

Collecting Target Balls Is Tough; Shooting 'Em Often Deadly

By Ralph Finch

If you know anything about the colorful old world of shooting target balls, you likely have seen a poster of Annie Oakley in a pretty dress blasting balls from the sky, or buckskin-clad Buffalo Bill — riding behind an Indian carrying a basket of them — shooting them with his rifle. Ditto big Doc Carver, who would shoot thousands of them in a crowd-pleasing exhibition.

And what about the itinerant sharpshooters who, as part of traveling vaudeville troupes, appeared in theaters big and small across America, England, Australia ... around the world, actually.

How much fun it must have been to see shooters described in newspapers as ...

— “James Webb, the celebrated Rifle and Pistol Shot and his Champion Dog, Rover.”

— “Dr. Carland Miss Jenny Carl, American Rifle Sharpshooters, now appearing, with Nightly Success” (in Australia).

— “Miami, the Western Wonder and Champion Lady Rifle Shot of the world. Miami performs all the Feats with the Rifle performed by any Male Rifle Shots.”

— “Buffalo Frisco, the famous and Popular Sharpshooter, assisted by the Beauteous Amazon, Hyda Revell.”

— “W.H. Patterson, shooting a small Hazel-nut from the Lady’s Head.”

— “A death-defying turn in which Colonel Marvan shot glass balls placed above the head and encircling the neck of his companion.”

Yet those were the good nights, when everyone went home smiling, talking about what fun — and skill — they had witnessed.

But what about those evenings when everything went wrong, when a shot rang out, a gasp was heard, a body fell and — after a moment of horrified silence — the audience screamed, women fainted, children cried and normally infallible marksmen fell to their knees and sobbed.

Also from old newspapers ...

The Melbourne Express, Thursday, July 23, 1897:

“A Berlin correspondent sent particulars of a very sad accident at a display of expert shooting by Kruger, who shot all sorts of objects off his sister’s head and out of her hand amid the applause of about 4,000 persons. He had begun mirror shooting, firing backwards over his shoulder at an object, only the reflection of which he saw through the glass, and prepared for the so-called William Tell shot — aiming at a glass ball placed on her head.

“For this purpose he loaded a cavalry pistol with a large ball cartridge, pointed the weapon backwards over his shoulder, and pulled the trigger. An awful scream told the result, the poor girl at the same time falling to the ground. The ball had struck her in the mouth and had passed out through the back of her neck. Indescribable excitement prevailed amongst the audience, and everybody tried to rush onto the stage, where the unhappy Kruger, the picture of

despair, knelt by his dying sister.

“A surgeon was on the spot at once, but he could not save the young girl, who died a few minutes after the fatal shot had been fired.”

From a Dec. 28, 1908 Australian newspaper, The Advertiser, a report from England titled “A LADY ‘WILLIAM TELL.’ A FATAL BLUNDER.

“An extraordinary mishap, by which a man named Herbert Lee, aged 25, of 5, Robert-street, Hampstead-road, was shot in the course of a ‘William Tell’ shooting act, occurred shortly before 10 o’clock the other night at the Middlesex Music Hall, Drury Lane, writes our London correspondent under the date of Nov. 27.

“A woman artiste who figured as ‘Clementine, Lady Expert, Queen of Firearms,’ was proceeding with her performance, which consisted of a display of expert marksmanship, and had occupied the stage about seven minutes, when the ‘William Tell’ act was reached. Lee, who acted as assistant in the previous items of ‘Clementine’s’ performance, stood on the stage with a glass ball raised slightly from the top of his head, the ball being made more prominent by a colored disc fixed behind it.

“‘Clementine’ took up a position in the dress circle, distant about 50 feet from Lee, who, in accordance with the story which was being illustrated, was blindfolded. ‘Clementine’ raised a short rifle to her shoulder, and amid the breathless excitement of the packed audience fired. The greatest consternation followed when Lee was seen to fall forward on to the stage, bleeding profusely from a wound in the head.

“The curtain was lowered, and Dr. Bremner, of Drury-Lane, was in immediate attendance. A cursory examination showed a wound near the left eyebrow. Lee was removed to King’s College, where he died.

“Subsequently Mr. J.L. Graydon stated: ‘I had no idea that there was any real shooting in Mme. Clementine’s performance of this particular trick, being under the impression that a string was used in some way to release the glass ball. I expressly asked her at the rehearsal if there was any danger in it, and she said that there was not. This is the first night that she has performed at the Middlesex Music Hall, although I believe she has been engaged in this very same business for about 18 years.’

“As a sequel, Clementini Dolcini, 33, an Italian, describing herself as a music hall artiste, staying at the Coronet Hotel, Soho-street, Soho-square, was charged at Bow street with manslaughter. The defendant, who was remanded, bail being allowed at £100, pleaded that Lee’s death was an accident.”

From The West Australian, Perth, March 24, 1923:

“A crowded theatre at Vienna witnessed a tragedy during a music hall ‘William Tell’ act. Alexander Brenner was shooting glass balls and electric light globes off his wife’s

head, and his first shot struck her in the forehead, killing her instantly. The man appeared to be broken-hearted, but the police arrested him.

"It is alleged that he had a liaison with a pretty dancing girl."

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Drop a note if you have a ball question: 34007 Hillside Ct., Farmington Hills, MI 48335-2513, or give me a call (8 a.m.-11 p.m.) at 248-476-4893. Better yet, e-mail rfinch@twmi.rr.com. For an in-depth look at 'em, go to www.targetballs.com. For a subscription to On Target!, the 64-page, three-times-a-year journal for collectors of glass balls, send \$40 to the above address.



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