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## **Packing Heat, Part 3**

**by Sheldon Richman**

I confess that walking around armed for the first time felt strange. I was self-conscious, as though everyone knew I was carrying. Of course, no one knew. There are many ways to conceal a handgun on one's person, thanks to the imaginative entrepreneurs who have deftly responded to the expanded market for concealed-carry accessories since the mid 1980s, when states began lifting their severe restrictions. (As discussed last month, except for Vermont, all states where concealed-carry is legal still require a permit — a violation of a basic natural right that is singled out in the Bill of Rights.)

That feeling of self-consciousness diminished with time, and I soon became comfortable going around armed. "Comfortable" may not be the best word. Most handguns with serious power weigh enough to be burdensome at times. Gun enthusiasts have a saying: carrying a semiautomatic pistol or revolver is supposed to be comforting not comfortable. Still, there is a large enough variety of holsters that anyone ought to be able to find an acceptable method of concealing. I use several, depending on the kind of clothing I'm wearing.

Having a permit for concealed-carry does not mean it is legal to carry a handgun anywhere. All the laws have exceptions. For example, in Arkansas you may not bring a gun into places of worship, schools, or anywhere alcohol is consumed on the premises. Government buildings and parks are also out of bounds. The law creates alleged gun-free zones, but they are really criminal-safe zones. The unthoughtful among us still believe that bad guys will abide by gun laws. Notice that most mass shootings occur where the assailants can be sure that no one is armed. I've never heard of one happening at a gun store, a shooting range, or a gun show.

The Arkansas legislature recently considered a bill to legalize concealed-carry in restaurants that serve alcohol (but not bars) and state parks. The bill was allowed to die in committee after some ostensible supporters double-crossed the sponsors. Killing that bill had an obvious subtext. The

legislature could at any time outlaw conduct that today is legal. It could repeal the permit law altogether. This basic right hangs by the thread of legislative discretion and caprice. Even if it would be politically difficult to repeal it, the legislature nonetheless has the legal power to do so. This makes a mockery of the claim that permit laws are consistent with the right to keep and bear arms. They violate it egregiously. Right and permission are polar opposites.

This puts a lawful person into a terrible dilemma: should he break the law or leave himself defenseless?

### **Guns and self-defense**

Whenever I think about this issue I think of Suzanna Gratia Hupp. In 1991 she was having lunch with her parents at Luby's Cafeteria in Killeen, Texas. She normally carried a handgun in her purse, but this was before Texas legalized concealed-carry. On that day, she left the gun in her car, since she had recently received her chiropractor's license and didn't want to jeopardize her ability to earn a living. As she was enjoying lunch with her mother and father, a man named George Hennard drove his truck through the restaurant's plate-glass window. Then Hennard got out and started mowing down people with a handgun. He killed 23 and wounded at least 20. Hupp's mother and father were among the dead. Somehow she escaped injury. Had her gun not been stowed in her car, in compliance with state law, her parents and others might be alive today. The state shares responsibility in their murders.

There's another saying among gun people: better to be tried by 12 than carried by 6.

The restrictions on carrying handguns demonstrate the low regard in which the policymakers hold the people. It is possible to make yourself safe at home without a handgun. You can install a security system and buy a big loud dog. You can keep a rifle or shotgun. But away from home, your self-defense options are severely limited. You could carry mace, but all that's likely to do is make an attacker mad. You could study to become an expert in the martial arts — if you have the time — but those who think those skills make it easy to disarm a thug have seen too many Bruce Lee movies. You could yell for a cop — okay, that was comic relief. Out in the streets there is just no substitute for a handgun.

I quickly became accustomed to having my gun with me, and I was less comfortable on those rare occasions when I did not carry it. I also knew that I had much room for improvement in both my competence and confidence in handling the pistol. If you're going to carry a gun, you should know how to use it properly.

## **My gun training**

One Saturday I was browsing at a gun store when I noticed a flyer announcing a match being held the following day by a local gun club in behalf of the International Defensive Pistol Association (IDPA). It didn't say much, but it welcomed all shooters and instructed them to bring at least 50 rounds of ammunition. I didn't expect to know anyone there, but I decided to go.

Early the next morning I drove 30 miles into rural Arkansas west of Little Rock for the match. I'm glad I did. IDPA is a competitive shooting organization dedicated to developing the skills associated with concealed-carry self-defense. To that end, its rules permit only equipment that is of practical day-to-day use. Matches consist of different simulated situations in which a person is threatened and uses a concealed handgun for protection. For example, one stage might have the shooter standing at an ATM. When he turns to leave, he is confronted by muggers and there is no way out except to use his handgun. The "bad guys" are blank cardboard targets vaguely shaped like a human torso and head. The stages are scored on the basis of time and accuracy. Some of the simulations are extremely unlikely, but the match planners have to find ways to avoid repetition and monotony. Even the most unrealistic situations help develop skills. And they're fun.

Participating in a match for the first time was thrilling and nerve-wracking. My performance was abysmal, but it did show me what I needed to work on. Being there also introduced me to the sponsoring gun club, the Central Arkansas Shooters' Association (CASA). Within a short time, I joined both CASA and IDPA, where I am a fairly regular, though not high-ranking competitor. I also find it worthwhile to go to the range on nonmatch days just to hone my defensive skills. My wife, Cheryl, has also become a shooting enthusiast. An afternoon at the range is one of our favorite activities.

It didn't take long for me to learn firsthand that the so-called gun culture is composed of decent people. From the first time I showed up at an IDPA match, I could see that gun enthusiasts were comfortable to be around.

They are there to have fun, but safety is always the No. 1 concern. They take their guns seriously and are very knowledgeable. I have never seen the slightest bit of carelessness, even when 60 guys are milling around waiting to shoot. I learned a lot about gun safety just from observing them.

## **Guns and gun shows**

It was around this time that I started attending gun shows. The gun culture certainly is on display at these shows. They are the friendliest gatherings of strangers I've experienced. I can also understand why the gun controllers don't like gun shows. They must truly hate the idea of assemblies of gun-loving, pro-freedom people. For a libertarian, it is easy to feel at home there.

I believe this is why they are under assault by the likes of John McCain, Joe Lieberman, and Sarah Brady. They say their objection is to the "gun-show loophole." Except there is no gun-show loophole. The law is no different at gun shows from anywhere else. Whether or not at a show, a retail gun dealer (who must be licensed by the federal government) must run background checks on customers. Likewise, whether or not at a gun show, no private gun owner is required to do a check when he sells or trades guns from his own collection. (The libertarian position on dealer licensing and background checks is obvious.) To talk about a gun-show loophole can have only one purpose: to stigmatize gun shows in order to make it easier to restrict or ban them. Defending the gun show is an important libertarian cause. Driving them out of business or shutting them down would set a precedent we might never recover from.

Looking back on my scant two years as a handgun owner and carrier, I am sorry I didn't get started much sooner. I missed a great deal of fun and camaraderie, and I'd be much more skilled today. But most important, I went too many years not knowing the satisfaction of assuming full responsibility for my own well-being and the well-being of my family. There is no substitute for that satisfaction.

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