

Travel and Adventure: The Wild West can be found at the End of Trail

by Norman Sklarewitz

With all the attractions New Mexico offers visitors, it's not unusual to see plenty of motor homes, house trailers and other recreational vehicles on its roads this time of year. But on Route 217 heading east about 40 miles from Albuquerque in late June, there is certain to be something strange looking going on.

READY FOR SOME SHOOTING - An annual gathering called End of Trail, attended by more than 1,000 members of the Single Action Shooting Society, takes place on Route 217 in Albuquerque, N.M. CNS Photo by Ron Mesaros. **PRICEY PISTOLS** - These ornate pistols are costly replicas of the original frontier six-shooters. Aficionados spend more than \$10,000 for the complete outfit, including fancy holsters, spurred boots and all the trimmings. CNS Photo by Ron Mesaros. **LIVING IN THE PAST** - The Single Action Shooting Society's goal is to preserve the history of the Old West. During the festival, members are required to dress in authentic 1800s outfits. CNS Photo by Ron Mesaros. **SMOKING GUN** - End of Trail is a Wild West Festival of fun and history mixed with plenty of make-believe and just showing off. Things get more serious at the shooting bays. Participants are required to run from position to position while firing several types of weapons. Photo by Ron Mesaros. In addition to normal Fourth of July supplies in each vehicle, there will also be a small arsenal of weapons - rifles, shotguns and revolvers, plus cartons of ammunition. Sinister as this all may seem, there's no need to call Homeland Security or anyone else. These folks are heading for a gathering of more than 1,000 members of the Single Action Shooting Society. Called End of Trail, it will take place for the public June 21-24 at the 480-acre Founder's Ranch, outside the tiny town of Edgewood, N.M.

Based in Yorba Linda, Calif., SASS is an international organization with a total membership of some 70,000. These men and women belong to clubs in every state in the U.S. and all over Europe, Australia and New Zealand, among other places. Along with nonstop competitions involving cowboy action shooting, the organization has as a major goal: the preservation of the history of the Old West.

Toward that end, all members at the event are required to dress in outfits authentic to the mid-1800s on the western frontier. In addition, each assumes an alias that befits the persona each assumes. As a result, for the few days they will be at the End of Trail gathering, SASS members become cowboys, gun slingers, lawmen, dance hall girls, gold prospectors, Civil War soldiers, gamblers, frontier business-people and just about every other personality, real or fictional, from that colorful but often-violent era in American history.

For the participants, the event is a curious mixture of make-believe in a real-life setting. Ken Amorosano, a founding SASS member and now a full-time staffer at its headquarters, explained, "Here we provide a Western fantasy that has a real relationship to American history and culture. You wear boots, a

broad-brimmed hat and old-style frontier trousers and shirt. You're holding real six-guns in your hands and your leather gun belt and holster are exactly the same as those used in the 1880s."

There's no question that many of those striding down the dirt main street of this simulated Western town affect a distinctive gait, almost a swagger, as they walk along, hands resting on the butts of their twin .44 revolvers at their hips.

Clothes worn by its members are often as not custom-made, cut and fitted to replicate authentic attire worn by the actual person whose name and personality has been adopted by a 21st century SASS member. It's the same with the weapons. Pistols worn on leather gunbelts are often costly replicas of frontier six-shooters, while lever-action rifles and shotguns are authentic to the mid-1800s. It's clearly not an inexpensive hobby.

"By the time I step up to do my shooting, I'm out about \$15,000," admitted one member.

Once within the gates of the Founder's Ranch, it's true that you can be whoever you'd like to be. At last year's event, Rob Holloway strolled along in the dress uniform of a captain in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. At home in Las Vegas, he's a paramedic student. Manuel Austin from Los Angeles was on leave from his job as a contractor in Iraq. At the ranch he and his son Garrett, 10, wore matching fancy Western dress outfits. Bill Plummer is a professor of animal science at the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. But here he was a plain working cowboy. Sharon Gule of Bellevue, Colo., was Miss Tabatha, a seamstress who makes bustle dresses, hoop skirts and other finery for ladies. For her part, Gina White of Boise, Idaho, was Sweet Violet, a demure maiden complete with lacy parasol.

Greg Kitchens from Southern California was a Spanish American War Marine. He proudly pointed out the original Marine Corps emblem on his uniform, the exact leggings wore by Marines in that conflict and the replica military model .44 Colt revolver on his hip. Michael Veitch from Las Vegas is a retired law-enforcement officer, but at the ranch he was an 1888 Arizona Ranger.

While most of those at the ranch assume only the name of 19th century characters and the clothes of his

persona, Mike Thompson of San Angelo, Texas, had the look, too. He was Teddy Roosevelt as a young cowboy in North Dakota, down to the distinctive toothy grin.

While a bit of showing off is very much part of the End of Trail experience, it's at the shooting bays where things get serious. Cowboy action shooting is like no other type of competitive marksmanship. Here there's no standing up and firing at fixed targets. That's not how it was in the real Wild West, and so it's not that way at End of Trail. Instead, over a period of days, each competitor moves from bay to bay where a different action scenario is presented.

At the timer's start, the shooter must run from position to position, draw one revolver, first firing at metal targets, then grabbing his shotgun and engaging other targets in a specified order before picking up his rifle and firing at five other targets and finally drawing his second revolver and blazing away at the remaining targets.

That's 10 rounds of revolver ammunition, 10 rounds with the rifle and at least four shotgun shells. The average time for all this noisy action is around 30 seconds.

During the course of the End of Trail, shooters will be required to fire on 12 different such stages, each with a different story. Back this year to defend his 2006 title as Top Gun male shooter will be Spencer Hogle from Northridge, Calif., aka Lead Dispenser, and 20-year-old Randi Rogers from Durango, Colo, aka Holy Terror, as Top Gun female for five years running.

However, it's a point of pride with SASS is that there are no monetary prizes for these top shooters. Just trophies and bragging rights.

IF YOU GO

Take Interstate 40 east from Albuquerque (20 Miles from Interstate 25). Exit Sedillo, east on Route 66 to Highway 217, south five miles to Juan Tomas Road, left 1.5 miles to Barton Road. Left 1 1/2 miles to participant gate at Founders Ranch entrance.

Web site - www.sassnet.com/EoT.

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