

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

Missouri Pistolmen

By: Jim Taylor

Missouri has been discussed and cussed for many things over the years. Once fact does stand out about the State... it produced some of the first pistolmen the Nation had ever seen. Called "The Boys" by those who sympathized with them, they were known variously as "guerrillas, bandits, outlaws and rebels" by those who did not. When I use the term "pistolmen" I refer to the *offensive* use of the handgun, rather than the defensive use of it as had been the practice until then. In the days that I speak of they were not called "gunfighters". That term was coined by the writers of Dime Novels of the 1880's. **"They were called pistolmen, and they referred to their weapon as a pistol, or by the make ... a Colt's .44. The Missouri guerrilla was the first expert pistolman. According to U.S. Army dispatches, the guerrillas used this 'new' war weapon with devastating results."** (from Gone to Texas by Forrest Cater, preface, page xii)

"Revolvers were their weapons. They were the first to perfect pistol work. With reins in teeth, a Colt's pistol in each hand, their charges were a fury in suicidal mania..." (from Gone to Texas page 8) It is said "the Boys" each carried from 6 to 8 pistols on their person and on their horses. **"The real secret to their success in combat against a more numerous Union enemy, aside from their guerrilla tactics, lay in their superior weapon, the Colt's revolving pistol. The revolver was the primary weapon of Quantrill's men, and there is abundant evidence that they were deadly with this frontier weapon. It became customary for the guerrilla's to carry from two to eight revolvers in their belts and on their saddles. These rapid firing five and six shot weapons, in addition to the customary Sharps carbine, gave them a tremendous volume of fire power..."** (from The Grey Ghosts of the Confederacy by Richard S. Brownlee, page 104)

Not only did "the Boys" have a lot of fire power, they did not have to stop and reload like the Yankees with their single-shot muskets and carbines. Having another pistol has always been the fastest reload. Two or three more makes a lot of sense. Pistolmen of all ages have known that. It has not been a secret. It is only in the last 30 years or so this fact has been lost to the general shooting public. All the shooting "games" have been designed around reloading a single pistol, and none if any has allowed for the use of another one or two pistols. At least not until Cowboy Action Shooting. But real pistolmen, those who used a gun seriously, have always known it's a good idea to have one or two or three more hid on you someplace. Johnny Hopper, a partisan during the Occupation of France in the 1940's, changed from being a mild mannered mushroom farmer to a killer of Nazi's. He never carried less than 2 and often had as many as 6 pistols

on his person. Hopper was once ambushed by the Chief of Police in Caan. The Chief had (according to the newspaper) a dozen men with him. Hopper pulled his pistol, killed the Chief of Police, jumped on a nearby bicycle and made a clean getaway. In an indignant reply to the newspaper a few days later, one of the original ambushers claimed there had not been 12 but only 3 with the Chief when Hopper shot his way clear. (from [Smithsonian](#), Vol. 24, Number 3, Sept. 1993) Whatever the truth of the situation, like most who use a gun seriously Johnny Hopper knew the value of having enough of them with you.

One of the lessons we should re-learn in this day and age is the lesson of packing more than one gun. Even if it is just into the woods to hunt Bambi. If you have ever been on a hunt and had something break on your gun, and it was the only gun you had with you, you will sympathize with my statement. And if you are carrying a pistol for more serious reasons the consequences could be lethal.

That the revolver was used an offensive weapon by "the Boys" in Missouri is shown by an account pieced together from reports filed after the fight known later as the "Centralia Massacre". I quote from [Grey Ghosts of the Confederacy](#), page 219-220. **"Nearing the Singleton farm, the Union forces topped the gentle rise and saw ... a line of two hundred dismounted guerrillas standing silently to their horses... Major Johnson was a brave officer... he calmly dismounted his company.....and formed a twenty-yard line of battle. The guerrillas were astounded... John Kroger... said... "the fools are going to fight us on foot." and then added, "God help'em." ... led by a screaming Bill Anderson they charged up the hill at the Union infantry. Johnson's men fired one volley with their single-shot Enfield muskets.**

That volley, downhill, was high, and only three of the partisans were hit... In the next minute the guerrillas, their terrible revolvers popping, had ridden into the terrified Union infantry, through it, and had scattered their horses. Frank James stated that some of the soldiers were desperately... attempting to reload. In a few moments, most were dead... The guerrillas roared back into Centralia and rode over Theis's men... in a little more than an hour the Thirty-Ninth Missouri Infantry had lost 114 men and two officers killed, two men wounded and six men missing."

The terrible efficiency of the Missouri guerrillas with their handguns may account for some of the Government's fear of guns in the hands of it's citizens. At least that may be one of the places where the anti-gun sentiment in the Government got it's start. There is ample evidence it did in Missouri.

Among the pistolmen of Missouri (though he was born in Illinois and was only in Missouri a short time) was one James Butler Hickok, more commonly

known as "Wild Bill". Missouri and Mr. Hickok have the distinction of one of the first "wild west" gunfights. Although I am sure such duels took place before this time, Hickok's legacy being what it is has helped fuel the legend. Not being adverse to publicity in any way did not hinder his reputation either. Either way, the shoot-out took place July 21, 1865 on the Town Square in downtown Springfield, Missouri. Apparently it was not uncommon at the time to have armed men around the town. **"Springfield at the time had more than its fair quota of belligerent heavily armed men...."** (from [Triggernometry](#) by Eugene Cunningham, page 160). The fight was with one Dave Tutt of Yellville, Arkansas. Most folks feel it was over a woman who had been with Hickok and then had taken up with Tutt. It may be, but she later showed up in Deadwood with Hickok and if she held any ill feelings about him killing her lover she never showed it. Tutt and Hickok had been in a card game on the night of the 20th and had quarreled. The next day about noon they were on opposite sides of the Town Square and faced each other. Walking with guns in hand, Tutt fired and missed. Hickok stopped and in his own words "held up the pistol and pointed it at Tutt and fired." The shot was through Tutt's heart which settled the matter. It is 75 or 80 yards across the Square which **"... would seem to place Hickok as a cool and deadly marksman. There was no question here... of the 'quick draw'.... He saw Tutt coming across the square.... He expected trouble... and challenged Tutt, ordering him not to cross the square. When Tutt fired and missed, Hickok deliberately fired his shot."** (from [Triggernometry](#) page 161) Hickok wound up in Court over the shooting but was exonerated, the Court ruling that he acted in self-defense. Hickok's favorite pistols by the way were the Colt's .36 Navy Models. Shortly after this affair Mr. Hickok moved on to Kansas where he caused considerable ink to be used in printing his escapades in the frontier towns, first at Fort Riley and then more notably at Hays City and Abilene.

Missouri is also credited by some with the invention of the "Border Roll" or "Road Agents Spin". It was said to be used to extract oneself from a sticky situation where someone had "the drop" on you and told you to hand over your guns. The pistol was offered, butt first to the other person, except it is held upside down with the trigger finger in the guard and the barrel in the hand. As Eugene Cunningham describes it in [Triggernometry](#) page 415& 416, **"The spin is started by a slight jerk upward of the hand accompanied by the release of the barrel. The forefinger is the pivot...the butt comes upward from the horizontal, describes a half-circle... and smacks into the waiting palm. The.. thumb drops to the hammer, cocks it while the forefinger holds back the trigger..."** This little trick was used by pistolmen as notable as John Wesley Hardin in later years. Forrest Carter credits the invention of it to the Missouri guerrillas. **"It would become known as the "Border Roll" in honor of the Missouri Border pistolmen who had invented it..."** (from [Gone to Texas](#) page 75)

Missouri has had the reputation of producing some bad men. And it has.

One of the more notorious being General William Tecumseh Sherman. It has also produced more than it's share of good men. One of the more notable was Elmer Keith, born in Hardin, Missouri in 1899. We need some more like him.

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