

The Drygulchers' Shooting Club at the Canadian Nationals

Our informal gang is called the "Drygulchers". It started with three guys and a mutt in search of notoriety. The group now numbers about 18 sans mutt. We take foolishness quite seriously by laughing at ourselves, enjoying every minute of it. Four years ago one of our members who can't live without at least three of every known type of gun advised that several Swedish rolling blocks in various calibers and gauges were available from Steve Holborn, a friend and gunsmith in Warren Ontario (705 967 0940). I acquired two in 8x58R, a powerful smokeless powder cartridge. Originally our 8 mm guns were registered, but we found a loophole in our long gun registry. Any single shot black powder rifle made prior to 1896 and of greater calibre than 8.3 mm across the bore can be considered an antique, and neither license nor registration is required to possess. Guess what? Our 8 mm Danish barrels just happened to be replaced with real honest to gosh 11.5 mm tubes (45 calibre) from Green Mountain and Badger, conveniently fitted and chambered by Steve. The rim diameter of the 8mm approximates the 45-70, in 45-70, 45-90 etc., and they were subsequently stricken from the records upon being verified. (One of our members is an official verifier.) Steve by the way is a close friend of Ron Smith recently featured in the "News".

We knew absolutely nothing about black powder prior to reading everything we could find about loading it. From "Handloader" and "Rifle" magazines, Croft Barker's BPCR Silhouette Handbook, Steve Garbe and Mike Venturino's Primer, among others, we learned that very few of them used the same methods. Which of them was correct? Funny thing was they all were. Our bullet casting was ok, sans antimony, and we all could pretty much weigh our powder properly, so there were a lot of options to try. We began by collecting lead. I mean like a passion. It seems that lead is like guns, not politically correct in some areas. The effort up here in Canada to remove lead from just about everywhere is becoming like the effort to clean up oil spills. We managed however to scrounge up enough to play with. Since then, agreeing with Steve Garbe we have nearly all become of the opinion that smokeless really is "just a passing phase". Thus began our trials and tribulations with black powder cartridge rifles.

None of us knew anything about compression. We squeezed 70 grains of GOEX into our cases by the simple process of squashing it all in the case with a soft lead bullet! Next we learned how to pound the expanded soft bullet back out of the gun without wrecking our barrels. Then we found that a compression die worked much better, and even learned how to measure the amount of compression with a feeler gauge under the lock ring of the die. We also discovered that the amount of powder and compression meant very little without a lot of experimentation on an individual basis as each gun displayed its own personality. Finally we also played around with bullet alloys. Softer is usually better, but not always. The above efforts contributed to what became our annual "Drygulchers Blow-out" here on my farm. I have a 512 yard range backed by a 300 foot high cliff of horseshoe shaped, solid Canada, to catch our effluent lead, including any ricochets. During the past two years the blast of the guns turned the neighbour's dogs into Velcro pooches (they stick to

the neighbour's legs), stopped the chickens laying, cows milking, and my wife's tea garden from operating for that weekend. Ranges include 100, 200 300 and 500 yards. Four hundred yards was difficult due to a beaver pond separating the 300 and 500 range as no one volunteered to place targets there.

We heard of a shoot near Ottawa. The Canadian Fullbore Rifle Championships are held there, run by the Dominion of Canada Rifle Association since 1868. That, I believe, precedes the NRA at Creedmoor by about 5 or 6 years. Ottawa, by the way is the Capital City of Canada. The city is the place where all our politicians get together and pretend they know how to run a country, just like in Washington, only colder in the winter. August 12-15, 2010, four of us headed for infamy. Our goal was to "Drygulch" the Nationals, (or have a lot of fun trying and hopefully learn what the hell we should have known before we went). The DCRA has their headquarters at the Connaught Range. Black powder sort of died out back in the early part of the 20th century, but in 1967 for the Centennial of Canada, two shooters by the names of John Adams and Don Holmes among a few others were instrumental in getting back to the old days style of competition. The history is available on the DCRA web site. Currently, two ladies, Betty-Ann Ferguson and Kathy Corcoran, as well as Chris Jones the match director, are almost always available to answer questions and assist. Chris's wife Petra was also helping out that weekend. Chris has been most helpful and patient giving freely of his time, advice on ranges, sight settings, accommodation, etc. On his advice we decided to stay in the military barracks for \$35 a night plus three meals a day. Sure beat corned beef and beans, burnt toast, and bad coffee in a tent, as camping is also available on the base campgrounds for \$8 per night. Local hotels cater to shooters. They realise money is always important regardless who spends it, and so far nobody has shot anyone. Our Canadian Firearm Law requires that firearms be stored safely and separately from ammo. No argument there. Hotels agree.

Five of us managed to convince ourselves we should go. I mean, who did we have to beat anyway, Dave Gullo, Dave Hicks, Frank Monikowski, Ray Hanson, all world class competitors? Many other great names in shooting? I mean come on guys all we could do is lose, what the heck? All we had to do is hit a 2-minute target every time, at up to 900 metres! (In English that is 984 yards).

We made bullets, and shot them, by the hundreds, that's what. Then we all became humbled. I mean, we really learned there are bullets, and then there are bullets. After casting a few thousand 500 to 550 grain slugs and selecting the ones that were most consistent, (mine now vary about + - 3 tenths of a grain at 548 grains), and playing with powder charges from 60-72 grains of GOEX 2fg, dropped 24 inches for about 7 seconds and compressed about .135", with .030" Buffalo Arms veggie wads, Remington Mag 9 1/2 primers, Winchester cases, bullets seated to o.a.l. 2.950" we all began to hit the targets. It is worth mentioning at this time, that Swiss powder is not available in Canada due to the company never making the effort to get their excellent product passed for sale up here. (Too small a market?) I managed to get some brought across by a friend, and was pleased with the results. My load for long range became 70 grains, gaining me 1226 fps over my old load of 67 gr. of Goex at 1180. It really is consistent, and is worth the effort. We are

allowed by law to carry 17 pounds into Canada in one-pound cans, so that plan will soon be put to the test. I will say though that there are a lot of us who use GOEX because it is available in the North American market, produced in North America, by American workers. It deserves our support. Along with advice from Steve Garbe about fouling control, the groups began to shrink by inches. Steve told me how he used a blow tube and a dry patch between shots. I tried swabbing out the bore between shots and compared it to Steve's method. Steve's proved best by dropping my three hundred yard group from 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches down sometimes to 4 inches at 400 yards (Pay attention when experts talk). I also found that after about 10 or 12 seconds the powder column has reached about all the level it will ever reach, so I take longer to drop the powder than necessary thus eliminating my need to be exact for say 5 seconds, or 3.4 seconds or some other hair splitting time. Actually I have been thinking about gearing up a trickler to eliminate my involvement altogether. I could be degreasing the bottom of the bullet while the powder is dropping. My cast slugs are from an Ohaus mould I picked up cheap from EBAY. The chap I bought it from said it kicked the bejesus out of him in his full house loads in a Marlin carbine. Seems like he didn't have a scale to weigh the bullets, and he simply shot them as cast thinking the bullets weighed 500 or so grains just like the Lyman design (457125). In fact the mould casts bullets of 1-20 tin/lead alloy that weigh 548-550 grains. Great, just what I needed anyway. Also, before I forget, I use SPG LUBE! Period! It works! My match gun has on numerous occasions shot 1 minute groups from a bench at 100 yards, although the norm is around 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 minutes depending on the weather, the day, or mostly me, with, to be honest, a lot of misses and shotgun patterns. It holds pretty well out to 500 yards too. Some days I impress myself, the next I become human again, barely hitting the target. All of us found this variation to be true.

We started with five shooters and my oldest son Ted, but ended up with four shooters due to a sudden change in the schedule of one. We safely arrived at the Connaught Range to check in and get the lay of the land. Our first impression of the range was devastating. How on earth could anyone ever hope to hit the "1000" yard target? As one of the photos shows, it was nearly impossible to see it. The close up was taken with a 12x telephoto lens from right of the centre at the fence. We were all worried. This range, or should I say series of ranges, was awe inspiring to our bunch of green horns. Hopefully we wouldn't look too foolish.

The events included a special match for unaltered original BPC single shot military rifles at 200 yards. The Wilf Black Match is named after Wilf Black, a Canadian who fought in Korea. Following were events at 300, 500 and 600 yards then 700, 800 and 900 metres with 5 sighter shots per event, with 10 for score at each range. Apparently the range rules allowed duplex loads, but being traditionalists we won't go there, and certainly, to quote Croft Barker, wouldn't think of inviting "that type" to our Blow-out next year. The shoot started on Friday 13th Aug, and continued into Sunday 15th, followed by an awards BBQ. (Sunday's shoot had to be cancelled due to thunderstorms, lightning, heavy rain, and other nasty things). I have included a full list and description of the events. There were individual awards for each distance, plus team awards and over all aggregate awards.

Next morning at 07:00 we met for a description of what we had to do. Having been allowed by the gods who look after fools, we had a chance to warm up by shooting in the Wilf Black 200 yard match. Our guns were not original unaltered military issue, so our scores were not counted towards medals, even if we managed to win one. The final scores are found in the chart elsewhere in the article. Chris allowed me to pay a small fee so my son, Ted, could shoot in the Wilf Black event with a spare roller I had brought along, but his score, like mine, would not count due to the non original unaltered class of rifle. It was his first time shooting any such rifle. He managed an unofficial score of 39/50 with no adjustable sight and hunting grade cartridges, (i.e. hastily dumped from a powder flask, using an original Winchester hand-tool to squash and seat 405 gr. bullets), so I was very proud of him. He made the sight on the rifle I used, being a machinist with a cnc mill.

As the 300-yard “Victorian” match was about to begin, a “Cease Fire” order came down the line. Seems like military intelligence is the same oxymoron in Canada as it is in the States. Someone raised a communication blimp just to the left of our range. We asked if we got points if we shot it down, but humour isn’t part of the military mind either, so we had to move.

About this time all of the newbies learned why the Apache, Sioux, and Comanche were such expert warriors. They wore a loincloth, carried a bow and arrows, a tomahawk and a knife. Period. We, on the other hand dragged about 300 pounds of excess junk around, all over the place, for two days. Converted golf carts, special carriages, little red wagons etc., were all brought into service. We felt (and probably looked) ridiculous. Our gang split up among the competitors to see what we could learn from the better shooters. This brings up another point. The guys shooting in the Black Powder Matches are the best company. I mean if you had a question, they told you a way to overcome difficulties. If you didn’t ask, they still helped when they saw you struggling. There were four of the best shooters in the world here, and you would never have known it the way they acted, quietly assisting the new competitors. John Adams and Edson Warren (two older shooters of fame) especially helped out spotting and assisting our group. Two of our guys were bunked in with Frank M. and Dave H. and the third spotted with Dave Gullo. I shot along side of Chris Jones, a fantastic shot in his own right. These guys had us hitting paper from almost the first shots, although we did experience a little glitch on one event when one of our lot failed to find paper. He learned not play around with the sights as if they were the steering wheel on a formula one car, and improved admirably on the longer shots. Also, we found out that if you really want to get into the medals, you have to learn how to plot your shots on a range card, hit the target and KEEP RECORDS. Two red nail polish marks on the staff of your sight do not qualify as zero marks.

Another important discovery was made not much later in the day. The guns recoil a bit, (massive understatement!!) Not so much as you would imagine if you were hunting, but when you lay down on a shooting mat, using cross sticks, wrist rests, etc. the cumulative result after firing about 100 rounds from these old guns tends to have a detrimental effect on not only your shoulder, but also your elbows. The shooter next to me was using a fold up mat/gun case/gear rack that had some “non slip” surface sections where his elbows

touched. I was bare elbows on the grass. The end result was no skin on either of us and blood all over the place half an hour after we started shooting. I felt that I was about two feet further back from the cross sticks than when I began. Buy some GOOD elbow pads or a shooting jacket. A chicken plate may also be advisable. The stock on my roller at the 700-900 metre ranges became impossible to shoulder while holding the fore end on the wrist rest. Looking through the elevated aperture sight with my cheek about six inches off the stock, the butt was under my armpit. Trying to hold the gun through about 45 ft.-lbs. of unrestrained recoil is an experience never to be forgotten. Even with my rifle weighing 13 lb. 2 oz. the sight slammed into my hat and face every time. It got to be rough. I am certain my scores would have been better if I had been able to keep my eyes both open when the trigger was pulled. George Peterson of Treebone Carving told me he had a special order stock available for rollers, but that in his opinion it was rather ugly. I am getting one. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Forty-five seventy rifles will reach 1000 yards. However, the flight time is about 3 ¼ seconds, and the wind can play hell with you. Trajectories are also higher. Your loads should be at least 1250 fps or more if you hope to score. I was actually able to glimpse a bullet in flight in my spotting scope when the sun reflected back off it. I had about 12 minutes of windage on my sight, and I was able to see the curve of the slug most of the way downrange. The best shooters shot the highest scores of course. They nearly all shot about 85+ grains of Swiss with the bullet seated out (some were double diameter, others had throated chambers, still others may have been 45-90's). Dave Gullo, Frank Monikowski, Dave Hicks, Ray Hanson, Glen Kaye and Chris Jones took all the individual medals. It was educational to see their various and relaxed techniques. They were focused, confident, and just plain great shooters. One new fellow shooting BPCR for only a short time, scored the high score for a first-time shooter at Connaught this year, and won a bullet mould provided by Dave Gullo.

I have not mentioned the names of our guys up to now, but I should like to give them mention. The effort they each put into getting ready for the unknown was fun, blissfully innocent, and sometimes frustrating. In Ottawa we all had a grand time-Ivan, from Sault Ste Marie, Mark from Goulais River, Ted from Warren, Ted my son, and myself, Sandy, from Kynoch, all in Ontario. Unbeknownst to me the shooting line had been divided up into teams. Ted from Warren, a chap called Bob, and I were teamed together with and when the medals were given out, we were shocked to learn we had won bronze in the both team aggregates, the "Loyalist Cup" match-300-600 yards, and "Ranger Cup" match -700-900 metres.

Frank M. and Dave H. kindly sent me e-mails sharing with us the loads they use. The results speak for themselves.

Thanks to all the folks who made our lives richer. We made new friends. We outgrew 100-yard ranges. We learned. We won more than mere medals. We shall return. I advise all of the readers to consider coming too.

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