

A Short History of Camp Perry  
And  
The National Championships  
By  
Hap Rocketto

Seven men stood looking north over swampy hummocks and cattails at the white capped surface of Lake Erie on a cold rain swept day, early in April of 1906, some forty miles east of Toledo, Ohio near the small town of Port Clinton. Eight months earlier the group's leader, Ammon B. Critchfield, had surveyed all of northern Ohio's lakefront searching for a new training camp to replace the Ohio National Guard's facility at Newark, Ohio. The United States had learned many valuable military lessons in the recent encounter with the Spanish Army in Cuba in 1898. One result of the four month long Spanish American War was the development of a new rifle to replace the inadequate Krag-Jorgensen carried by the regular Army troops. The bolt action Krag had a low muzzle velocity, poor penetration power, lacked a method to rapidly reload its magazine, and had a single locking lug on the bolt. It was very much inferior to the Spanish 7mm Mauser rifles. The new rifle and cartridge, built along the lines of the Mauser at the Springfield Armory, also had greater range than the Krag, making the camp at Newark unsafe and obsolete.

Critchfield served as Ohio's Adjutant General for six years and as such would oversee the development of the new facility. The general wanted to build a shooting range that would serve to train his fellow Ohio Guardsmen as well as other military and civilian shooters from across the United States. His efforts would earn him the title of 'The Father of Camp Perry'. That dream, named for Oliver Hazard Perry, the hero of the War of

1812's Battle of Lake Erie, was about to become a reality and an American shooting tradition.

It is hard to ignore the presence of the spirit of Critchfield at Camp Perry. His hard work on behalf of the shooting sports was recognized in 1934 by the riflemen of Ohio who donated The Critchfield Trophy to the National Rifle Association. The trophy is awarded each year to the National Smallbore Rifle Prone Champion. Two years later, on September 6, 1936, a stone obelisk was dedicated to his honor in front of the recently completed Arcade. If that isn't enough, a sharp eyed observer will note that the white letters on the green street sign marking the road that loops through the small cabins in the Club House area tells all that they are traveling on Critchfield Circle.

Congress enacted Title 10 of the United States Code in 1903. Part of the new law stated that, "An annual competition called the 'National Matches' and consisting of rifle and pistol matches for a National Trophy, medals, and other prizes shall be held..." For the first three years they were held at Sea Girt, New Jersey under the direction of the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice. In 1907, at Critchfield's urging, they were moved to the recently constructed ranges at Camp Perry, Ohio and a shooting tradition that was only interrupted by two cataclysmic world wars began.

The inaugural matches were conducted in August and September of 1907 and would continue to be held at Camp Perry until the United States entered World War I. The fighting in Europe would put a halt to the competition for the 1916 and 1917 shooting seasons but the ranges were used for extensive training of marksmanship instructors. Peace brought a return to shooting competition and Camp Perry in 1918. The following year the United States Navy hosted the National matches at its east coast ranges at

Caldwell, New Jersey. Camp Perry would again host the matches in 1920 and there they would stay for the next two decades.

The Small Arms Firing School was added in 1920 and served to train thousands in the skilled use of military small arms. Many of those who first learned how to 'hold 'em and squeeze 'em' on the lake shore of Ohio would put those skills into practice on the coral beaches of the Pacific or the hard packed sands of the Normandy coast. Others took those skills and taught them to others in the training bases that sprung up after the United States entered the Second World War.

World War II left its mark on Camp Perry, adding to its traditions. As war clouds formed the United States began to call its citizen soldiers to active duty. Company C of the 192nd Tank Battalion, based at Camp Perry, was federalized and eventually shipped to the Philippine Islands where it was on December 8, 1941. Four months later, almost to the day, the remnants were captured when the Philippines fell. Of the 42 men that left Camp Perry in November of 1940 only ten would return. In 1984 several memorials were raised to these gallant men. The recognition involved naming the armory in the arcade building the "Bataan Armory", the dedication of a plaque on Memorial Plaza, and the static display of an M3 Stuart Light Tank that they rode into battle a half-century earlier.

The face of the Camp Perry became dotted with orderly rows of 14 feet by 14 feet huts built to contain Italian shipped there for internment in 1943. German prisoners of war would join them almost as soon as Allied forces landed in France in 1944. The tarpaper concrete floored huts would later house generations of shooters who considered hut living an important and indelible part of the Camp Perry experience. Many youngsters participating in the matches remember the huts as their first experience at independent

living on their way to adulthood. In these little shacks the day's shooting is rehashed, tales of triumph and despair are told, gear is checked and cleaned in preparation for the next day's shooting, and the traditions of past shooting generations are passed on to future ones.

Men of Ohio's 37th Infantry Division were beating back the Japanese, as Axis prisoners of war were first being led into confinement at Camp Perry. Four members of the 37th were to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for courage above and beyond the call of duty. Of these men Private Roger Young became the most famous. His heroism and death was immortalized in song by lyricist Frank Leosser and, like "Praise the Lord and Pass The Ammunition", "The Ballad of Roger Young" became one of the great patriotic songs of World War II. Private First Class Frank Petrarca, Technical Sergeant Cleto Rodriguez, and Second Lieutenant Robert Viale also displayed bravery worthy of the nation's highest military honor. On July 23, 1954 the four major ranges at Camp Perry were dedicated in their honor.

Through a clerical error the 'i' and the 'a' in Viale's name were transposed and thousands of shooters, for 36 years, entered Vaile Range into their scorebooks. The error was discovered and then officially corrected. Viale's son, then Colonel Charles Viale United States Army, a decorated infantry officer and combat veteran like his father, was present and spoke when the range was rededicated in August of 1990.

The National Matches started up again in 1946 with pistol and smallbore events being held at Camp Perry. For the next three years Camp Perry was not available and the matches were held at various sites around the country. The North Korean invasion of South Korea caused the 1950 matches to be cancelled. In 1951 the matches were again

conducted but they did not return to Camp Perry until 1953, where they have remained to this day.

The first matches fired each year are the National Rifle Association Muzzle Loading Rifle and Pistol matches. There was some black powder activity in the 1960s and after a ten-year absence the charcoal burners returned in 1978. Since then the matches have grown into a formal two-day event that kicks off the summer shooting activities.

Following quickly on the heels of the black powder events are the National Pistol Championships. Even though pistol events were present in the first National Matches they were not formalized until 1935. Shooting a traditional three gun tournament, using .22, center fire, and .45 pistols to shoot slow, timed, and rapid fire events, the pistol events have been dominated by members of the military and law enforcement. Only five civilians, H.J. Adams, James E. Clark, Hershel L. Anderson, Max J. Barrington, and James R. Lenardson, have been crowned pistol champion and two of them, Anderson and Lenardson, were retired military shooters who had won the title earlier while in uniform. William B. Blakenship's five match run, from 1959 through 1964, holds the record for consecutive wins while Blakenship, Huelet "Joe" Benner and Harry Reeves have all won six titles. Benner and William McMillian are the only Olympic Gold Medalists ever to win a US National Pistol Title. Navy Petty Officer First Class Donald L. Hamilton whose 2668-140 has stood since 1969 fired the NRA National Pistol Championship record score.

While pistol, smallbore prone, and highpower rifle have always been long term fixtures it was not until 1957 that smallbore position shooting was added to the program. In that year Captain Arthur E. Cook, of the US Air Force, won the champions laurels. Cook, the 1948 Olympic Gold Medallist in the 60 shot prone English Match, would win

again the following year. Olympic Gold Medal winners Gary Anderson, Lones Wigger, and Jack Writer join Cook in the exclusive circle of Olympians who have won national smallbore rifle titles at Camp Perry. In the 43 years that the match has been contested only four shooters have won the title more than once, Cook, Tommy Pool, James Meredith, and Lones Wigger.

From 1963 through 1992 the legendary Wigger took the title a record 21 times, with one stretch of nine consecutive wins. This consistent display of excellence, from the man who may arguably be the finest rifle shooter in the 20th century, gave birth to the apocryphal Camp Perry match report delivered to the folks back home. In reply to questions concerning what happened during the smallbore phase at Perry the standard reply became, "Nothing out of the ordinary, the wind blew and Wigger won."

Sandwiched in between Wigger's wins in 1986 and 1988, was Karen Monez's National Championship winning performance that made her the first woman to earn the position title. Captain Michael Anti, of the US Army Marksmanship Unit, established the current match record of 2303X2400 in 1994.

The American mainstay of prone shooting has a long and distinguished past. First fired at the national level in 1919 it has the longest unchanged course of fire and target of any of the National Championship's phases. In 1955 Viola Pollum became the first woman to win the National Smallbore Championship. William Woodring, a Winchester employee, won three titles consecutively starting in 1936, making him the only shooter to accomplish this feat. The only other shooters to win back-to-back prone titles are G. Wayne Moore in 1946 and 1947, Mary Stidworthy Sparling in 1977 and 1978, David P. Weaver in 1988 and 1989, and Sergeant Thomas Tamas of the Army in 1995 and 1996..

Wigger's eight prone wins makes him the most successful shooter in the history of the championships. Wigger's near perfect 6399X6400, fired in 1975, is the National Championship record while in 1963 and 1973 he won both the position and the prone titles. Wigger, Presley Kendall, Tommy Tamas, and Ken Johnson are all shooters who have won both smallbore prone and position titles.

The high power shooters are no slouches either. From 1958 on Middleton Tompkins, Ron Troyer, Gary Anderson, Carl Bernosky, David Tubb, and Pat McCann have blocked almost all other shooters from the top step of the victor's platform. Starting in 1977 Bernosky's run of four straight titles set the consecutive title record. He also shot the National Championship record score of 2385X2400 in 1992. With ten championships to his credit G. David Tubb is the king of the hill in this division. Anderson, Bernosky, and D.I Boyd, who won his championship with the service rifle in 1981 and stopped Bernosky's run, are the only highpower champions ever to also win a championship in the smallbore position matches. Jim Hill, silver medallist in the English Match at the 1960 Rome Olympics, won the 1956 Service Rifle Championship and the 1964 Smallbore Rifle Prone Championship. Until 1968 the match rifle and service rifle championships were held to be separate and equal, since then the shooter firing the highest score, no matter what rifle is used, is declared the champion.

There are two distinct parts to the pistol and highpower matches. One segment is the National Rifle Association National Championship, open to any firearm that meets NRA rules, while the other, the National Trophy Matches, known as 'The Board Matches', are fired with the current service firearm. The National Trophy Matches are where competitors vie for points towards earning the prestigious Distinguished Badges and

membership in The President's Hundred. Competition is fierce because The National Trophy Individual Match is the only Excellence-In-Competition Match where any score in the top ten per cent earns a civilian ten points towards 30 needed to earn Distinguished.

Over the years the matches have been successful events. Through the mid 1960s the matches were heavily supported by the Department of Defense. The ranges were operated by the major services and all a shooter had to do was shoot. Antigon hysteria in the 1960s saw Congress force a drastic reduction in support offered the National Championship. A huge army of National Rifle Association members volunteered to step into the breach and filled the gap so well that there was barely a hiccup in the smooth flow of the matches. Several hundred volunteers spend weeks each summer scoring targets, running the ranges, operating telephones and performing numerous other seemingly mundane tasks that are essential for the safe and efficient operation of the matches. Their only reward is room and board, a small enameled pin after ten years service, and the knowledge that, without them, the matches could not exist. Their dedication is legendary and many of them have spent 25, or more, summers toiling to make the matches a success.

During the summer long shooting fest shooters in all disciplines not only compete for national titles but international awards as well. Pistol shooters compete for places on the Mayleigh Cup Team and the NRA/USA Civilian Pistol Team Postal Match. Smallbore prone rifle shooters squeeze out every possible point and X to earn membership on the Dewar International Trophy Team. The Randle Trophy Match, named after smallbore great and former NRA President Thurman Randle, is open only to women who hotly contest for places on the team. Every eight years teams from Great Britain Canada, and



other English speaking nations meet at Camp Perry to shoot a prone match, shoulder to shoulder, for the Pershing Trophy. Long range High power shooters have lain in the sun on Viale Range in hope of bringing home the title of long range champion of the world that is represented by the Palma® Trophy.

There is more than competition at Camp Perry, there is the opportunity to learn. There are formal clinics in all disciplines run by the various military services. There are schools for new shooters and programs to teach coaching. There are hundreds of new shooters eager to learn and just as many experienced shooters willing to pass on the wealth of knowledge gained over a lifetime of shooting. In the pits, on the ready line, in the huts, and on Commercial Row novices and national champions mingle and exchange ideas, theories, and tall tales. Camp Perry hosts a National Championship like no other and, like the shooting sports, it is for everyone.