

Kenny Rasnic, a member of the Missouri Big Irons Mounted Shooters based in Farmington, drove from southern Missouri to attend a competition in Ashland.



# staring DOWN a BARREL

**Meet Missouri's modern-day gunslingers.**

BY ANDREW BRIDGES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HARRY KATZ

**MISSOURI WAS ONCE** *home to some of the most notorious gunslingers of the Old West. Outlaws like the James brothers and Younger brothers later joined together to become one of the most infamous gangs of the West but were born in Missouri.*

Outlaw Johnny Ringo spent time in Missouri before his big gunfight at OK Corral. Hyman G. Neill—also referred to as Hoodoo Brown—is considered the baddest of them all in some eyes. And we can't forget about the legendary Miss Calamity Jane, who was born in Princeton, Missouri.

Even future lawman Wyatt Earp settled in Lamar, where he had a few scrapes with the law, until his wife died. Earp, of course, went on to become one of the most legendary sheriffs of all time.

Hollywood has done its best to enthrall Western enthusiasts with movies like *Tombstone*, *McClintock*, *Lonesome Dove*, and many more. And what kid didn't play cowboys and Indians growing up?

Now, there is a new Wild West competition that brings the child out in all of

us and allows the competitor and spectator to act and feel as if they were part of the James-Younger Gang or riding beside Wyatt Earp to chase down some desperados. It's called Cowboy Mounted Shooting, and it blends horsemanship, marksmanship, and showmanship into a few hours of gun blazin' action.

Cowboy Mounted Shooting is a trademarked sport that started in 1990 in Arizona, but it wasn't until 2002 that a group of horse enthusiasts brought the sport to the Show-Me State.

Unlike many sports, this competition has more than enough adrenaline-fueled moments to satiate spectators' appetites for action.

Something about watching a cowboy or cowgirl speeding through a course with pistols in hand, shooting balloons with accuracy, and still keeping his or her horse under control makes you want to go out and try it.

Is it the smell of burnt gunpowder? Is it the crack of thunder followed by a cloud of white smoke billowing from the barrel of a gun? Or is it the sure speed of the human and horse, companions competing as one?





Harrisburg resident Travis Smith is currently the state champion in Cowboy Mounted Shooting after he scored the highest at a shoot earlier in 2015.



Riders for the Show Me Mounted Shooters and the Missouri Rawhide Mounted Shooters gather for a joint competition in Ashland.

#### — RARE BREED —

Travis Smith has long been fascinated with horses and warfare. He's traced mounted combat history back hundreds of years. However, it wasn't until 2002 that Travis got the chance to join his passion for riding horses and his fascination with the war horse when he, his wife, and a few others came together to bring the sport of mounted shooting to Missouri and start the Show Me Mounted Shooters club.

"I have always been fascinated by the war horse history that spans back to before the Roman Empire, the technology of the ancient world, and how well the horses were bred and trained for battle," he says. "It's fascinating to think that all of those secrets to training horses that way have been lost or forgotten in the past one hundred years in the age of mechanization."

Travis, now the vice president of the Show Me Mounted Shooters, has seen the sport grow from just a few competitors to a movement. Show Me Mounted Shooters now boasts more than fifty members, and two new clubs have started in Missouri since Travis and friends founded their club. Each club is located in a different region of the state, and each is responsible for having its own competitions, also called shoots.

"When this started about twenty years ago, you just needed a horse that you could do a collected lope, and you could win a lot," he says. "Now, there is more horsemanship involved, and it has gotten more competitive."

As vice president, Travis is involved in all the big decisions for the club. He is also a certified range master at all of the events. Being the range master means he's responsible for standing in the arena, ensuring the safety of all the

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Travis Smith, Show Me Mounted Shooters*





Kingsville resident Jessica Retzke rounds the barrel in an attempt to shoot a balloon. The black powder cartridges create a lot of smoke when fired.



Live rounds are prohibited at Cowboy Mounted Shooting Events. Instead, competitors use these brass cartridges loaded with black powder.

competitors, and enforcing the rules. Along with his many responsibilities to the club, he owns and operates two businesses.

At his day job, Travis works as a professional farrier, where he is responsible for trimming horses' hooves as well as getting them re-shod. He gets calls from across central Missouri for his farrier services. He shoes horses for the University of Missouri Equine Clinic and has had the opportunity to shoe Windfall II, an Olympic medalist. He often gets the chance to see firsthand how different horses react with different riders.

"I get to personally watch a lot of other horses run as well as my own," he says, "and I get to find ways to help a horse keep a competitive edge."

But Travis doesn't stop there. When he gets home from a long day of work,

he and his wife, Laura, go straight to the barn, which houses their second office, smelting foundry, and branding shop. There, Travis creates the patterns and runs the foundry to pour custom brands. Laura does the design, makes sales, and runs the website—flying45.com. Katie, their nineteen-year-old daughter, sand casts and finishes all of the brands while she attends college.

"Our branding iron business is a totally family-run business in which we create custom freeze brands and hot brands for customers all over the world," Laura says. "We deal mostly with ranch and farm owners who are interested in protecting their livestock and tying together their ranching operations with a distinct symbol that they can register and use for a logo."

Travis and Laura started their branding iron business because they couldn't



## THE RULES

In mounted shooting, there are three divisions: men's, women's, and seniors'. Each division has classes that are ranked one through six. Beginners start at class one, and they must get four qualified wins in their class to move up to a higher class.

Much like the Old West, Cowboy Mounted Shooting uses two .45 caliber single-action revolvers. A single-action revolver must be cocked each time before firing. The guns do not shoot live rounds, only blanks. These blanks can pop a balloon up to fifteen feet away. The riders are scored on time and accuracy.

There are more than sixty possible patterns for each competition. Each competition could consist of three to six randomly selected patterns. The patterns that everyone will ride during the competition are pre-determined before the start of the competition. Each pattern consists of two sets of five balloons, each set a different color. The rider will follow the pattern and shoot the first set of balloons before engaging the second. Once they shoot the first set, they holster their first revolver and pull their second revolver for the second set. After all the balloons have been shot at, the rider then crosses the finish line. There is a five-second penalty for dropping your gun or for each balloon missed. There is a ten-second penalty for not running the course correctly and a sixty-second penalty for falling off your horse.

Mounted shooting fans and participants come in all shapes and sizes. While Keagan Loeffler is on the younger side, Jim Gumm is closer to your average age shooter.





President of the Missouri Rawhide Mounted Shooters, Benjumen "Ben" Denney competes with a video camera mounted on his hat. Visit [missourilife.com](http://missourilife.com) to see the footage from his shoot.

find a brand they liked and couldn't find a company that helped design brands. They finally settled on the Flying 45 logo and name because it symbolized the caliber of pistols used in mounted shooting and the speed at which they compete. For now, their company brings in a little extra money to support their shooting hobby.

Although the sport is more competitive than ever, Travis and Laura know that it is still all about family. The mounted shooting accomplishment they're most proud of is involving both of their children in the sport.

"I have a seven-year-old boy and a nineteen-year-old daughter that are into the sport," Travis says. "I get to pass on my love and passion for horses and the respect of firearms to them, which is very rewarding."

### — HORSIN' AROUND —

It takes more than just the cowboy or cowgirl to compete in Mounted Shooting;

the horse has everything to do with the success in the arena. The horse and rider have to have a certain kind of bond or trust that only exists after a lot of hard work and fun times in a saddle. Much of this bonding comes from the beginning of the horse's training.

"The key to training a mounted shooting horse is just the same as any other horse, really," Laura says. "It's all about establishing a bond and trust with the animal and putting in a lot of riding time. To me, mounted shooting is all about the bond between the horse and the rider. You have a gun in one hand and reins in the other. If you don't have a willing partner and your horse doesn't trust you, then you are not going to do well."

Laura not only spends her time raising two kids, but she also has a full-time job as a secretary at Columbia College in Columbia, is the treasurer for Show Me Mounted Shooters, and has her

hand in the day-to-day dealings of the family branding iron business. On top of that, she also helps Travis train their horses for mounted shooting. Working together, they both found that one of the keys to starting a new horse with shooting is to have them around horses that are already gun-broke. That way the horse gets used to the sound, sees the reaction of the other horses, and learns it is okay. Eventually, you have to take the snap sound to the next level and get on the horse.

"When we start shooting off of them, we start with just toy cap guns that make a loud snap, and then we progress to half loads which are only half as loud, then slowly move up to the full blank cartridge," Laura says.

The Show Me Mounted Shooters club hosts a beginner shooting clinic at least once a year where all the current members come and share their techniques and knowledge with novice

shooters. On some occasions, the experienced shooters have even had beginners and their horses grow remarkably comfortable with the sport in just one day of practice.

"The hardest part is putting it all together," Laura says. "We practice our shooting on the ground and walking the patterns, and then we get on our horses and run the patterns. But to put it all together and have a smooth, fast, clean run is hard to do."

### FRIENDLY COMPETITION

Benjumen "Ben" Denney, a battalion chief for Raytown Fire Department, quickly understood that he needed to learn the basics before he started trying to compete in 2009. Now a member of the Missouri Raw Hide Mounted Shooters, Ben says the easiest way to get started is to introduce yourself to people at competitions.

"Get in touch with someone that is doing it, go to a match and introduce yourself, and ask questions," he says. "I saw a video of it and did a lot of research on it. I even went to the world championships in Amarillo, Texas, just to watch and meet people. Within the first few hours of watching the sport, I knew I wanted to do this."

There are currently three different sister clubs in Missouri for mounted shooting: Show Me Mounted Shooters, Missouri Raw Hide Mounted Shooters, and Missouri Big Irons Cowboy Mounted Shooters. Between each of these clubs, there are competitions nearly every weekend of the warmer months across the state.

Ask some mounted shooters, and they'll tell you that one of the hardest things to achieve in Cowboy Mounted Shooting is consistency, not just shooting from the horse but being consistent



With a couple of onlookers, Travis Smith rides a tractor and prepares the Ashland Arena in Ashland for a three-day competition of all classes.

in every aspect. This sport not only relies on the relationship between the rider and horse, but on each rider's hand-eye coordination. You have to ride your horse, shoot, and manage to stay within a designated pattern that you may have never run before.

"You have to work on consistency on riding your horse, become a better rider, and work on your consistency shooting a gun, and then you'll become a better shooter," Ben says. "The hardest part about this sport is doing it enough. The more you do it, the better you get."

Since his start, Ben has often come out a winner in mounted shooting, but in his eyes, the lifelong friends are the true reward for competing.

The relationship he has with Travis is one of a kind. They live nearly a hundred miles away from each other, but when they get together, they could be mistaken for brothers. And though they compete against each other, with no shortage of jousting, they will always put the competition aside to help each other.

"No matter if you do good or bad," he says, "you will always have a good time with these people."

Much like Travis and Laura, Ben also gives credit to other competitors. He says that most, if not all, would help any stranger learn.

These cowboys and cowgirls, along with their horses, are a special breed—one that overcomes the fear of the speed of the horse and the hammer of the gun to achieve success.

### LOCAL GUNSLINGERS

Whether you want to ride and shoot or just watch, Missouri's cowboy mounted shooting clubs have competitions throughout the state. Check with your local club.

#### CENTRAL MISSOURI

Show Me Mounted Shooters  
[showmemountedshooters.com](http://showmemountedshooters.com)  
660-841-5351

#### KANSAS CITY

Missouri Raw Hide Mounted Shooters  
[missourirawhidemountedshooters.com](http://missourirawhidemountedshooters.com)  
816-304-6876

#### SOUTHEAST MISSOURI

Missouri Big Irons Cowboy Mounted Shooters  
[mobbigirons.net](http://mobbigirons.net)  
573-701-2849