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ERIC SHARP

Shooters hit mark with retro guns

Use black powder to power rifles

BY ERIC SHARP • FREE PRESS OUTDOORS WRITER • AUGUST 31, 2008

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CAMP GRAYLING -- The rifle that Paul Behe snugged against his shoulder was an original, just like those carried by some of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders when they charged up San Juan Hill more than 100 years ago.

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The bull's-eye that he stared at through the long, skinny telescopic sight was 900 yards away -- well over a half



Paul Behe

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mile -- and even at 6X magnification it looked very, very small.

Behe had loaded a black powder cartridge the size of a big man's index finger into the breech. He waited for a wind gust to die down, squeezed the trigger and a cloud of gray smoke the size of a cow belched out of the barrel.

Looking through a spotting scope, Ron Walters of Houghton Lake told Behe, "You're in the 10 ring at 9 o'clock." The bullet had hit within six inches of the center of a target that was nine football fields away.

Behe, a Mt. Clemens resident who is one of the top black powder cartridge target shooters in the country, and a couple of dozen other BPC specialists from a dozen states had gathered for a meet on the Camp Grayling National Guard installation, one of a handful of places in the country that offers a 1,000-yard shooting range.

Their accuracy was an impressive testament both to their marksmanship and the wonderful craftsmanship of the guns they fired. On the 900-yard range, Behe shot a tighter group than many of today's deer hunters could achieve at 100 yards with a modern rifle. He set five national records during the meet.

"We're very fortunate to have a place like Camp Grayling," Behe said. "We shoot for score at 800, 900 and 1,000 yards, and there aren't many places left you can



ERIC SHARP/Detroit Free Press

Paul Behe swabs out his black powder cartridge rifle after each shot on the 900-yard range at Camp Grayling.

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do that. Since they closed the 1,000-yard range at Camp Perry (Ohio), the nearest one after Grayling is in North Carolina."

"The thing we spend the most time on is developing the loads," Behe said, experimenting with bullet weights, different gunpowders and powder compression. "We're always experimenting."

Charles Bowen of Armada was shooting a replica 1885 Winchester high wall in .45-100 -- .45 caliber and 100 grains of powder. He said that it took eight months of experimentation with different bullets and powders to develop the load he was shooting.

Bowen added that the one thing modern shooters haven't been able to improve upon is the design of the bullet.

"A lot of guys are still using replica molds from the old 1881 U.S. Army model. It's the best design ever made for the old trapdoor Springfield (rifle), and no one has been able to come up with anything better," Bowen said, adding that because the bullets are pure lead, "there's no barrel wear and the gun is good forever."

There's also a practical reason for shooters to roll their own ammunition. The hand loads cost about 25 cents per shot, whereas commercial ammunition is more than \$2 per round.

The gun Behe was shooting was an original Winchester 1885 high wall in .45-100. Though originals like his can command \$10,000 or more, shooters can get into the sport with replicas that start at about \$2,000.

The cartridges are enormous by today's standards, with huge bullets at their tips

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as big as those that modern hunters use for extremely large, dangerous game like water buffalo, rhinoceros and elephants.

A typical bullet is about 400 grains for a .45-70 black powder cartridge and 530 grains for a .45-100. The bullets that deer hunters use in a modern .30-06 rifle are mostly 150-180 grains. (An ounce is about 437 grains.)

Black powder bullets travel slowly by the standards of modern rifles that use smokeless powder, barely breaking the speed of sound as they leave the muzzle. The 400-grain bullets from Ron Walters' .45-70 leave the barrel at about 1,200 feet per second (less than half the speed of a .30-06) and slow to less than 800 f.p.s. at 1,000 yards.

Walters of Houghton Lake said when he shoots metal silhouette targets at 600 yards it takes more than three seconds until the noise of the bullet hitting the target comes back to the shooter.

When Behe fired his .45-100 on the 1,000-yard range, it took nearly three seconds for the bullet to reach the target.

The shooters can use any accessory that was around back when their guns were invented, and two of the major divisions are those who use the rudimentary telescopic sights available then and those who shoot iron sights.

"I have a sight on mine, but the tube can only be 3/4 of an inch in diameter," Behe said.

Even though they fire a slow bullet compared with modern hunting rifles, Behe said that a bullet from a black powder cartridge gun will still rip through a 6-inch

pine tree at 1,000 yards.

"Inertia -- that's what this is all about," he said.

Contact **ERIC SHARP** at 313-222-2511 or esharp@freepress.com.

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