

# Business with a bang done here

## Moline gun range attracts all varieties of marksmen

By LAURA FRAEMBS  
Dispatch Writer

It took long hours of practice in a drafty room filled with loud bangs, but now she no longer fears being on her own, no longer feels defenseless.

"I'm not afraid to be at home alone anymore, because I've got my own gun and my own ammunition," says Peggy Young.

More importantly, she knows how to use them correctly.

Young, a Burns Security guard at the Quad-Cities Nuclear Generating Station in Cordova, gained that expertise at Mid America Recreation, an indoor shooting range and gun store in downtown Moline.

Because she must carry a gun on the job, regulations required that Young receive firearms training. As an added bonus, she says, she found she enjoys the sport of target shooting and feels safer because she's trained to defend herself.

And Young's not the only person who's discovered those bonuses, according to Fred Miller, gun enthusiast and owner of Mid America.

Miller opened his doors in 1979, and he says business has gone up since that time. Some of the customers, like Young, are there for required training. Many are interested in home protection. Others just love practicing the skill involved in becoming an expert marksman.

WHATEVER THEIR reason for coming, Miller says, Mid America can fill their needs.

"Generally people that come own a pistol and want some place to shoot," he says. "But if you don't know anything, that's what we're for. If you're interested in a gun but you don't know a damn thing about it, we'll teach you how and give you a place to shoot."

That's a promise that applies particularly to those customers who go to Mid America looking to buy a gun to keep around the house for protection.

"If you're interested in getting a gun for protection, we're going to take you back here and teach you how to use it," Miller says. "If I sell you the firearm, I'll teach you how to use the damn thing."

Once he's done that, you can become a Mid America member, a privilege which allows you to use

the range for target practice during its hours of 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week.

NOTE THE WORD "privilege," however — Miller says definitely that he doesn't accept just anyone as a member. In order to allow for a screening process, the first three visits to the range are free. If you're accepted as a member, the fee is then \$50 per year. Guns are rented for \$2 per visit, and range fees for target practice are \$3 for the first half hour, \$2 for every half hour after that.

Miller says the reason for the careful screening process is simple — it's nothing more than basic safety precautions.

"I don't want people coming out of the bars and thinking they'll come in and use my guns," he says. "Who, then, does come in and use them?"

Miller says it's often those people who know nothing about guns but are eager and willing to learn — usually with the goal of learning techniques for home protection or self-defense. In fact, about half of the guns sold by the Mid America store are for that purpose, he says.

AND THE motivation for those sales is easy to understand, says Roscoe Picard, a former Rock Island Arsenal employee who now works part time repairing and restoring firearms at Mid America.

"I think women especially are quite tired of being told that they can't defend themselves against a rapist," Picard says. "I think the householder and the businessman are tired of being told to just get a description and hand over the money."

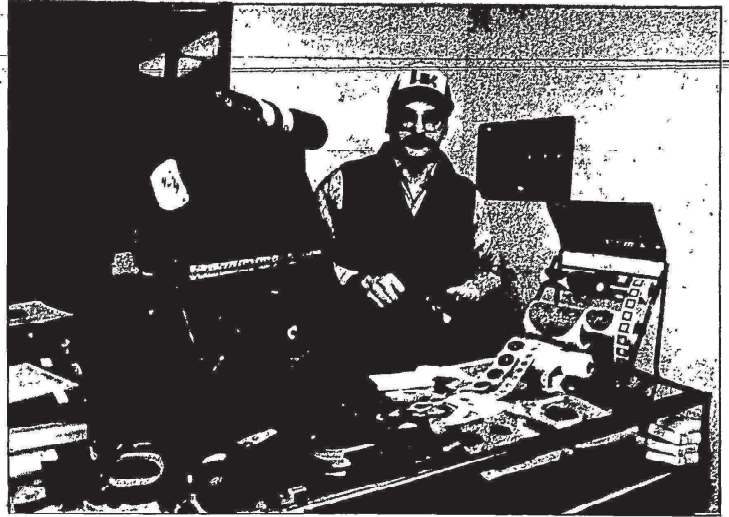
The alternative — owning a gun and knowing how to use it correctly — isn't as dangerous as some people believe, Picard says.

"Three separate times I have pointed guns at people — once several persons at one time I pointed guns at these people and they went away," he says.

Those kind of "non-events" — when no shot is actually fired and no crime committed — don't get counted in the statistics, although they prove that owning — and knowing how to use — a gun is beneficial, Picard says.

The knowing how part is crucial.

DALE MERRITT, a regular customer at Mid



Dispatch photo by Fred Marston

Fred Miller, owner of Mid America Recreation in downtown Moline, checks over his own collection of handguns. Miller opened the indoor shooting range in 1979 and says business is up since then. His customers include all

types of marksmen, ranging from those interested in learning how to use a gun for home protection to those who just love to shoot. The indoor range is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week for members.

America, spends part of his hours there teaching women how to shoot, and if they're interested in defending themselves, learning the skills is important, he says.

"Most of them start out wanting to learn a little about home defense, and they decide they like it," Merritt says. "But if you're going to have (a gun) around the house, it's best to know how to use it."

According to Merritt, it doesn't take too long to do that at Mid America.

"About four to six hours is the minimum," he says. "It won't make them an expert, but it's good enough to let them know what they're doing."

Miller agrees. "Usually after three or four visits (to the range) you'll feel good about it," he says. "Then you can come back whenever you think you need a refresher."

What's taught in those first visits are what Miller calls "the most important building blocks" of shooting.

"You make sure that they can operate the machinery first thing," which means opening and loading the gun, he says.

AFTER THOSE skills are mastered, the "building blocks" of grip, trigger control and alignment of sight must be tackled, Miller says.

And it's not as easy as it sounds. "Handgun shooting is very difficult," Miller admits. "What shooting's all about is getting your physical self in tune with that gun. It becomes a personal challenge."

Although it's difficult, almost anyone can become a good marksman, Miller says. In fact, those accepting that personal challenge may vary widely from what one might expect.

The criteria for being a good shot is not what the stereotype would be, Miller says. It doesn't take a big, strong, burly person to be a good shooter — it just takes health.

"If you can see the black blur (of the target) and you can see your sights good, you'll be a good shot."

Those that become good shots may get interested in entering marksmen competitions. The highly refined target practice attracts both men and women, and many of them come to Mid America to sharpen their skills, Miller says.

"ONCE THEY get interested in shooting, they usually get into competition. And if they want to learn to compete, they'll keep coming back and refining the three fundamentals of grip, trigger control and sight alignment," he says.

The details of those fundamentals become extremely important in the precisely defined world of slow fire, time fire and rapid fire competitions. Slow fire contests involve firing 10 shots in 10 minutes, time fire means firing two five-shot strings in two 20-second periods, and rapid fire involves firing two five-shot strings in two 10-second periods.

All firing is done to the signals of a range commander. At Mid America, that's Miller, seated in a booth with a glass window through which he can keep a close eye on his six-stall firing range. My shooting range was designed very specifically for control of the people on the range," he says.

While Miller is controlling the marksmen, they're busy controlling their weapons. Indeed, it's that mental effort, that precise concentration, that attracts some to target shooting.

Bonnie Reynolds, weapons training instructor for the Burns Security guards at the nuclear plant in Cordova, says she started target practice through her job and gradually became more and more interested in it.

"I SUPPOSE it was the exactness of shooting that attracted me," she says. "It's not so much a physical sport, it's a mental sport."

Other marksmen who come to Mid America to practice their sport say they're attracted by the competition itself.

"I just like to go shooting, and also it's fun to compete against the other guys," says Olaf Johnson, who's been visiting the Moline range for about a year.

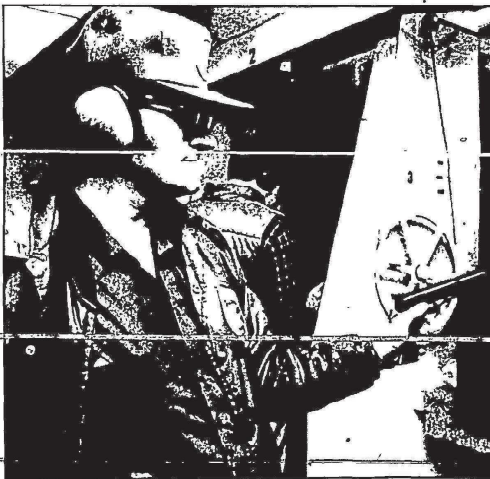
But mainly, it's that simple love of target shooting — for whatever reason — that brings the customers in.

"I do a lot of shooting here, I just like to shoot," says George Owen, a regular visitor. "Guns are a lot of fun — they pass the time."

Owen says he "comes from a long line of shooters."

(Please see "GUNS," page 10)

Dale Merritt takes aim at the targets at Mid America Recreation, an indoor shooting range in downtown Moline, while Olaf Johnson practices his technique in the background. The men are two of the regular customers at the indoor range and gun store, and Merritt also teaches classes in shooting for women. In addition to instruction for those just learning the skills of target shooting, practice in competitive shooting is offered at the gun range. Merritt and Johnson are two of the regulars who come to sharpen their skills in slow fire, time fire and rapid fire contests.



Dispatch photo by Fred Marston