

# Wild West Gunmen Were Not so Hot

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Since we're about to destroy some legendary paladins of the American West, we must quickly present the credentials of our author (and authority). Charles Askins, Jr. is the son of the late Maj. Charles Askins, a shooting editor for *OUTDOOR LIFE* for many years. At the time of this story, Charles Jr. (Col. Askins now) had won the national pistol championship, the national all-around championship and ranked No. 1, .22 caliber all-America pistol team. He had won state championships in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma, and Southeastern, Southwestern and Northwestern regional championships. He had won a rapid-fire Olympic championship. And he was a former member of the U.S. Border Patrol. So, stand back, please, out of the line of fire.

"The Lily Belle Saloon was quiet with hushed expectancy, its silence broken only by the rasping voice of Wolf McSween. Big Wolf, sixgun, in hand, was taunting little Bucky Johns, fastest gunswoop of all the Big Bend. McSween teetered on his heels, the snout of his .45 describing little circles in the vicinity of Bucky's belt buckle.

"'Why don' yah say yore skeered?'" he demanded. 'We knows yah fer a yella dog. Beg, Tejino, 'cause I'm gonna cut yah down—now!' Screaming the words he threw the .45 forward.

"Bucky Johns in that death-stalking instant, moved. Moved with the lashing speed of a jungle cat. Spinning, his right fist flashed down and up, spitting fire. The blur of his shots became a staccato yammer. Then it was all over. With an agonizing scream big Wolf McSween clutched his wrist, blood spurting between his fingers. . . ."

How many times have you read tripe like that in the baker's dozen of Wild West pulp magazines which clutter our news stands? How many times have you read it in the supposedly authentic biographies of the gunfighters of the old West—Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid, Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp, and the rest? How many times have you seen it acted out for the movies by handsome gunmen who invariably flinch as their blank cartridges go off?

Countless times, I have no doubt. Matter of fact, the gunning fracas described above is mild indeed—generally the hero knocks half a dozen guns spinning. Western-story writers have a certain number of stock situations which they rotate for their gun-swinging valiants. Briefly they may be summed up as follows. 1. He rides down the trail, flips out the Old Equalizer, and dusts off a jack at 200 yards, not, please understand, killing the innocent rabbit, but neatly shooting him through both ears. 2. He dots the "i" in the sign over the Silver Dollar Saloon, remarking meanwhile that "some painter man was downright car'less 'bout his spellin'." 3. Later he knocks the gun out of the brother's, father's, or uncle's hand, when the brother, father, or uncle of the love interest (i.e. heroine) attempts to ventilate our hero (believing him to be the rustler king). 4. Finally, in the last paragraph, he tackles six gun-wolves all at one time, shooting three through their respective shoulders, two alongside the head, so that they are ren-

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dered instantly unconscious, and plugs the sixth and last—the real villain of the piece—plumb through the heart.

Glorifiers of our Men of the Draw, real and fictional, never feel they have done their hammer man justice until they have permitted him to perform half a dozen ballistically impossible gun stunts. Billy the Kid, First Gun Hand of New Mexico during the early '80s, whiled away many happy hours on the trail, it seems, by nonchalantly barking each fence post as he galloped past. Of course the chronicler blissfully ignored the fact that there were no fence posts along the trails in Lincoln County sixty years back. (N.B.: And damned few today!) Wes Hardin, Texas's brightest contribution to that shining galaxy of powder-burning immortals, used to draw his twin .41's, and fanning both simultaneously, ignite a dozen matches with as many bullets. This remarkable feat of gunning legerdemain has probably impressed me more deeply than any other, for the clever Mr. Hardin undoubtedly must have fanned the hammers with his teeth. Contemporary experts, as well as the less dexterous modern gun handlers, have found it necessary to hold the sixgun in one hand and fan the hammer with the other. Wes Hardin's scribe disdained to have his stalwart stoop to such petty conventionalities.

Clay Allison, dapper gambler and killer extraordinary, used to toss up the five of diamonds, thumb out a machine-gunlike burst of shots—and the pasteboard would float to earth, a ragged tear where each spot had been. Ben Thompson, Abilene gun wolf, with more notches on his old hawleg than teeth in a buzz saw, shot a fellow's boot heels off while forcing him to dance, blasted the buttons off his pants, and laughed uproariously when the poor dude's breeches fell about his knees. Later Ben, who, if we may place any credence in his chroniclers, had a most subtle sense of humor, neatly clipped the ash from the Abilene mayor's cigar as he stood drinking in the Longhorn Saloon. When the mayor turned to protest, Ben upped his Old Convincer and bored a perfectly round hole in Hizzoner's ear exactly 45/100 of an inch in diameter.

Ah, but Wild Bill Hickok was the gunman extraordinary! Wild Bill, leadslinger without parallel. Wizard of the draw. Straight-shooting, fast-shooting Abilene marshal. Verily, the super triggerman in a day when there were only two classes of Westerners—the quick and the dead. Wild Bill, bless 'im, was colorful copy for ten million words of paperback fiction. Hickok has accomplished more with his magical sixes than Thor with his hammer, Zeus with his thunderbolts, and Darryl Zanuck with his entire corps of movie rewrite men.

To quote from Alsike's "Life of Wild Bill Hickok" ". . . he (Bill, of course) strode out of the Longhorn and noting that the street was filled with Texas men, all of whom were avowed enemies, Wild Bill thought to impress these fierce cowboys of the Texas pampas with his six-shooter skill. Forthwith he drew his long-barreled, cap-and-ball weapons and firing both revolvers so fast there was a steady stream of fire at the muzzles and the shots sounded so close together the reports could not be counted, emptied both weapons. His target was a sign hanging in front of the town's only blacksmith shop. 'Jim Cooley, Blacksmith' read the board above the swinging doors of the farrier's place. Wild Bill had fired his guns at the 'oo' in the name 'Cooley.' On inspection each 'o' was found to contain six bullet holes. Afterward, spectators paced the distance and found that it measured 187 long steps."

At 200 yards the modern .45 Colt bullet drops eleven feet. At 187 yards, or paces, as stepped by the witnesses of Hickok's little shooting lesson, the bullets would probably drop only about nine and one-half feet. So, you may see that while Wild William had been handed down to us as a pistoleer of remarkable versatility he was also an engineer of no mean accomplishment. On that memorable

day in the streets of old Abilene, Bill whipped out his "cutters" and as he pointed 'em with that scintillating wizardry of his, he also instantly calculated the bullet drop for the range. Nine-and-one-half feet it was, and Bill, so far as I am concerned, on the basis of that little piece of shooting alone, makes some of our modern ballistics experts, who must plot for hours to figure a trajectory curve, look like the rankest amateurs.

What about all these entrancing yarns of the gun fighters of yesterday? How much of these grand Sagas of the Sixgun are we to accept as truth, what part pass over with a knowing smile? Isn't it possible the revolver wizardry of those super fighting men was a brand not seen among the effete target marksmen of today? Isn't it logical that those devil-men, grim gun hawks with a thousand enemies about them, practiced with such dogged persistence as to achieve a hammer skill which modern pistolmen have never attained?

Maybe—but I think not.

In the last ten years I've shot away something like 340,000 rounds of pistol ammunition. I'm betting that's more shells than all the leather slappers west of the Mississippi burned up among 'em! I fired those shells mostly at targets—but not altogether. In the last year, and at times before, I practiced constantly to master the hip-shooting technique of our Western immortals. Of the more than a third of a million bullets sped down the range by me, I expect a full 100,000 have gone into draw-and-fire practice. In the last decade, when I used up more than 30,000 hulls annually, I was lucky enough to win the national pistol championship, the national all-around championship and the .22 all-American No. 1 rating. Today 420 medals adorn my walls and I claim 117 cups and similar trophies won by me at one time or another. If a comparison is to be drawn between the shooting skill of our bygone trigger men and that of today's shooter, it may add some light to explain my success (or lack of it!) in attempting to duplicate the gunning feats accredited to those lead spillers who lived and died in the smoke of Colonel Colt's most famous invention.

To begin with, I got two .45 single-action sixguns. Made of infinitely better steel, bored to closer tolerances, fitted tightly at cylinder and joint, with good trigger pulls and improved sights, these modern counterparts were vastly superior to the best that the gun swingers of the old days could buy. Six-shooters in those days were made of inferior stuff, sloppily bored and rifled, the cylinders loosely pinned to the frame, chambers quite frequently drilled out of line, and the sights were an abomination. But the ammunition—whew! It was by long odds the worst part of the combination. I have before me a box of black-powder .45 loads purchased in Tombstone in 1889. This fodder shows a variance of eleven grains weight between individual bullets and a difference of 8.3 grains weight between powder charges. When Clay Allison pipped his cards, and Bill Hickok punctured his signboard, they must have had better hulls than these!

The old gunfighters never had been to the Camp Perry School of Marksmanship, so they did not know anything about sighting in a sixgun. They believed, like a lot of folks who buy new shooting irons today, that the factory makes 'em to hit dead center. When you attend the Camp Perry shooting school you learn better. The first .45 S.A. sixgun I bought, shot, I found, exactly level but four inches to the right; the second hit three and one-half inches high and four inches right. How in hell can I shoot the spots off cards and the gun out of an opponent's hand, as well as satisfactory plug signboards and otherwise be a bad man, with guns that shoot off center like that?

Maybe Wild Bill and Ben Thompson savvied more than I give 'em credit for. Maybe they adjusted their sights and got their powder burners to hitting true, but it is a fact that a lot of converted cap-and-ball sixguns in those days had a back

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sight which was also the hammer firing pin. I do not know how you'd move a notch like that to get in perfect zero on your target.

After sighting my guns in by bending the sights and filing down the back notch, I group-fired both at fifty yards with black-powder loads. This to get a definite line on the accuracy of the .45 single-action and the old, reliable 255-grain black-powder load. The first gun fired from a bench rest made a group size of 7.3 inches; the second ran 8.7 inches. At 200 yards my groups (multiplied by four) would mean the best I could do would be to hit a thirty-two-inch circle, approximately. Unfortunately Wild Bill's historian doesn't tell us the size of the "oo" in Blacksmith Cooley's name, as painted over the shop door, but somehow I have a feeling these letters did not measure thirty-two inches. I was somewhat discouraged by this and must confess that I did not even try to duplicate Hickok's 187-yard shooting feat. I'll grant he has me at the long range.

The next thing I did was to make a dummy. "Trigger McGook" I dubbed my stooge, and a right good make-believe man was he, what with his ready gun and fierce scowl. I stood Trigger up and put his sixgun in his hand. Then I had him do the road agent's spin, and just at that instant I decided to disarm him by the fiction-worn expedient of shooting the gun out of his hand. Now, .45 black-powder loads, which I was using are potent indeed. In fact, they pack more wallop than any smokeless load you can get. My bullet caught McGook's iron between barrel and cylinder. The gun came all to pieces, and the unfortunate part of the story must be related here. Various large chunks of the receiver, ejector-rod spring, spring housing, as well as the ricocheted bullet, penetrated McGook's paunch. He bled copiously of alfalfa, his life fluid.

Hell of a hero I'd make in one of those Wild West books if, intent on disarming the gal's brother by shooting his six out of his fist, I filled his belly full of assorted parts from the suddenly come-apart revolver! Evidently even in the heat of battle with my straw man, I should have selected a better aiming point than the junction of barrel and cylinder. I'll have to get acquainted with some of these Western writer chaps and find out where you hit the other man's iron so that it flies harmlessly behind the bar, and the owner isn't even bruised.

Trigger McGook eventually digested the ejector spring and other bits of steel, and was just as belligerent and ready to shoot it out as before. This time I gunned for his wrist. The distance was twenty-five feet, pretty long range for gun scraping. My first shot, triggered from the hip after a fast gun snatch, hit McGook squarely in the chest. The second blast took him in the navel and the third connected with his elbow. Since Trigger was practically immortal, I blandly disregarded the highly probable lethal effects of that dose in the chest, followed by the hit in the belly, and congratulated myself on that damaging shot in the elbow. Of course, it had missed the wrist by a couple of inches, going high, and would never have done in the judgment of the rankest writer of Westerns, but I felt pretty good about it.

I think I should confess right here that I am an ardent Western-story fan. I digest 'em by the dozens. Not infrequently I find where the hero's Man Friday is being hanged by the villains of the piece. Invariably the hero gallops in and shoots the rope in two just before his pardner gasps his last. So it seemed to me I'd better try this with my man McGook. Forthwith I strung him up. Backing off on the paint horse about two pistol shots' distance, I galloped forward in best Hollywood style, jerked out the .45, and went to work. A brisk little wind was blowing and Trigger was swaying pretty badly. This had a wholly distressing effect on the rope. Undoubtedly a dancing lariat would prove no handicap to your real Western gun-pointer, but it proved damnably annoying to me. On the third shot I did manage to cut one strand of the rope. McGook's face was turning

black; I'd have to hurry. Wildly I whammed in the three other shots, missed—and turned away leaving my pal to dance in the breeze.

Clay Allison, reputed killer of eighteen less-speedy hombres, tossed playing cards into the air and while they floated and ducked above his head, knocked the spots off 'em. Now, I have plenty of trouble puncturing pint-size tin cans in the ozone, much less cards, so I wisely pinned my aces, deuces, and treys to a substantial backboard. I shot at these cards at twenty feet. Not, let me hasten to assure you, by slap-bang, rapid fire from the hip, but by deliberate slow fire with a carefully aimed gun. Altogether I shot away seventy-six black-powder loads. I missed the spots on the cards twice. In all the shooting, however, I hit the spots dead center only seven times. I nicked 'em, sure, but smack 'em plumb center I did not. At that stunt old Guntwist Allison has me licked forty ways!

I tried shooting corks from whisky bottles and, when given plenty of time—say four seconds a blast—I was deadly. I tried igniting matches at twenty feet, and could break a match stick about every second shot. I never did get one to burn. I snuffed candles, bounced empty cartridge hulls, and cut a string to which was suspended a bottle. But all this stuff smacked more of the circus than the prairie gun thrower, so I gave it up.

Billy the Kid got his lead-throwing practice by plinking fence posts, so why shouldn't I? I saddled Snake and galloped alongside a row of narrow silhouette targets at twenty yards. Six shots, six misses. H-m-m. Maybe the Kid edged over a bit closer than that to his unresisting targets. Yep, that must be it; he was closer to 'em. I got nearer. At fifty feet I thumbed out six shots as the horse plunged by. Tally: one hit for the full cylinder. At thirty feet, and with Snake running wide open, I smacked five of the six silhouettes. At twenty feet I got 'em all.

Shooting two guns, I tried riding between the silhouettes, placed in parallel rows facing each other and about twenty feet apart. This stunt invariably resulted in fifty percent hits. If I watched the figures on the left I hit all of them. If I concentrated on the right-hand targets I smacked a bullet into each of them. But, since I couldn't look in two directions at once, I'd always miss the targets on the blind side.

I tried riding hell-for-leather at the silhouettes, wheeling abruptly at thirty feet, and starting to shoot as I turned. This grandstand play netted exactly no hits at all. I rode closer. At about a dozen feet, I could ventilate the figures with satisfactory regularity, but had they been men and not make-believe, they'd have drilled me long before I reached them.

As I've said, I have fired upwards of 100,000 shots at man-shaped targets from the hip. At distances up to forty feet hip shooting is dangerously lethal—of that I am positive. Targets the size of a man can be plugged with a full cylinder of .45's in around two-and-one-half seconds, and with practice it does not matter which hand you use. Two guns fired together are not quite so accurate, but the gunner can expect about ninety percent kill hits. But that forty feet, in my experience, is extreme hip-shooting range. Half that distance is much more effective.

It is pure "toro" to say that the other fighter's gun can be shot out of his hand, that his wrist can be punctured, or that he can be hit in the shoulder, ear, alongside the head, or in any other selected part of the body with a shot fired from the hip in the heat of a kill-or-be-killed gun scrap. No man can do it, no man ever has done it except by accident. Which doesn't mean that I will not highly enjoy my next Western yarn in which the lightnin'-fast cowboy marshal sends six irons spinning from as many fists with as many bullets. I'll eat it up, same as usual.

I've tried fanning the hammer, too, but with only one gun. (I'll leave fanning two guns simultaneously to John Wesley Hardin.) With this style of shooting, at

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six feet the shots are all kill hits, and you can get six shots off in less than two seconds. At distances beyond six feet fanning the hammer is nonsense—not that I do not think it is a silly, ineffectual gun stunt at any distance, for it is.

And that brings us down to the most romantic, colorful, and entrancing part of the whole story—the business of the quick draw. Ah, what glamour, what drama, what tension-packed moments have been built around the gun snatch! Haven't you read—a thousand times at least—where the hero told the villainous robber chieftain, "Go fer yer gun, Killer Floogel, I'm gonna salivate yah!" And then when he'd cajoled and pleaded with the craven gunman to draw he'd beat him to it. Well, Ike Akard and I stood face to face and practiced the draw with empty guns at least 100 times every day for a month. At the end of that time, so far as witnesses could tell, our hammers dropped exactly together. It did not matter whether we started with gun hand hanging at the side, with a grip on the gun butt, or with thumb hooked over the cartridge belt, we were always together. We'd have killed each other dead as hell at each exchange.

The old gun jiggers were popularly supposed to have swung their irons in quick-draw practice several hours daily—just as Ike and I did. Granted, then, that the fighters of yesterday were in good form all the time, it stands to reason that, if they stood up man to man and started for their sixes exactly together, they both died—just as Ike and I would have died had our guns been loaded.

I know a lot of gun slingers—not famous fellows like the old-timers who, since their demise, have had plenty of unofficial publicity agents to build 'em up—but buckos who have killed maybe six, maybe eight, or even as many as a dozen men. These gun wielders tell me that the quick draw is a minor item. When a man expects trouble, he takes his gun out before it starts and holds it ready in his hand. If the trouble develops suddenly, he distracts the other man's attention, and starts for his gun in plenty of time to get in the first shot without any race to see who clears leather first.

But of course you can't make a thrilling story out of that kind of stuff!