Keeper of the Cave

Discover Matt Forir's quest to put Missouri geology on the map.

BY TINA CASAGRAND | PHOTOS BY HARRY KATZ

ON A LATE morning inside Springfield's Riverbluff Cave, three men are shaving clay with hand trowels and plucking fossils from the walls. Having uncovered parts of a mammoth skull, Matt Forir—keeper of the cave and founder of the Missouri Institute of Natural Science, which has a ninety-year lease on the cave that Greene County owns—is searching for the rest.

"We're mammoth-hunting," he says, squinting one eye. "Big game hunting, if you will."

The construction lights lend him an air of drama, like telling a ghost story with a flashlight.

The mammoth is the latest project in Matt's lifelong history of exploration. Not only does he dig, he educates and devises ways to help others have the same joy of discovery. Sometimes that means placing a fossil in the hands of a child. Sometimes that means taking locals to the badlands region to dig for dinosaurs. Today, it means crouching through a cave tunnel and leading his volunteers like an army officer through the Riverbluff Cave, one of Missouri's greatest geological discoveries.

The cave was sealed for fifty-five thousand years until a road crew discovered it on September 11, 2001, after exploding two dynamite charges. Following the terrorist attacks that morning, the federal government placed a ban on all explosives, which prevented the crew from planting and exploding ten more charges. An hour after its discovery, as the rest of the country was glued to the news, Matt, the geologist for Greene County's Resource Management office, was exploring the cave with his colleague Lisa McCann.

"This is where we stopped that first day," Matt says, gesturing toward a short cairn of rocks. "If we had just walked a few steps farther and shined a lamp in this direction, we would have seen this."

His headlamp beams over a pit and onto a wall. It illuminates claw marks. Deep. High above the heads of the volunteer crew.

"Man," crew member Joel Alexander says with an Arkansas drawl. "That was a big critter."

Matt says a short-faced bear, which stood twice as tall as a grizzly and went extinct nearly twelve thousand years ago, left the marks. The crew gazes in a hushed awe. Someone asks how deep the marks go. Matt shrugs and points to a mud pit.

"You can go down there and see."

On top of founding and running the Missouri Institute of Natural Science, which hosts a museum and arranges biweekly digs like this one, Matt still serves as Greene County's geologist, teaches cave studies at Drury University, and runs a business that plots sinkholes beneath peoples' properties. In the past, he's worked in construction, done crime forensics, participated in too many dinosaur digs to count, and earned the title of, as he'll say with false haughtiness, "the world's foremost authority on Missouri cretaceous turtles."

The turtle is a fitting totem for a man whose personality is purposeful, private, and a little hard-edged. His laugh is hearty, sometimes at the expense of others. He's prone to cursing and derides panda bears as a "Darwinian dead-end." He admits to being polarizing, having upset locals by making decisions like closing Riverbluff to cavers

Greene County Geologist Matt Forir first explored the Riverbluff Cave near Springfield on September 11, 2001, the day it was discovered. Inside the cave, many fossils date back to nearly 1.1 million years ago.

Geologist Matt Forir uses an air scribe to remove rock from a sixty-seven-million-year-old triceratops femur. Matt named the triceratops Henry after his three-year-old son.

and refusing to work with volunteers who lack commitment. It's a strict and stubborn personality he attributes, in part, to his upbringing.

"I grew up near St. Louis in the little town of Jennings," he says. "My parents were blue-collar workers. Everyone was poor."

As a boy, when he learned about dinosaur digs in Colorado, he pleaded with his parents to move there. They looked at him like he was crazy. He settled for fossil hunting in Missouri instead. His first two specimens, found in a creek when he was four, are on display in the museum.

"I was certain this was a worm," he says, pulling a crinoid from the display case. He takes out another plant fossil, which has five segmented fronds. "And this was the fossilized foot of a lizard," he says. "That's how I explained it. There was nobody around to correct me."

Matt withdrew into fossils and books about dinosaurs as his father's alcoholism progressed.

"You could tell how drunk he was by how he parked the car after work and how long it took him to get out," says Matt's mother, Barbara Forir. "If he was really drunk, he would just pull up in front of the house; if he was just a little drunk, he'd pull into the driveway and back in. But if he slid out of the seat, oh boy. The kids would go downstairs and slip out the backdoor."

She says that at these times, Matt retreated to neighbors' houses and was always hard to read.

> "For the first time in my life, I didn't have to hide. I'm not Matt Forir, the son of an alcoholic."

"Maybe that's why I'm quiet," he says. "That's how I protected myself. At school, I could be the class clown, the smart one, the rough, tough biker."

But that's all that Matt revealed to his peers: the outside, the act.

After stints in construction and carpentry, Matt ended up on the doorstep of St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley. There, he met Bruce Stinchcomb—the geology professor who changed his life.

"Geology is funny," Bruce says. "People that are doers and like the outdoors get bitten by a bug with it. Matt was certainly one of them."

Bruce took his students to digs and caves in southern Missouri and led trips out West. His labs were always hands-on, and he encouraged his classes to have open discussions.

"Oh man, did I take to it," Matt says. "I traveled the world."

He resolved to see as many rocks, fossils, and caves as he could, and Barbara says every flat surface in her home had a fossil on it—treasures from Matt's latest trips.

"For the first time in my life, I didn't have to hide," Matt says. "I'm not Matt Forir, the son of an alcoholic. I could be whoever I wanted."

Despite years in the American West and an deep affection for the badlands of Wyoming, Matt settled in his home state.

"So many people say the grass is greener, but Missouri has done a lot for me," he says.

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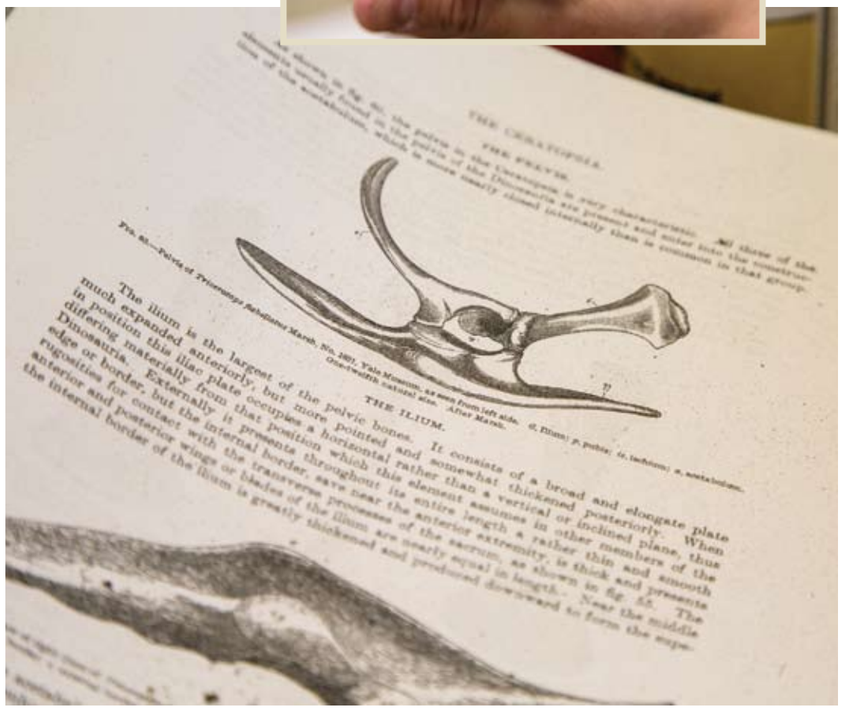
Remarkable MISSOURIANS

Below: This skull of a forty-million-year-old sabertooth tiger, called a Hoplophoneus, was found during a dig in South Dakota, in which Matt participated. It was completely encased in rock until Matt cleaned it to display at the museum.



Above: Matt Forir is surrounded by sixty-five-million-year-old triceratops bones encased in plaster field jackets. **Right:** The book *Ceratopsia* is considered the bible of triceratops anatomy.

In 2005, he founded the Missouri Institute of Natural History on the south side of Springfield. There, displays tell the story of evolution in Missouri, huge Ozark crystals shine in glass cases, and casts of major discoveries from Riverbluff can be touched and photographed. Many friends and connections helped get the museum started, and local rock hounds volunteered to run the building.

"If this place had existed in St. Louis for me, I would have had a better time as a kid," Matt says.

That's why the museum is free. Bruce says he is proud of the work his former student has done: "It is a local museum, and it is part of the culture of community."

"Sharing Riverbluff is such a treasure," says Joel, a recent college graduate who joined Matt's crew after visiting the museum. He has since been on dinosaur digs and worked in a cave that was a hideout during the Civil War.

"I help everyone I can; that's part of the reason I built the museum," Matt says. "I want this place to breathe in and out."

RESILIENCE *in* PRACTICE

What makes Eric Greitens tick?

BY WADE LIVINGSTON

Soldier, leader, and author Eric Greitens reviews his schedule at The Greitens Group offices in St. Louis's Central West End. His day included promoting his book and writing a recommendation for a prospective Navy SEAL.

HARRY KATZ

HE DOESN'T REMEMBER the blast from the suicide truck bomb. The aftermath is clearer. Soldiers coughing. The burning in his throat. Blood on his uniform—not his own. He tells this story in one of his books, of sitting on a rooftop in Fallujah after the 2007 attack. He was battered, yet ready to fight. He felt lucky. He had plenty of bullets, his med kit, the high ground, good cover, and a clear view of every approach. He knew he could stay there for hours if necessary, though he would eventually need some water.

But on this night, Eric Greitens offered wine with the lamb burgers with pita and greens. Everyone chose water. After dinner, Eric led his guests to a side room that is, most accurately, a library. He had one last story to tell. He wanted to ensure his company left full.

Eric stood in the middle of the library, which doubles as a makeshift home office. It houses several bookshelves sporting presidential biographies, multiple copies of the books he's written, and atop one bookcase, his nearly five-inch thick Oxford dissertation on humanitarian aid for children in war zones.

Eric gestured toward the mantel.

On the mantel was Winston Churchill's multivolume history of World War II, which was flanked on either side by two jugs like rooks on a chessboard protecting the assets in their charge. The two jugs were adorned with drawings of Odysseus, who, like Eric, endured quite the journey and told tales of it. But neither Churchill's tomes nor the jugs interested Eric at the moment. He pointed at the framed print.

Above the mantel in his Central West End St. Louis home hangs Winslow Homer's *The Veteran in a New Field*.

This is one of the paintings I included in *Resilience*, Eric said, referencing his fourth book, which debuted in March.

Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life is a collection of letters and emails that he wrote to his friend and fellow Navy SEAL, Zach Walker. Zach Walker is a pseudonym, but the problems Walker faced—re-acclimating to civilian life and searching for his purpose—are very real. Eric understands this, and he wants you to.

And so he told the story of Homer's painting. The soldier sheds his uniform, picks up his scythe, and works the wheat field in front of him, his back toward the dark undertones—the past—that dominate the foreground. The golden wheat, a bountiful crop, lies ahead. Opportunity. A brilliant blue sky hovers above. Hope.

As he spoke, he looked at the print, then back to his guests. Eric Greitens—Missouri native; battle-tested Navy SEAL; Naval Reserve officer; White House fellow; nonprofit founder; leadership guru; Rhodes Scholar; author; businessman; public speaker—took shape. His accomplishments manifest in his mannerisms and appearance.

As a Navy SEAL officer, Eric was deployed four times to Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, the Horn of Africa, and Iraq. His awards include a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.

SERVICE

His expression is disarming; intelligent blue eyes teem with energy but convey calm. His forehead is prominent, smooth and tall, the bow of a vessel awash with analogies of ancient wisdom: as the archer must draw back the bow to propel the arrow forward, so too must we look back on our past to realize our purpose, he might say, though more eloquently. There are scars around his jawline, one the result of an elbow he took in a boxing match.

The flecks of gray hair denote a man in his early forties; his physique is that of an athlete untouched by middle age. His hand offers a firm shake, controlled, not domineering; the calluses, which he'll pick at during a business call, bespeak blue-collar values, the kind that prefer used cars over new. His palms are dry, his nails neatly clipped.

Skeptics who meet the man might find themselves flummoxed. How can someone be so … good? They might liken him to Ed Harris's portrayal of astronaut John Glenn in *The Right Stuff*. In the movie, Glenn is cast as the all-American frontman of the Mercury Seven. He knows just what to say and might be too perfect, but his less-polished colleagues come to see him as the glue of the group and, maybe, the leader. And Eric has many followers.

Krystal Taylor is one of them. She's worked for Eric since 2011. "Eric has challenged me to do things I never thought I could do," she says.

Earlier in the day, after lunch, Eric rushed off to a private meeting and left his guests with Krystal, vice president of the Greitens Group. The for-profit arm of Eric's business offers corporate leadership training, organizes speaking gigs, and promotes his books: *Strength and Compassion*, *The Heart and the Fist*, *The Warrior's Heart*, and *Resilience*.

Krystal knows Eric as a man who might have been a bit nervous before his 2011 appearance on *The Colbert Report*; he researched Stephen Colbert, studied clips of others' appearances. "He likes to have a model," she says. He prefers jeans; "He likes to be comfortable." He enjoys Thai food and the occasional chocolate-chip cookie but tries to avoid caffeine. Krystal says his smoothies, which he sips throughout the day, are his fuel.

But what really fuels Eric is his work with veterans through The Mission Continues (TMC). That's where many of his conversations start and end. And that's where Krystal chauffeured his guests for a tour.

Eric founded TMC in 2007 with his own combat pay. At that time, he was sleeping on an air mattress in a barren apartment.

TMC occupies the ground floor of 1141 South Seventh Street in St. Louis. A stack of cinder blocks greets visitors. On them are the organization's principles: work hard; trust; learn and grow; respect; have fun.

TIME magazine's Joe Klein featured TMC in the publication's cover story in June 2013. Klein worried about the problems veterans faced when they returned home. PTSD. Alcohol and drug abuse. Suicide. He asked a simple question: can service save us? A few months later, for a follow-up story, Klein had his answer. Yes. TMC provides a certain number of veterans with community service fellowships at nonprofits throughout the country. It also organizes platoons of veteran volunteers around community-improvement projects.

TMC staffers, such as Meredith Knopp, vice president of programs, and Lyndsey Reichardt, development director, vouch for Eric's prowess as a charismatic, in-the-trenches leader, the kind *Fortune* magazine ranked among the top fifty leaders in the world, at number thirty-eight.

HE FOUNDED TMC WITH COMBAT PAY. AT THE TIME, HE WAS SLEEPING ON AN AIR MATTRESS IN A BARREN APARTMENT.

TMC staff tell stories about physical fitness days that he organizes for the crew. He once led them to the Arch on a cold, rainy November day for some exercise. Eric was right beside them, doing calisthenics and lugging the five cinder blocks around in the mud. Tourists snapped pictures. It was a fun outing, though no one thought to bring towels or clean clothes; the challenge was getting back to the office without soiling their cars. Improvise, adapt, overcome, as Eric might say.

Meredith and Lyndsey quote Eric and use his analogies. A staple is the compass, TMC's original logo. If you can make one degree of positive change in your life, they'll say, that's a start. Challenge yourself. Take action.

Challenge is a word Eric is fond of. Purpose is another.

Earlier in the day, Eric lunched with Tim Smith, one of the first TMC fellows. They discussed issues facing veterans upon their return from combat.

COURTESY OF THE MISSION CONTINUES

CHALLENGE

Eric's idea behind founding The Mission Continues is that veterans need a purpose; finding that can change their lives.

What are the problems, in Eric's opinion? A system that prescribes pills, delivers disability checks, addresses wounds, and not much more. A system that fails to challenge veterans to further service—to realize their purpose.

But, as Eric says, veterans can change the narrative and author their own stories. Tim shared his.

The Army veteran served in Iraq. Eight of his friends died in an IED blast. When he returned home, he struggled. He was unemployed for months. With one child and another on the way, he and his wife moved in with his mother.

As the lunch guests slurped their noodles and picked at their rice, Tim recounted how he had gone back to school, met Eric, and become a TMC fellow. Now, he's a successful businessman—the president of Patriot Commercial Cleaning, which employs veterans in need of a mission.

As Tim talked across the table at Café Saigon, Eric smiled. It was an easy smile, barely wrinkling his face.

Eric joined the conversation.

"Have you read the chapter on 'Story' in *Resilience*?" he asked. Seeing blank looks, he continued.

As a writer, he said, you understand the power of the narrative, our personal stories. You learn that our own stories are meaningful, and you realize the opportunity to make meaning of them. The gist, to

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Five cinder blocks emblazoned with the nonprofit's values greet visitors to the offices of The Mission Continues. TMC staffers use them for team-building activities during field days.

Eric holds his son Joshua, who is only nine months old, in front of a print of Winslow Homer's painting *The Veteran in a New Field*—an 1865 painting of a veteran of the Union army.

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PURPOSE

paraphrase his writing in *Resilience*: you have to wrestle with your past to navigate your future, to find your purpose.

Eric entered the conversation, offering context to Tim's story. He wasted no words, with the economy of a writer who admires Hemingway. He was empathetic, but above all, he spoke with conviction. He is a believer—in himself and his work.

As Eric spoke, Tim nodded. He is a believer, too.

Lunch ended. Eric had finished half of his dollop of rice. He placed his napkin over the uneaten food. The two men walked back to Eric's office.

The office space is new; the Greitens Group relocated from the TMC complex to a location closer to his home in August. The move coincided with Eric's departure as CEO of TMC. He now serves on its board of directors.

Eric describes his personal office as Spartan. It is. Several tables have been pushed together to form a large desk. There's a telephone. A rolling whiteboard. A large bookcase occupies the near wall and houses copies of *The Heart and the Fist*. A few pictures sit on the bookcase. One of Eric with his brothers. Another of the entire family. One of him and his wife, Sheena. And a picture of Eric with his nine-month old son, Joshua.

Fatherhood is Eric's newest challenge; he's struggling to feed Joshua without making a mess.

When he talks about Joshua, Eric smiles—really smiles. He might even guffaw, the veins in his forehead flaring. It's unrestrained emotion, which the public might rarely see. He is a polished, focused man whose lone flaw, as a TMC staffer says, is landing a joke.

Eric is less guarded when he talks about Zach Walker, his muse for *Resilience*. Earlier in the day, I'd asked him to tell me a story about Zach. He thought for a moment. He recounted Hell Week during SEAL training.

As darkness fell, a calorie-deprived Eric had just finished a medical check and was heading to change his uniform before the hazing resumed. Zach, who'd previously survived the crucible, passed him on the way.

"Hey, Mr. G, I got ya," Zach said, cryptically.

Eric was confused.

He reached the changing station and donned his camouflage shirt. Drill instructors yelled. They sprayed him with a fire hose. They demanded pushups.

Eric assumed the position. He lowered his body to the ground. And then he felt it—in the chest pocket of his shirt. A bulge. A Clif Bar. Calories. Camaraderie.

The water pelted his face. He smiled.

Eric is a man who speaks in stories. And all of them have a point.

As I stood in the library and listened to Eric tell the day's final tale, that of Homer's painting, I wondered about Eric's future. Public service? Political office? Perhaps. He's considering how best to serve in the next phase of his life. What's ahead in his wheat field?

And I found myself wondering about my own field. I believe that was his purpose.

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

"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 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, Benjiumen "Ben" Denney competes with a video camera mounted on his hat. Visit 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."

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.

FRIENDLY COMPETITION

Benjiumen "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 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
660-841-5351

KANSAS CITY
Missouri Raw Hide Mounted Shooters
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SOUTHEAST MISSOURI
Missouri Big Irons Cowboy Mounted Shooters
mobigirons.net
573-701-2849