Firearms and academia: Stepping up to the plate

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ACADEMIA AND FIREARMS - STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

By Charles F. Priore, Jr.

The editorials in the 25th Anniversary Edition of the Blue Book of Gun Values had a markedly different slant than those in previous editions. As a matter of fact, this new concept was hatched over my dinner table with S.P. Fjestad and R.L. Wilson in attendance. For that edition, editorials were written by a variety of people from different walks of life. There was a female documentary filmmaker, a minister, and even a guitar collector/expert. And then there was me, the academic librarian who, for twenty years, has been employed by two very elite liberal colleges—one the birthplace of the late Senator Paul Wellstone!

My 2004 article described the display/exhibit sponsored by the Carleton College Gould Library of famed firearms historian R.L. "Larry" Wilson (Carleton Class of 1961), who came to campus after a forty-year hiatus and gave a talk entitled "Annie Oakley and a History of Women at Arms." I mentioned also that, despite the worries of student or faculty protests or demonstrations, nothing happened—and the entire event was a smashing success.

The piece then went on to describe how faculty and staff in academia should try to reach out to undergraduates and get them involved in the hunting/shooting sports. And just as important, it was time for the industry to stop supporting these do-nothing Police Chief groups and "step up to the plate" by spreading some of their largesse on this future generation of young and highly educated shooters. With the recent legal setbacks to the anti-gunners, in which the courts have ruled that the firearms industry is not liable for gun crimes, now is a perfect time for the industry giants to re-channel their efforts.

Falling back on my article, I decided to approach the industry and to seek support from some of the local shooting clubs. In the words of the late William B. Ruger, "We are sometimes our own worst enemy." Right off the bat,
I ran into a brick wall. The clubs were all eager for new members, but steadfastly refused to consider anything other than the status quo. For example, when I informed one club president that the students would only shoot a few times per year and certainly not in the summer when they all go home, my entreaties made no headway at all. No student or group discounts allowed, period. One club would not return my calls. Another insisted that all of the students, in addition to their dues, pay another $40 for membership to the NRA, which of course is a great idea, but not an affordable one. I was beginning to get desperate. Why could I not find a simple gun club for these future shooters? After all, this was rural Minnesota. Then, a friend at the college recommended a small gun club just a few miles from my farm. I had not even known that it existed, but the Kenyon Sportsman’s Club seemed to be the answer. After a few days of telephone tag, I finally made contact with one of the club officials. We had a most enjoyable conversation. The grounds would be perfect, the distance from campus very reasonable, and the dues only twenty dollars a year. I thought I had found the answer to this elusive issue when the bombshell was dropped. After forty-five minutes (long-distance, I might add), he finally informed me, “Oh, but we don’t allow women members.” I just about dropped the phone. When I tried to explain that I have two daughters ages eight and ten and that I wanted to join them up, I was informed that they could visit, and that they could shoot—but they could not join! Now I am not a “liberal” person, but this sort of discrimination makes my blood boil. So much for these Neanderthals—I was back on the trail again.

Sometimes, when a door closes, a window opens. Just a few weeks before this article is going to press, the pieces of my quest are beginning to gel. I have kept in touch with R.L. “Larry” Wilson, and, dare I say, my daughters now think of him as “Uncle Larry.” During one of our recent phone conversations, where I expressed my frustrations, he said he would start to “pull some strings” to help out our club. A few weeks had passed when, suddenly, I was overwhelmed by a $1,000 donation from the National Shooting Sports Foundation. Then S.P. Fjestad, author and publisher of the Blue Book of Gun Values, made contact with Birchwood Casey. They are located in Minnesota and are the manufacturers of targets and cleaning supplies. They have “opened up” their catalog for us and they, too, are being quite generous. Cabela’s, which needs no introduction, has given the club a gift certificate to get us going. And last, but not least, a small gun range (The Wanamingo Sportsman’s Club) has enthusiastically embraced our organization, especially the women members, with $10 per year memberships! Talk about the rewards of perseverance.

Last year, I closed my article by writing that, if we wanted to preserve our shooting heritage, we needed to get the camel’s nose into the tent. I think you will agree that we have succeeded!

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