

MY SKEET HISTORY

The Players

By

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Few of today's shooters know that the rules were quite different in early years. Shooters were required to hold the gun in the low gun position until the target appeared. The low gun position required that some part of the stock must be touching the hip bone, however shooters would attempt to get the gun closer and closer to the shoulder. The rule was difficult for the referee to enforce. Finally, the rule was changed to allow the shooter to start with the gun on his shoulder if he so desired. By the time I started shooting, you could mount the gun. A round of skeet consisted of completing the shooting all the singles, followed by shooting the doubles. If you were still straight, after finishing the double at 7, the you shot the station 7 single of your choice. Shortly thereafter the rules were changed to shooting the singles on the station, followed by the double. That was implemented in order to speed up the completion of the round.

Since automated target machines were unheard of, an individual would be in the house, putting a target on the throwing arm. Your call would determine when he released the target. In order to know which house the shooter wanted released, he would call 'pull' for the high house, 'mark' for the low house and 'doubles' for the pair. Even after automated machines came into use, old time shooters would often call pull, mark or doubles. Larry Drennan was in his nineties and still using that method.

In my early years, many of the players were wealthy, influential people. As I mentioned in my earlier post, they were either business owners or many were key executives with local firms.

Locally, Jim Durham owned Radio Inc, Don Hill was the founder of Grant Supply, Jesse Vint was the President of Unit Rig, Tex Ritterbusch was a Vice President at Dover Corp, Lloyd Johnson was an executive at Amoco, Dr. James Little was a noted eye surgeon, E.T. Tennelly owned Tennelly Interiors and Bert Wilkerson owned a Chrysler dealership.

In Arkansas, the Echols family were bankers, John Smith owned the Cadillac dealership, Larry Randall owned the Ford dealership, Fred Valance owned a

furniture factory, and the Pakis family was quite well to do also. Marina Pakis was a great lady's shooter.

In Kansas, Daphne Muchnic's family owned the Locomotive Finished Products company, Don Freely owned an automobile repair garage, Jim and Joy Pope were independently wealthy, C.L. Scott was the President of Inland Underground Storage, who had taught aerial gunnery at Lackland AFB during WWII, and Joe Orr, who was a TWA pilot.

I'm sure that I have missed people, however this will give the reader an insight into who some of the more well to do shooters were. All were great shots.

In the 60's, I shot practice at the Southern Hills Gun Club or at the Tulsa Gun Club. While practicing at the Tulsa Gun Club, I met Fred Antry. We sometimes practiced together, although I never saw Fred shoot in skeet tournaments. The only way I can describe Fred was to say that that he was a true gentleman. He was just one of those people that you immediately liked. Fred always shot beautiful shotguns. I later learned that Fred was a WWII veteran and a true part of world history. Fred served as a First Sargeant in Patton's 3rd army and was stationed at Nuremburg, Germany, as an MP for the Nuremburg war trials. Fred passed away in 2012.

For those too young to remember, the Nuremburg war trials were held immediately following WWII to prosecute German Officers, Industrialists and others held responsible for the holocaust and death of 6 million Jews.

The pigeon shoots at Ft. Smith were expensive, so I never shot in the races, I only shot pigeons when they were offered in practice. My good friend Lynn Geyer also liked to shoot pigeons. We wanted to improve our skills, so we contacted Clay Lincoln, a good friend who was a member at the North American Aviation gun club. At that time the club was located next to I-44 at about Mingo. The club had a single trap field. The three of us pooled our money to buy pigeons from a man in North Tulsa who trapped them.

We would go to the gun club when no one was there, to practice. We alternated, with one person releasing the bird from inside the trap house, the second person was the shooter and the third person would function as a back-up shooter.

The Ft. Smith skeet Calcutta's generated the most money, as they were conducted in a party environment. They always topped \$10,000, which would be a huge

amount of money in today's dollars as inflation has increased tenfold since then. The Calcutta would be normally held in a big room at a local motel. There was always an open bar and the crowd was encouraged to imbibe. That would loosen people up and get them to open their wallets to bid and spend.

I was always surprised at the money that would be bid under these circumstances. Since I was a young shooter with very little financial wherewithal, I was just there for the show, however it was always fun to watch. Auctioneers were very creative when it came to selling a shooter. They would do everything they could do make it look like the shooter was misclassified, in order to get higher bids to enhance the pot. For example, the auctioneer might proclaim that the shooter was really a AA shooter shooting in A Class. Also, previous accomplishments would be referenced. Auctioneers would be pleased when there was competition for a shooter, as that would enhance the pot. They would often banter back and forth with the bidders as the bidding progressed. Shooters often commanded prices in the hundreds of dollars. That was a lot of money in the 60's. I normally never participated other than as a shooter. The shooters entrance fee was normally \$20, however they received 20% of any winnings.

Calcutta's were handicapped events. AA shooters got no targets, A got one target, B got two, etc. The top 3 scores were paid and ties were divided. Normally the top scores would be 100, 99, and 98. 100's must be shot, you could not use your handicap to get to 100. You could only use your handicap to get up to 99. Buyers received 80%, shooters 20%.

After we returned from Kansas City, I went to a big shoot at Tinker AFB. Bob Omstead and his wife Karen went to the Calcutta, along with my wife Kathleen and me. I was surprised when Karen Omstead began bidding for me. When I tried to stop her she said, I know you, you will do good. She bought me and that put a lot of pressure on me. Since Karen was Bob's wife, I felt that I had to come through for her. Fortunately, I had one of my 100's and Karen did well when the payoff was computed.

With so many well to do players in the game, skeet was referred to as a white-collar game, where trap was considered a blue-collar game. Over the years, those distinctions have disappeared.

Sometimes, individual shooters would host an open house on Saturday night. A blanket invitation would go out to all the shooters. One of the first open houses that I went to was hosted by John Smith at his home in Ft. Smith. John had a beautiful

home adjacent to the Arkansas river. Bob Omstead and I went together and enjoyed the party.

Since drinking inevitably would be involved, I became more skeptical of the open houses. The last open house I attended was hosted at a big shoot at Tinker AFB, in the late 80's. I was hesitant, however my wife Jan wanted to go to enjoy the pool. We went, and naturally, alcohol was consumed. A shooter, who will go unnamed, began pushing people into the pool. Sometimes fully clothed people were pushed into the pool. Jan was in the pool and decided to get out. As she was climbing out, a hall of fame shooter who will go unnamed, grabbed her by the ankle. That caused her to fall onto the pool deck. She hit face down, breaking a tooth and losing a contact lens. We dressed and immediately left, and I did not return to shoot in Oklahoma City for several years.

In the 70's when I was living in Kansas City, Winchester annually conducted The Winchester Clay Bird Tournament at Winchester owned and operated gun clubs. At that time Winchester owned several gun clubs located around the country. Shooters were required to shoot 100 skeet targets and 100 trap targets. If you were a skeet shooter with an established average and not a trap shooter, your trap average would be set at 90 percent of your skeet average or vice versa.

I wanted to compete, however the closest Winchester affiliated club was in Oklahoma City and I didn't have a trap gun. I took a Model 12 Winchester field gun down to Simmons Specialties and got a vent rib installed and put a straight stock on the gun. I practiced trap several times before going to Oklahoma City to compete. I shot reasonable however I thought that I should have shot better. My trap score was one target better than my skeet score. I had always contended that trap was easier than skeet.

The prizes were new Winchester skeet and trap guns for the winner, a case of shells for second place and a plaque for third place. I got the plaque however I sure wanted the guns.