in particular.

"Warm weather shows are not as good as cold weather shows," he says.

(Months later, during *Wanenmacher's Tulsa Arms Show*, held this past weekend, there are in fact double the number of people with twice as many vendors.)

Diener offers me a seat in what passes for the hospitality booth.

"We even allow in New Yorkers," he says.

## Target Practice

Diener has been doing these shows for 20 years, so he knows the misconceptions, the jokes, and the characterizations of him and the people who come here as having more bullets than brains.

"The media, being fairly liberal, doesn't understand what we do here. The number one priority of gun owners is safety, but there's no total defense against stupidity. We have professionals, from doctors and lawyers and accountants. We have families here.

"And the only people who have loaded firearms at my show are my security staff. People from the sheriff's office remove their clip when they come in here. We don't allow bulk black powder to be sold, because it can explode. By the way, we've never had an item stolen and we've only had one round go off in the 20 years I've been doing this."

Not everyone is so impressed. For all those, like Diener, who maintain gun shows are a great place for fathers to bring their sons for their first hunting rifle, there are those who believe these shows are a combustible mix of mainstream America and the radical right.

In an interview with *The Joplin Globe* in 1991, Kerry Noble, who was once second in command of the *Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord*, a militarized Christian Identity sect, said gun shows also offer militant groups the perfect opportunity for recruiting new members. He maintains that such groups come to them primarily seeking angry young white men.

"There are two ways people are recruited into the movement," Noble, who is now reformed. "One is at the gun shows, and the other is through tax seminars. The majority of people have gripes with the IRS or are Second Amendment activists."

Diener doesn't talk about Christian identity groups or the disenfranchised; instead, he tells that story about that round going off.

Years ago, a man in a restroom was approached by another man, who had a gun for sale. Standing at a urinal, the first man proceeded to load the chamber with four shells. Deciding he didn't want the gun, he returned it, but inadvertently only removed three shells. Later that afternoon, the seller, standing at an exhibit, blew off five of his toes when the gun accidentally went off.

"It was," says Diener, laughing, "a really good pair of boots, too."

He turns serious. "There are three classes of people who come to gun shows," he says, "one: shooting sports; two: home defense; and three: ex-military men and women who want to collect."

## High Profiler

One of those ex-military men, James "Bo" Gritz, (pronounced "Grites"), a retired Special Forces colonel and now leader in the Christian Patriot movement, whose books include *My Brother's Keeper*, *a Nation Betrayed*, and *Called to Serve* are on sale here, comes by and joins Diener.

Gritz, a popular right wing radio talk show host, was David Duke's first vice presidential running mate in 1988, and ran for president on his own in 1992 on the *Populist Party* ticket, a front for an all-star list of Klansmen, Nazis, anti-Semites, and right-wing extremists, including Duke and its founder, Willis Carto.

Gritz also headed an expedition of mercenaries—paid for by H. Ross Perot—in an effort

to locate American POWs in South America; he helped negotiate the end to the Ruby Ridge affair, even if he did give the stiff-armed Nazi salute at the end of it to the waiting Fascists; and he also went to find accused bombing suspect Eric Robert Rudolph in the hills of North Carolina for the FBI—even though it never confirmed asking him.

Gritz, who is a regular at these kinds of shows, makes no mention of his trademark bit: the burning of the UN flag.

“The stinking residue,” Gritz said at a 2001 show, after a burning, “is what will become of people who fail to fight.”

Further, he said that those unwilling to fight, according to his interpretation of *Revelation 14:9*, will become living *crispy critters*.

Gritz is a man full of contradictions. He was the most decorated Green Beret of the Vietnam War, but is also on *Anti-Defamation League's* Extremists' Watch List. He is credited with being the role model for the George Peppard character “Hannibal” Smith on *The A-Team* and Stallone’s *Rambo*, but also charged with attempted kidnapping of two boys in Connecticut who were involved in a custody dispute.

During the 2000 election, Gritz said that “. . . Jews, feminists, sodomites and other liberal activists may install Gore over an apathetic moral majority [and that] runaway abortion, anti-Christ/God and globalism are certain.”

Equally troubling, according to the *Nizkor Project*, a group that traces and monitors materials on the Web pertaining to fascism and the holocaust, Gritz has ties with a white supremacist “Identity” movement, which states that Jews are “Satan’s spawn” and that non-whites are “mud races.”

## Back to the Gun Show

Nevertheless, people come by to shake hands with Gritz or get him to autograph a book, and Diener explains that Gritz has been cited 62 times for valor, including once when a bullet bounced off the back of his head.

“The man is not afraid of anyone. In fact, General William Westmoreland [who called Gritz “*The American Soldier*”] went to see him in the hospital,” Diener says of the man sitting next to him, who’s now eating a chocolate donut. “Bo got out of bed and left on

assignment the next day.”

What Diener doesn't mention is that Gritz, his childhood friend from Enid, while deploring the Oklahoma City bombing, also called it a “Rembrandt—a masterpiece of art and science” on ABC's *Good Morning America*—a statement, judging from those lining up to get his signature, which hasn't affected his popularity.

But the ex-colonel, too, stays away from talk of new world orders and Armageddon. It is obvious he's not all that interested in me anyway, but sits to talk as a courtesy to his friend.

“People come to gun shows,” he says, “to primarily add or dispose of their private collections, and what people who want to close down shows like these don't understand is that it's an infringement on our Second Amendment rights.”

Diener agrees.

“Bill and Hillary [Clinton] and *Chuckie* Schumer [Sen. Charles Schumer, D—NY] want there to be a 3-day waiting period to buy a gun, which will shut down shows like these, which are only two days long. They don't want anyone to bring in a gun, because there's not a background check done on the ones brought in.”

The business of waiting periods and background checks are dismissed by Gritz.

“Look, I don't want to see a criminal buy a firearm, but see those people on cell phones?” he asks emphatically, correctly assuming I am not buying the fail safe nature of the security checks performed here. He is pointing to two women inside a booth. “They are calling the FBI right now and performing an instant background check. Go try to buy a gun,” he tells me. “I mean it, go ahead. See how far you get, but don't tell them who you are or that I sent you.”

Up until a few years, however, gun show organizers vehemently opposed the background checks they're now trumpeting.

Before *Instacheck*, the national law requiring instant background checks of all gun sales by licensed dealers, state laws differed on the sale and purchase of firearms, some of which had no restrictions.

On that point, *Americans for Gun Safety* President Jonathan Cowan said, "Gun shows without background checks were "firearms convenience stores for criminals . . . cash and carry, with no questions asked."

According to both Grits and Diener, in accordance with federal law, every dealer at his show now has an FFL (Federal Firearms License) before he or she can sell firearms.

Gritz sees a man who has an M-1 rifle for sale.

"He asked me earlier if I was interested, and I may buy it. I don't need it, but I used to have one in combat. It would be kind of neat . . . nostalgic to have one."

Asked about the people selling Nazi flags at his show, Gritz says the flags are "extremely sought after" and considered "memorabilia" by ex-military men. A walk by the booth, however, which is placed in the far north and east corner of the Expo, reveals not only vintage flags, but postcard-sized photos of dead bodies in ditches; clothing; flasks; and postage stamps featuring Hitler himself.

At *Wanenmacher's Tulsa Arms Show*, 80-year-old television and movie star Dale Robertson, an Oklahoma native, wasn't booked to be a lightning rod. He signs autographs, tells stories, poses for pictures, and holds babies. He is on nobody's watch list. There's a \$10 admission price, which is waived if you join the NRA, but most here seem to already be members.

Advertising itself as a place where you won't see "lots of non-gun related stuff or flea market garbage," Wanenmacher doesn't have *Beanie Babies*, but like Grand National, does feature jewelry, watches, wildlife art, and Nazi memorabilia—on both the upper and lower levels of Expo.

## Bulletproof

It is not a comfortable place to be, hanging around *these* booths, under Swastikas, seeing video cassettes for sale of *Triumph of Will*, by Hitler's favorite filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl, and self-published books on the authenticity of Nazi goods on the market. You try to keep the images and specifics in your mind, because gun shows don't permit cameras or recording devices inside; you want to make sure it is in fact a body in a ditch you're seeing in this postcard and not something else. You try not to linger; try not to make eye contact with the people manning these booths, hoping they won't see your

disgust or fear or uneasy curiosity of them.

Ask any of the organizers of either show about the appropriateness of these items, whether it's a good idea for children—even gun-toting ones—to be exposed to SS passports and medals and manifestos, and you'll hear much about the booming market for World War II (even Third Reich) artifacts, how it's like coin or stamp collection, but nobody answers the obvious: What does one do with a Nazi flag besides fly it in a garage or carry it in a parade?

Still, Diener looks at these shows in much the same way others view a *Star Trek* Convention. "It's not just for people interested in guns. Look around."

He's right, in a sense—even if the non-gun owners are as out of place in these shows as non-Trekkies are during Shatner's Q&A.

If you didn't know better, the *Grand National Gun and Knife Show* and *Wanenmacher's Tulsa Arms Show* could be Swap Meets. People shop, snack, kibbutz, and bargain as if the Expo were a giant garage sale. These shows also offer free chiropractic, *Dippin Dots*, sabers, plastic ammunition containers, hunting manuals, carrying cases, funnel cakes, and camouflage outfits.

Except, of course, you do know better.

According to *Handgun-free America*, since 1994, more than 60,000 firearms have been illegally purchased—a figure, not surprisingly, disputed by gun show advocates.

For all the hunters and sportsmen and safety-conscious gun collectors who attend them, these shows are clearly not just the healthy exercise of Second Amendment rights. In many respects, they also represent the loose tiles on the American mosaic, a messy, sometimes dangerous mix of commerce, constitutional and religious expression, conspiracies, criminality, anger, real fear, and paranoia. For every woman looking for a pistol for protection, there is a potential nut job buying *The Turner Diaries*.

And then there are all those men with canes.

As for the *Beanie Babies*, part of that *non-gun related ... flea market garbage*, Diener smiles: "We use them for target practice."

