

Family lore has it that I was so lonely the eight weeks my brothers were away at boys' camp that my parents agreed to send me along the following summer, even though at age five I'd be the youngest kid at Sunapee ever. The first week of Bunk One was a fog of small humiliations. Bad enough bearing the ordinary marks of juvenescence -- bed-wetting, quickness to tears, cluelessness -- worse was being a tub of over-mothered babyfat among a tribe of lean savages. Within a day of arriving it was clear I'd be forever consigned to right field, ignored by quarterbacks, left jiggling and huffing far behind during capture the flag and track. Knowing nothing of sports, rock and roll, or tits, I could buy my way into conversations only with a saccharine infantile cuteness that diminished me even further. A few days into summer I feigned illness for the raw relief of the camp nurse's cool, sympathetic hand on my forehead.

At the edge of the woods near the camp office sat a giant granite boulder neatly cracked in two. It must have stood five feet high -- much taller than my head, anyway. It had been a foreboding presence at the edge of my vision all that first week, beautiful and frightening. The two sides lay just far enough apart that a person could walk between the rough faces, and indeed a path ran through there; I occasionally saw bigger boys disappearing along it, leaving me to wonder what lay beyond that serene yet disturbingly violent portal. One hot day Bunk One's counselor, a Rutgers football player named Bob Posey whose contempt for my manlessness was palpable, led the ten of us through. Between the sparkly rock

faces the air was cool and thick, strengthening my sense that something magical was afoot. Beyond, a path led down a wooded fern-covered hill about two hundred yards to a wooden platform. A big man stood on it with his fists on his hips. We climbed up three steps, and directly ahead of us lay a cleared rectangle as wide as the platform and fifty feet deep. Along its far end ran a board fence, tacked to which were rectangles of paper with black dots in their centers. On the platform at our feet lay five old urine-stained mattresses. On the mattresses lay rifles.

Rifles! Real guns! Like most kids in 1961 I'd seen lots of cool gunfights on TV and played my share of cowboys and Indians with Mattel cap pistols and squirt guns of primary-colored plastic. These, though, were long and serious-looking, their burnished wood warmly reflecting the forest-dappled sunlight. The big man turned out to be another crew-cutted Rutgers footballer named Hank Hilliard. He scooped up a rifle and opened its bolt with a *slick-click* so satisfying I felt it in my spine. He pointed to the various parts and spoke their names, extended blunt fingers to describe how to line up the sights, and repeated stern admonitions about the range's rules. My eyes, though, never left the rifle; my fingers ached to hold it.

Finally, he eenie-meened five of us to lie on the mattresses but warned us not to touch the rifles. Mine was a Mossberg 340 KA, North Haven, Connecticut, .22 short long or long rifle -- it said so on the side of the barrel. To this day I can't remember the names of my neighbor's grown children but I remember every detail of that rifle. I lay next to it like a lover, besotted with the contrast between the

smooth wooden cheek of the stock and the intricate metallic personality of its mechanism. A strange and thrilling new aroma rose from it -- sharp, sweet, smoky, and chemical: *guns*. Something plopped onto the mattress next to the rifle -- an inch long and slender, shiny brass with a rounded gray tip. "Pick up your rifles," Hank boomed, and I finally hoisted the Mossberg's hard heaviness into my arms.

All week, I'd watched other boys swing bats and tennis rackets with unimaginable natural grace. They'd kicked around soccer balls and thrown perfect spiral football passes as though their taut bodies were built to do nothing else. I could do none of those things and didn't want to. This, though: It was as though the Mossberg had been made in that North Haven factory to give meaning to the life of one TV-besotted fat kid.

"Open your bolts," Hank barked, and with a flick of the wrist that felt positively elegant I worked the big knob of the bolt up and back. "Load." I poked the nose of the cartridge into the breech and pressed it home with my thumb. "Close your bolts." Pushing the bolt forward and down made my heart thump with expectation. "Aim and fire at will."

The rifle next to me went off instantly and the kid holding it grunted, "Oh!" The other three popped off nervously in the next two seconds. I ignored them. My whole consciousness was focused on the front sight spiraling in tighter and tighter on the black dot in front of me. Suddenly everything lined up and I squeezed. The

rifle gave a slight live jump against my shoulder but, it seemed, no noise at all. Another cartridge dropped on the mattress next to me.

We each shot five bullets, and then, after an elaborate ceremony of opening bolts and ascertaining that each rifle was unloaded, we pelted across the clearing to retrieve our targets. Up close, big circles surrounded each black dot -- the one ring, two ring, up to five. The black dot itself turned out to be the size of a silver dollar and divided by five white circles into tight concentric zones numbered six, seven, eight, nine, and in the very center, an unnumbered disk whose diameter was no larger than that of the bullet. One kid's target was completely untouched. Another had one forlorn hole in the upper right corner. The other two kids hit the target two or three times apiece, their shots scattered widely over the paper.

All five of my holes were inside the black dot, several of them touching each other and one nicking the very center ring itself.

Hank rocked his head back when I handed it to him. "Damn," he breathed, touching each with a pencil point. "Thirty-six out of fifty." He handed me back the target and gave me the first man-to-man look I'd experienced since arriving at camp. "Nice shootin', Tex."

I'd found something I could do.

Thirty-eight years later I am trolling the tables at the Tanner Gun Show in Denver's Mercantile Mart, a vast hangar on 58<sup>th</sup> Avenue near Interstate 25. Offered are perfectly preserved octagonal-barrel lever-action Winchesters from the 1880s, priced in the high four figures; Yugoslavian AK-47s for three hundred bucks apiece; German and Soviet pistols from the Second World War; beef jerky; chrome-plated Jennings pistols for less than a hundred dollars; cartridge-reloading supplies; Barrett .50-caliber rifles capable of penetrating an armored limousine; a coffee table volume on *Guns of the Wehrmacht*; sweatshirts emblazoned, "Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Should Be A Convenience Store Not A Government Agency;" elegantly engraved English fowling pieces beyond the budgets of mortal men; three-hour classes to meet the requirement for carrying a concealed weapon; hand-made holsters; fifteen-hundred-dollar semi-automatic versions of the assault rifles American soldiers carry in Afghanistan, complete with laser sights and night-vision scopes; more AK-47s, these from Romania; and tables loaded with hodgepodge weapons of little interest that dealers seem eager to unload. Threading the tables is a crowd made up mostly of middle-aged white men. One walks the aisles with a rifle on his back sporting a paper flag in the barrel: "Marlin 99E .300 Savage \$495." I'm on the lookout for a .22 rifle and a waistband holster for my Colt Detective Special.

Gun shows aren't new to me. I started going to them in 1990, when George H.W. Bush was still president. They were low-key then, relaxed. It was easy to see the men behind the tables as little odder than camera buffs or model-train

enthusiasts. Yes, those were guns on the table, but the easygoing atmosphere made it possible to say, well, everybody's into something. I liked guns and hunting; these guys just liked them a little more. Gun shows were no big deal.

Then Bill Clinton was elected president, and something changed. Everybody in the firearms world -- gun-shop owners, gun-show vendors, the guys at the cartridge-strewn cutbank outside of town where people gathered to shoot -- suddenly seemed *angry*. In the middle of otherwise pleasant conversations, gun people would sooner or later adopt a peevish, put-upon tone, snarling about "liberals" and "gun-grabbers" and the likelihood that the government would round up everybody's guns. Are you kidding? I'd think. Sure, Clinton and other Democrats -- and even some Republicans -- were promoting the Brady Bill, which aimed to impose background checks before gun sales. But hell, even former president Ronald Reagan supported that. Nobody, even the most strident gun-controllers, was even hinting about confiscation of law-abiding shooters' firearms. That didn't seem to matter, however. Otherwise reasonable people were embracing a mythology of incipient confiscation with such zeal that at times they seemed almost to relish it. "Enjoy that," a fellow shooter at the cutbank said to me one day as I was loading one of my revolvers. "You not have it very long." The words "socialist" and "tyranny" began cropping up in a way that struck my ear as a comical throwback to the Eisenhower years. Some went so far as to call government officials "jackbooted thugs" and "Gestapo" with eerily straight faces.

And everybody with a gun, it seemed, understood the difference between “real Americans” and the “elites” in Washington and New York.

This kind of talk is commonplace now but in the early nineties it was, to me anyway, brand new. I realized that I’d started hunting and collecting guns in the eighties, that this was the first time I’d hung out with gun people under a Democratic president. That a lot of that fear and anger was artificially ginned up by organizations and politicians angling for advantage was irrelevant. It was real. The rhetoric around guns seemed to burn hotter even than that around abortion. because it went beyond politics or even morals to the level of personal insult. Gun owners weren’t just afraid of losing a political rights, they believed themselves -- sometimes with good reason -- looked down upon, belittled, and demonized. Educated people in the cities, the driving force behind gun-control, had little experience with guns beyond the negative yet were full of assertions about how this or that weapon -- assault rifles, high-capacity magazines, handguns -- had no “legitimate” purpose and should be banned. The law-abiding owners of such guns, mostly rural and suburban, were pissed: I think my AK-47 is cool; that not legitimate enough for you? Doubtless all of this got scrambled up with other resentments -- over wages that hadn’t risen in two decades, over the rendering politically incorrect if not downright illegal long-held prejudices, over the perceived preference for snail darters and spotted owls over working people’s jobs -- but guns was the stand-in, the defining totem for a community that Charlton Heston, speaking for the NRA, defined this way: “God-fearing, law-abiding, Caucasian,

middle-class, Protestant. . . admitted heterosexual, gun-owning. . . NRA-card-carrying. . .male working stiff(s).” You hate guns, so I love `em. And you’ll take mine away when you pry it from my cold, dead hands.

Then came a grim series of high-profile killers with guns traceable to gun shows -- Timothy McVeigh, the Branch Dividians, the Columbine shooters, and more. Congress and the Clinton administration began talking about measures to restrict the free-for-all sale of untraceable guns at gun shows, and what had been amiable gatherings of like-minded hobbyists became encircled laagers. Tables heaped with white-supremacist literature began showing up, as well as books on how to make homemade silencers and bombs, bumper stickers reading “Welcome to America, Speak English or Get the Hell Out,” gruesome sniper autobiographies, and such volumes as *Can You Survive? Guidelines for Resistance to Tyranny for You and Your Family*, with a cover depicting a blood-dripping Commie sickle slicing through a U.S. map. Vendors stood behind their tables with their shoulders back and their fists balled, eyeing everybody who came by with suspicion that they were an anti-gun activist or an undercover ATF agent. In those days, it was hard to get a paper tray of nachos at a gun show snack bar -- to say nothing of actually trying to buy a firearm off a table -- without getting an earful about how Bill Clinton and the liberals were headed for your house *any minute* to round up your guns.

The strange thing about this Denver gun show, in December 2009, is how all that overheated air seems have gone out of it. If anything, I expected these folks

to be *more* het up than when Clinton was President. Barack Obama initially sent gun owners into such a panic that this year I had a hard time finding rifle cartridges for hunting season -- and handgun ammunition, forget it. The hoarding was intense -- shelves stripped bare, gun racks sparse and prices through the roof. A popular poster at the Denver show is Obama's smiling face with "Firearms Salesman of the Year" below it. That and, of course, his face in Joker make-up over the word Socialist in big black letters. Obama doubtless pushes these peoples' buttons in all kinds of ways -- by being an unabashed urban intellectual, I suspect, as much as by being black -- but among gun enthusiasts it is an article of faith that he intends to ban private guns and confiscate them the minute he gets the economy fixed, health care passed, and Afghanistan pacified. Obama-hatred is at least as strong as Clinton-hatred ever was, yet this gun show has none of the belligerence of a gun show circa 1994. Mostly the guys slumped behind their tables wear the haggard look of businessmen after fifteen months of recession. Yes, gun sales have been strong, but not for all guns, and not for everybody. Moreover, not all of these guys are in the gun business full-time. A lot of them are welders, carpet salesmen, automobile detailers, and real-estate agents, suffering along with everybody else, but with a firearm sideline and eighty precious dollars invested in having a table here today. Nobody wants to alienate anybody. It may also be that even with Obama in the White House, gun owners are worn out. For years, they've won almost every battle they've fought, and that has to take the edge off feeling victimized. Furthermore, a day before this gun show opened, the

Republican pollster Frank Luntz released a poll that found that gun owners -- even NRA members -- are a lot more comfortable with common-sense gun laws than anybody thought. Maybe the gun community is growing up.

Then again, maybe not. I'm drawn across the room by a table with a tall, shiny metallic cylinder standing on it. It is four feet long, about a foot across, and built of heavy-gauge stainless steel. Atop is a complicated watertight cap. The side has been cut away to reveal rifles and ammo boxes stuffed inside. Cousins Vaults, the sign says. Pete Cousins sits behind the table with a broad-brimmed felt slouch hat pulled low over his eyes.

"You take and spend fifteen hundred dollars on a gun, why *wouldn't* you bury it?" he asks me.

"Well," I venture, "I guess 'cause I'd want to enjoy it. You know, take it to the range. Shoot it."

He snorts and lays his hand on the black high-tech M-4 carbine lying on the table. "Hell. I spend fifteen hundred dollars on a gun, you can be damn sure I'm going to bury it." He hands me a pamphlet which suggests burying old car parts, bed springs, and other junk around the vault to confuse the government agents' metal detectors. I ask if I can sit down.

Pete was born in Littleton, Colorado, in 1957, when its transition from open range to Denver suburb was beginning in earnest. Pete remembers new streets begin carved into the sawgrass and sagebrush every week. His father worked in a feed store, and his mother in the supermarket. From his first days in school Pete was aware of the divide between the country families who'd been in Littleton for years and the newcomers oriented toward office work in Denver. Those other kids dressed differently. They talked a lot more than Pete and his friends. They cut up more in class but, maddeningly, they also got better grades. Though different, they weren't bad kids; Pete liked going to their houses after school to play. Theirs were like houses on TV -- brand new, and full of new shiny stuff. Their chairs and sofas matched. Their fridges were always the same color as their stoves. They had pictures on the wall in frames, not old calendars thumbtacked up.

One day Pete went home after school with a boy called Andy Baker whose dad drove into Denver every day. Andy was excited to show Pete the thing his dad had just brought home: a full-sized pinball machine. It was dazzling -- tall, bright, and loud. Standing on a footstool, the two boys happily hammered away at it all afternoon. When Pete got home that night he wished his family had something like that.

Pete loved his own house. It may have been smaller than the Bakers, but it was cozier, more homey, more a place you'd want to live than a place you'd want to watch on television. Though the furniture wasn't all of a perfect set, it was more comfortable than the stiff armchairs at the Bakers. That night, though, Pete felt

for the first time a little twinge of sadness that there wasn't anything in his house as impressive as that pinball machine. And, having been thrown into that mood, he now saw his home as embarrassingly shabby.

It was starting to get dark, that lonely hour before his parents arrived home from work. Pete walked gloomily around his house as though seeing it for the first time. Then he remembered something.

He pulled a chair across his parent's bedroom and stood on it to reach down from the top shelf of his father's closet a folded green rag. He placed it on the floor and peeled it open. Inside lay his father's German Luger. Dad had shown it to him several times, and had even let him hold it. It had never interested Pete very much before, but now he looked down on it with something like love. It was a beautifully made thing -- shiny and complicated, with lots of fine crosshatching and tiny numbers all over it. Pete took it into his hands. It was cold and heavy. Made for World War One, Dad had told him. That made it something like fifty years old, a serious, solid, important thing. Pete looked up, at his parents sagging bed, the black and white TV with the coat hanger for an antenna, the dresser with the cracked mirror atop it. This Luger was the nicest thing the family owned. Better than any old pinball machine.

First chance he got he invited Andy Baker over and showed him the gun. Andy was suitably impressed. "Tough!" he kept whispering as he turned it over in his hands. "Tough!" But right after that, Andy was oddly cold toward Pete. He made a weak excuse for not wanting to play one afternoon, and a few days later,

made another. Finally, he told Pete what was up; his parents said he couldn't go over to Pete's anymore because there was a gun in the house. He didn't invite Pete to his anymore, either, and Pete got the message; his kind wasn't welcome among the Bakers.

Pete asked his father to take him to shoot the Luger, and they drove to a split-rail fence that Dad knew far out of town. Dad balanced a few old cans along the fence-top, then paced off a short distance. He knelt on the ground behind Pete and wrapped his big arm alongside Pete's, helping him hold the big gun steady. Dad smelled of alfalfa, cigarettes, and old Carharts, and he whispered encouragement into Pete's ear. The gun was thrillingly loud and bucked in Pete's hand as though alive. On his fourth shot a can flew off the rail and Dad laughed along with him like a kid.

On his next birthday Pete got his own .22 rifle, and when they went out the Cooper's place on Sunday Mr. Cooper said Pete could shoot all the prairie dogs he liked; he'd be doing him a favor. The Coopers had one of the last ranches in Littleton and going out there made the Cousins family happy. Pete got two prairie dogs. He rode an old horse around inside the corral. He tried to catch the big rooster and about made Mom and Dad pee their pants with laughter. As always happened when they visited the Coopers, Pete's parents relaxed in a way they didn't do in town. Mom drank a beer. Dad rolled his own cigarettes the way he used to instead of pinching them out of a pack. The Coopers' house was almost an extension of the barn, with sacks of feed right there in the kitchen, a roll of barbed

wire in the living room, wire cutters and worn work gloves strewn everywhere, a heavy canvas coat hanging from the horn of a mounted antelope head, and easy chairs so old sitting in them was like getting a big hug. It was the most comfortable place Pete knew, a real boy's idea of what home should be like. Mrs. Cooper put a lot of food on the table -- lamb they'd raised, beets and potatoes from the garden, pie. Pete ate so much he had to go lie on the couch after. From there, he listened to the grownups talking around the table.

"It's the veterinary inspector, then it's the one from the Labor Department to look at the bunkhouse," Mr. Cooper said. "You know *they're* going to find something to fine you for. It's how they make their money. It's how they keep their job. Then it's the man to test the well."

"What do they care about your well?" Dad asked.

"They care. There's a law. And he gets his little fee, or fine, or tax."

"You'd think they'd recognize."

"You'd think they'd recognize how fine we cut it. You'd think they'd recognize we're doing something here. Turn every inch of land into suburb and what are you going to eat?"

"There's always that," Mom said.

"What?" Mr. Cooper said harshly.

"You can sell," Mom said softly. Across the room on the sofa, Pete could feel Mr. Cooper's back go up. Then Pete heard him let out a breath.

"I could," Mr. Cooper said. "I get offers like everybody else. I could take the money and not have to bother with the cheatgrass and the rinderpest and the farmhands and the goddamn USDA inspectors. Of course, I don't know how much we'd actually clear once I paid all the taxes I owe. I don't know what I'd do with myself all day." There was a long pause, and in a tighter voice Mr. Cooper said, "It would be nice to think, anyway, that it would be my own decision, not forced on me by government bureaucrats trying to whittle me down with their taxes and their fees and their rules." Pete heard the clink of a bottle neck against the rim of a glass.

On the drive home that night Dad looked in the rearview and asked Pete if he'd been listening. "Yes, sir."

"You know what the founding fathers wrote into the Declaration of Independence?" Dad asked. "They put a long list of all the reasons they wanted rid of the king. One of them went like this, and I'm quoting here: 'The king has sent officers among us to burden us with taxes and eat out our substance.' Eat out our substance! I've always liked that. The founders didn't want the government living off the people. Didn't want the government meddling with the people at all, and they wrote the Constitution that way. Problem is the government doesn't follow the Constitution anymore. It's not like they've forgotten it, either. They just don't want to follow it any more than the king of England. Tyrants don't like Constitutions. Don't like the rule of law and power in the hands of the people.

Never did. That's why Thomas Jefferson wrote that the tree of liberty has to be refreshed from time to time with the blood of tyrants. He knew."

Littleton kept changing all through Pete's school years. The Coopers finally sold and moved away. A discount tire place went up on the spot their house used to stand which shocked his parents as much as if a church had been bulldozed. It seemed that fewer and fewer kids every year wore the country air of old Littleton, and they became an increasingly tight knot among the speedy, disrespectful new kids. On weekends they'd ride their bikes to a cutbank up Clear Creek and shoot their .22s at bottles and cans. As soon as they turned fourteen they got their hunting licenses, and were the only ones taking time off from school to go looking for elk. The Vietnam war was underway, and among the suburbanites that Pete still thought of as the "new" kids, guns were uncool. Pete once got razed for having a copy of *Guns and Ammo* in his school backpack, and didn't like it. Talking about hunting with his friends in the cafeteria one day, he was interrupted by a pretty girl named Heather Rosen who shrieked at him, with tears in her eyes, "how could you do such a thing?" and made him feel like a mutant.

The war was over by the time Pete finished high school and he got a good job in an auto-painting shop on Colfax Avenue. He and his friends continued shooting on weekends and hunting in the fall. Guns kept their group close-knit. They were what distinguished Pete and his friends from the incomprehensible people who were changing Littleton so fast. The cutbank where Pete and his friends liked to shoot disappeared inside a subdivision and they had to start paying

to shoot at an indoor range. Then the range got zoned out of existence and for a while there was no place to shoot until a new range opened about an hour away. It felt to them that Colorado was becoming unfriendly to shooters. Colorado! Even their favorite elk spot was taken away, subsumed into a state park that didn't allow hunting. As the seventies wore on, it felt more and more to Pete as though his kind of people were being pushed around by the grown-up versions of those smartly dressed, speedy kids from elementary school -- people who couldn't do a thing with their hands but who had no end of words to confuse everything and turn the world upside down. Pete cast his first-ever vote for Ronald Reagan, who had a refreshing way of talking about ordinary people, and who like Pete and his friends seemed to have no use at all for the fast-talking types. When Reagan said, "government isn't the solution, government is the problem," Pete was glad the country had a president who'd listen to and save the likes of poor Mr. Cooper, driven off his ranch by government agents eating out his substance. And, of course, Ronald Reagan was a friend to gun owners, a lifetime member of the NRA.

While his Dodge slowly declined into smoke and rust throughout the eighties, the cars passing under Pete's airbrush seemed to grow sleeker and more opulent. More and more, the United States felt to him like two countries and that he was on the losing side. What kept him proud, though, was that nobody had a finer collection of firearms than Pete Cousins. When the Army traded the Colt .45 for the Beretta 9 millimeter in 1986, Pete was the first among his friends to buy one. It was a stunning pistol -- double-action, fourteen shots, deadly accurate --

and lying on his oilcloth-covered kitchen table it seemed to light up the room. It was the hot gun in every new movie. The Beretta put a heavy ding on Pete's credit card, but it was worth it.

Hard as it was for Pete to watch so many people getting rich while he seemed to stand still, he liked the clarity of Ronald Reagan and the people around him; their certainty about the values Pete remembered being discussed around the Coopers' dinner table. So it bothered him when that clarity started wavering under the next president, who smelled of the elite northeast and who raised taxes after promising he wouldn't. When Bush sent the ATF in to take the guns away from Randy Weaver up on Ruby Ridge in Idaho -- and then shot Weaver's wife and son dead during a siege -- it was a wake-up call to Pete; government had no qualms about disarming citizens if push came to shove. Then Clinton was elected and the air filled with talk of waiting periods and bans on assault rifles -- the opening notes, Pete and his friends were certain, of a slide toward a nationwide gun ban. Pete was putting the finishing touches on a customer's silver-blue BMW when his boss called him into the office and pointed at the little TV atop the filing cabinet. Government agents in ninja suits and helmets, backed by tanks, were storming a religious compound in Waco, Texas, to confiscate all the guns therein. As Pete and his boss watched, the whole place went up in flames and more than eighty people were killed. The government's violent disarming of the people had begun. That night, Pete wrapped the six-hundred-dollar Beretta, his favorite rifle and two boxes of ammunition in a lawn-and-leaf bag and buried them under the swing set in his

back yard. His other guns he loaded and scattered strategically around his house. Pete was ready.

*Gun Country* is a journey into American gun culture, told from the inside. Like *Blue Highways*, *Stiff*, *Confederates in the Attic* and any number of other popular books, *Gun Country* takes the reader around the U.S. to meet a fascinating subculture -- in this case, those whose social, political, recreational, or aesthetic lives revolve around firearms. In much the way Tony Horwitz placed himself among Civil War re-enactors in *Confederates In the Attic*, I am a character in *Gun Country*, acting as a kind of tour guide who is both of the culture under examination and outside it. In a nutshell, I'm a college-educated liberal Democrat pro-gun-control anti-NRA gun freak. I've been a hunter and gun collector my whole adult life. I own six hand guns and a permit to carry them concealed. I possess a federal license to buy and sell guns on the Internet and mail them around the country. I've gone most gun nuts one better by putting myself through the four-month process to obtain a Treasury Department permit to own a silencer. I speak gun, and that gets me past the defenses most gun enthusiasts put up when asked about their passion.

Good as it was, *Confederates in the Attic* was limited by Horwitz's remaining outside of his subjects, which ultimately gave the book a slightly sneering, look-at-the-freakshow feel. It was not a book that any Civil War re-enactor would appreciate, for example, but luckily for Horwitz they are a small readership to sacrifice. Gun owners are not. *Gun Country* avoids Horwitz's pitfall by taking the reader right inside the heads and hearts of its subjects and telling their stories from their own points of view. This close-third-person technique has several advantages. First, experiencing their lives of others as they do is just plain fun -- in the way fiction or reality television is fun. Everybody interprets his own life as the most compelling drama going. Live it with him, and you go along for the ride. Telling someone's story the way they would tell it feels refreshingly fair and honest.

Nobody in America is neutral about guns. Love or hate them, they fascinate us all. Our political arguments over their control, however, don't begin to get at the deep unspoken feelings that most of us, pro and con, rarely allow ourselves to examine. Neither side has any idea what those who disagree are *feeling*, what guns mean, deep in the DNA, to those on the other side. If *Gun Country* has a purpose beyond entertainment, it is to insert a lever into that logjam, to get a useful conversation going. One of the people into whose skin the reader crawls is as obsessed with guns as the others but for the opposite reason; her son was murdered and her teenaged son paralyzed by an armed crazy on the Long Island Railroad, and she has devoted her life to lowering the rate of gun death.

Close-third-person is a technique I learned writing *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, which was published to unanimously great reviews by Spiegel & Grau in 2009. (*The New York Times* called it the "best non-fiction book of the year so far." *USA Today* compared me to John Berendt, Tracy Kidder, and Studs Terkel; Robert Olen Butler compared me to Tom Wolfe. See all reviews at [http://www.danbaum.com/Nine\\_Lives/Reviews.html](http://www.danbaum.com/Nine_Lives/Reviews.html)) Most gratifyingly, New Orleanians -- highly suspicious of outside writers since Katrina -- loved *Nine Lives*. I've received hundreds of fan emails from the Crescent City. The *Times-Picayune* called it, "One of the most moving -- and riveting -- books ever written about the rich and complicated life we live here;" and the weekly *Gambit* wrote, "New Orleanians will recognize it; more than that, they'll get it." Just as *Nine Lives* resonated equally with New Orleanians and those who'd never visited the place, *Gun Country* does more than illuminate gun culture for the uninitiated. It aims to appeal equally to the nation's fifty million gun owners, who will recognize themselves in these portraits and appreciate their straight-up telling. They'll get it.

My role in *Gun Country* to get the reader from one character to the next and to offer my observations as an experienced -- and particularly knowledgeable -- journalist. I will roughly follow the seasons of the year -- gun shows, machine-gun shoots, spring turkey season, the annual firearms-industry trade show, the yearly scramble to cram pro- and anti-gun amendments into the budget bill, a long hot summer of gun violence in the city, deer season, and so on. In each chapter I

establish the setting, encounter one iconic individual, and then disappear. Each person's story is then told the way he or she experienced it.

Each has a different take on guns. Each experiences guns differently. In addition to Pete Cousins, among those the readers will meet are these:

-- Michael Mattocks grew up poor and black and North Capitol Street in Washington, DC. At age twelve, Michael starts making fake crack by boiling together soap, baking soda, and Orajel, which "makes the tongue numb when the crackheads bite into it". By thirteen he's sick of making candy-bar-and-sneakers money and has graduated to peddling the real thing. From there it's a short leap to buying his first gun from a couple of Chinese dudes who'd sell them out the trunk of their car.

For Michael and his friends, guns aren't really for killing; gunfire is *language*. Here's how he described his gun life to me: "We did a lot shooting, but hardly anybody ever got hit. It's not like we ever took our guns to the range and practiced with them. What you'd do, if someone got in your face the wrong way -- disrespected you, eyefucked you in a way you didn't like -- you might peel off a few in his direction. If you hit him, good. But it didn't really matter most of the time, because even if you didn't put one in him, you'd said something. You'd said you had the power. You'd made yourself *heard*. One time this dude Boo was beefing with my brother James, so I got my sister Sabrina's .357 -- she loved that gun -- and shot it at Boo six times. I was on one corner, and he was diagonally across on the other. Man, a .357 Magnum is a loud goddamned gun. *BOOM!*

*BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!* Lit that whole street up. I wasn't really trying to kill Boo; I just talking to him. I wanted him to know James had a brother, and that we had the power. He left James the fuck alone after that, I can tell you. Somebody shoots a .357 Magnum at you six times from like thirty feet away, you know you've been shot at. Another time, me and my crew were hanging out, and these other dudes come walking by and we know they're strapped 'cause it's like ninety-five degrees out there and they're all hoodied up. Next thing, they're pulling their guns out, we go for ours, and it's like *Pa! Pa! Pa! Pa!* – must have been about fifty shots. We shot at them and they shot at us. Bullets going everywhere and nobody got hit. They drove off and we ran around back to hide our guns and get back on the stoop in front, laughing like a motherfucker. When you're fourteen years old, that shit is *fun!*"

-- Craig Menteer was raised in Spokane by a timber-working dad so taciturn that Craig and his brother secretly call him "The Stump." Craig knows early on that he is smart, but that his brain works faster than his mouth and that more is to be gained from watching than from speaking. The woods overwhelm him; they make him shiver with the kind of feeling he knows he's supposed to get in church. He goes hunting with Dad long before he is legally allowed to hold a gun himself, and to make himself useful he applies himself singlemindedly to the teachings of the Boy Scouts. He can tie a double-carrick-bend by the age of ten, and when Dad and his buddies leave hunting camp before dawn to stalk deer, Craig stays behind to make the camp look like an ad in *Boys' Life*: tarps flown and guylines pulled taut,

firewood cut to even lengths and stacked neatly, hatchet stuck in a stump with its handle at a perfect forty-five-degree angle. When Craig turns fourteen, Dad buys him a bolt-action Savage .30-30 for forty dollars -- not much of a gun, but it's Craig's.

He finds that hunting concentrates the best of the woodland experience. Unlike simply hiking, there's no talking during hunting, no day-dreaming, no worrying about girls or school. It takes focusing the entire brain on the woods: What's the wind doing? Where are they feeding? Is that an antler rub on that tree? Which way is the grass bent in those tracks? Craig can get so lost in the hunt that he goes into a kind of trance and loses track of where he leaves off and the woods begin. He always finds the deer but he rarely gets a clean shot. The rifle itself doesn't particularly interest him. That he rarely gets to shoot it matters to him not at all. But he reveres it; it's the portal into this purest way of being in the woods. If it wasn't on his back, this would just be a hike.

It's different for dad, who gets even stumpier if he doesn't kill a buck. Dad likes meat and dad likes antlers, and a day without either is a day wasted; he's not above ordering Craig or Andy out to pop a deer caught in the headlights after dark. One night they're on Interstate 90 to Spokane after a long day without finding a deer. Craig is behind the wheel, Andy is dozing in the back seat, and dad is in the passenger seat breaking one of the cardinal rules of hunting; he's unloading his rifle in the car. It's a massive thing, a lever-action Winchester .348 big enough to kill grizzlies. He's grumbling to himself about getting skunked and

working the lever of the rifle to kick the lipstick-sized cartridges onto the floor mat when his index finger slips and the gun goes off.

In the closed car, the shockwave pops Craig's sinuses and ruffles his clothes. He hears only the very start of the earthshaking bang, though, because in the first millisecond his ears shut down and what he mostly experiences is an eerie, buzzing silence. He holds the car perfectly straight on the highway, staring straight ahead. Nobody says a word for a long minute and then dad mutters, "Shit" -- the understatement of a lifetime. A large, smoking hole has appeared in the floorboard between his feet, and the acrid tang of cordite makes Craig's eyes water. Neither the drive shaft nor the tire is damaged. There's nothing to do but keep driving. Nobody mentions Dad's unforgivable blunder. Not then, not ever.

Craig is now a sixty-year-old carpenter in Missoula, Montana. Hunting means no less to him now than it did in his youth. He's still an Eagle Scout; he can read terrain like a Cheyenne, make ropes do remarkable things, and he always finds the elk. He doesn't shoot them very often, though. He owns one gun, a fat lever-action Marlin .444 with open sights that shoots a huge, slow bullet -- not a very good gun for shooting past a hundred yards, but a sentimental simulacrum of The Stump's .348. Craig takes the rifle out of the basement in October, cleans it, oils it, and carries it to the range for a box of shells' worth of practice. On sore knees, he humps that rifle up and down wooded hillsides and open meadow every day of the monthlong hunting season that he can get away, and when it's over he cleans and oils the rifle, packs it away, and doesn't think about it again until the next October.

He desires no other guns. He doesn't care a whit for the Second Amendment. The rifle itself means nothing to him. Without it, though, there is no hunting. And hunting is everything.

-- Oliver Mazurkiewicz is born on a U.S. Army base in Miesau, West Germany in 1963. His father is a civilian employee of the Army; his mother, a war bride. She endured the entire Second World War in Hanover, which was bombed relentlessly, and all five of her brothers were killed in the Wehrmacht. So the first time Oliver points a stick at a friend and says "bang," Mom stomps across the playground and snaps it over her knee. "*No guns!*" she growls down at him. "I've had enough with guns!"

Oliver, though, is surrounded by guns; he lives on an Army base. The helmeted MPs at the gate wear heavy .45 automatics on their belts and the sight of their cross-hatched grips, peeking out from holster flaps, never fails to thrill Oliver. As he walks between the base school and the PX after school, squads of soldiers troop past him to and from the range, their long M-14s riding on their backs. Popping noises emanate from the range all day long, a backdrop to base life so constant most people don't hear it, but to Oliver it's music -- especially when the soldiers are practicing with their M60 or M2 machine guns and the ripping noise of their bursts finds him wherever on base he is. Other boys' moms have no hangups at all about guns and lavish on their sons all the beautiful plastic weaponry the sixties and early seventies have to offer -- Johnny Eagle pistols, Monkey Division grenade launchers, Mattel tommyguns. It's Oliver's life work, at

age eight, to play after school and on weekends anywhere at all but his own back yard, lest mom see him charging a pillbox or storming a beachhead with the other boys and pitch a fit. He lives for that moment when the boys choose up, lifting their weapons from the bedspread, filling their hands with grips and stocks, working bolts, sighting down barrels. And then they scatter, hunting each other down in the azaleas, bringing to bear the magic geometry of aim, pull, and distant impact. "What did you play with your friends today?" Mom always asks at dinner, face pinched with disapproval. "Baseball," Oliver invariably replies, and everybody gets to live in peace another day.

He's fifteen before he experiences the seductive power of real guns. The family's at Camp Darby now, between Livorno and Pisa, Italy, and Timmy Flake has tumbled to a incredible opportunity. A coffee shop in downtown Livorno has a stash of real guns in a cabinet under the staircase; Timmy saw them. Breaking in at night shouldn't be any harder than any of the other break-ins the boys have pulled off -- the gelato place, the wine shop, Michelle Cooper's underwear drawer. They stake the place out together, drinking endless cappuccinos as they examine surreptitiously case the windows and door locks. Easy: no alarm wires on the windows, a simple pin-and-barrel lock on the door. Oliver feels Timmy's foot pressing on his, and sure enough, a skinny man in a newsboy's cap has the cabinet under the stairs open. The bottom half of several standing-up shotguns are visible inside, and on the cabinet door itself hang two pistols by their trigger

guards. Mafia guns! The man quickly closes and locks the cabinet but that one look is enough to make Oliver's heart thump.

Timmy tells his parents he's sleeping at Oliver's, Oliver tells his he's at Timmy's, and off they go on their bicycles, six miles in the dark to downtown Livorno. The street is deathly quiet and they're inside the café's window in a minute. They aren't halfway across the floor, though, before they hear footsteps moving very fast upstairs and the door at the top of the stairs open. The boys practically fly to the open window and hit the pavement outside in a splatter of hands and sneakered feet. They're racing back up the street when, incredibly, two loud explosions thunder behind them, lighting the narrow street with quick flashes. It's the next sound, though, that thrills Oliver to the bones -- the whirring whip-crack of bullets flying past them. The power in that sound! The unearthly speed and strength of a flying bullet! The boys ride home whooping with laughter; getting shot at for real was even better than getting their hands on the guns. They'll have plenty of guns someday. Being shot at is once in a lifetime.

He learns to hunt when the family moves back to Virginia. Mom doesn't like it, but he's seventeen now and she's happy enough that he isn't in jail or dead from doing some crazy thing or other. He gets a job selling medical hardware but what he really likes is tinkering with guns, fixing them, buying and selling them on the side. What captivates him about guns is how precisely they are designed and engineered, how perfectly they fit together, how satisfying they are to handle and manipulate. Mostly, though, it's their incredible capacity for channelling force that

blows Oliver's mind, they way they can focus a gigantic explosion into a pinpoint and deliver a devastating wallop to an exact spot hundreds of yards away.

He's at a range one afternoon when from behind him comes a great ripping noise he knows instantly: machine gun. Sure enough a man is slapping another long magazine into a World War II-era German MP-40 submachine gun. Oliver is transfixed watching the man slick back the bolt and let fly, shiny brass casings arcing through the air like water from a fountain. "How'd you get *that*?" Oliver finally asks, and what the man tells him makes Oliver salivate: Anybody can own a machine gun or silencer if he's willing to fill out forms, pay a \$200 tax, and wait several months for a federal license. Oliver walks to a payphone that minute to call the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and order an application.

When we meet Oliver in 2009 he is sitting in a small, nondescript office in an industrial park in Longmont, Colorado. There's no sign above the door; by all outward appearances his business might be an extension of White Rose Herbal Company which occupies the other half of the single-story building. He gets up and opens the door behind him, and steps into a room that looks like something from *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* On the wall hang two dozen fearsome-looking weapons, most of them vaguely reminiscent of M-16s but loaded down with complicated electronic sights, under-barrel lasers, and, screwed onto the muzzle of each, a black silencer the size of a salami. Most can fire fully automatic, meaning that under the law they are machine guns. Price tags hang from them; none costs less than \$3,500, and often the sights and silencers carry extra price tags of their

own. They are 21<sup>st</sup> century weapons, the kind one imagines in the hands of starship troopers, or the Special Forces soldiers hunting down Osama bin Laden. I ask Oliver if most of his customers are military and law enforcement.

"Less than one half of one percent," he says. "Almost all my business is civilians."

"What on earth do they do with guns like these?" I ask. He rears back in comic surprise at such a question.

"Shoot them!" he says. "Collect them! *Have* them! They watch television, see our soldiers over there with all these cool modern weapons, and want one. It's people taking their firearm collection to another level. The guy that drives a Camaro GT street car, now he wants to race, so he buys a Camaro GT racer. Get it? Guy has a speedboat, now he wants a bigger speedboat. You have hunters, collectors, and then collectors who want to go to the ultimate in collecting. To say, 'I collect machine guns,' is a badge of honor. It's the final step."

"And they're willing to go through the process."

"The process is nothing. You fill out a form and you wait. And you pay the \$200 tax stamp. But remember, they put that \$200 tax on machine guns and silencers in 1934, when a Thompson submachine gun cost \$125. Back then, it was a real obstacle. But not now. Come here."

He takes us back another room, a workshop where three gunsmiths are at work under fluorescent lights. On a counter stands a five-foot long machine gun on a bipod. "I'm in the process of selling this to a guy," Oliver says, lying a hand atop

it. "Heckler and Koch 21E. Seven point six two caliber, belt fed, twelve hundred rounds a minute, accurate out to a thousand yards. Guy's paying me \$81,000."

I must have gasped.

"Think about it," Oliver said, bending back fingers. "He's already got the Mercedes 350 SLR. He's already got the Gulfstream Jet. He's got his own island. He gets together with his friends, he wants to show them something new. He wants to impress them. What's more impressive? This is like owning a 1959 Cadillac two door convertible coupe."

"And the guns out there?" I asked, hooking a thumb toward the four- and five-thousand-dollar automatic rifles in the other room.

"Same thing, less money. Guys always want that ultimate thing and don't care what it costs. I know a guy lives in a shack and has a \$130,000 dollar race car. Same thing."

"How's business?" I ask him, and he smiles slyly.

"I can't keep up."

*Gun Country* runs 120,000 words. I can deliver it in the spring of 2011.