

RETRO FIREARMS

Primed for Black Powder

Shooting deer with a black powder muzzleloader is not a quick or simple process, yet some hunters clearly find it worth the effort. Delaware's Division of Fish & Wildlife reports that 1,868 deer were harvested last year during the brief muzzleloader season (Oct. 10-18 and Jan. 26-31). And Mark Ostroski, coordinator of the division's Hunter Education Program, says that more than half of his friends who hunt use muzzleloaders.

John Haldeman does so to better appreciate the challenges our ancestors faced when using these firearms, which involves loading black powder and round lead bullets into the muzzle end of their rifle barrels. The Long Neck-area resident describes the firing powder as the "old-timey powder you see in westerns, when the cowboy [pulls the trigger] and the smoke comes out." It was used from around 1200 through 1893, when smokeless powder became available. Haldeman, who grew up in a family of hunters near Lancaster, Pa., began shooting black powder guns at the age of 12. He still shoots them for fun, but the part you don't see in those

westerns is what a nuisance it was to use these old-style guns.

First off, the powder must be kept dry. If it is damp, there could be a delay of more than a second between pulling the trigger and the gunpowder igniting. Second, the old models were enormously time-consuming to load, requiring more than a minute of preparation to fire a single shot. If a hunter missed the mark, the deer would be long gone by the time another ball and powder charge could be reloaded. Black powder can also be dangerous: An inadvertent spark could cause it to explode when loading the ball, and if loaded improperly, the barrel can explode when the trigger is pulled.

Beyond all that, Haldeman notes that "it takes a hundred times longer [than a modern rifle] to properly clean it at the end of the day." This last step is necessary to prevent the sticky, sulfurous powder from corroding the inside of the barrel.

Bill Trifillis doesn't mind these chores. The Lewes-area resident is no longer a hunter, but says he's been "gunning" for 50 years,

making and shooting muzzleloaders for target practice and competition. At a private range a few miles from his house, he demonstrates the process. He sets the butt of his American long rifle on the ground to get access to the muzzle, and pours exactly 70 grains of powder (a grain is a unit of measurement for gunpowder; 70 grains of the type Trifillis prefers is about a teaspoon and a half) from a heavy brass flask into a sturdy powder measure, also made of brass. (Steel can spark if dropped against a rock, and plastic is subject to static electricity; either could create an explosion equivalent to that of a hand grenade.) He then pours the shiny black grit into the muzzle and next taps a .54-caliber round lead ball (0.54 inch in diameter) into the muzzle inside a small square of pillow ticking. This cloth "patch" helps to seal the ball tightly against the barrel's bore so it fires more accurately. With a long fiberglass ramrod,



John Haldeman, left, of Millsboro, loads his .50-caliber Hawken as Bill Trifillis, of Lewes, fires his .54-caliber contemporary flintlock American long rifle at a range near Lewes. Trifillis built his rifle, a project he says took about 300 hours.



Trifillis shows off the design work on the long rifle he made, the black powder loaded into it for firing, and the flintlock mechanism. The powder used in old-style guns must be kept dry or there could be a delay of more than a second between pulling the trigger and the gunpowder igniting.



A cloud of white smoke appears after Bill Trifillis, known for his marksmanship, fires his long rifle.

he then carefully pushes the ball down the length of the barrel until it is seated firmly against the powder.

The method of igniting the powder depends on the type of firing mechanism. This one has a flintlock, which needs to be primed with another bit of powder to catch the spark from the flint. He cocks the hammer, aims at a well-riddled paper target about 40 yards away, and fires. A cloud of white smoke — several feet across — appears in front of the muzzle before dissipating in the breeze.

"On a cool, damp day, you'd see that cloud hang there," he says. "You'd shoot, then run to the side to see if you hit the deer."

Trifillis has a reputation for accuracy, Haldeman says, often winning competitions. From 50 yards, this marksman admits he is usually within a "bullet's width" of the X he aims for on the target. At 100 yards (considered far for this type of gun), a few inches is more typical.

With all the inconveniences and potential danger, why would anyone use

such an old-fashioned gun today? "Besides having another season to hunt in, it's a lot more economical for practice than a modern rifle," Haldeman says. He explains that it can take less than five minutes to fire a modern rifle 20 times — at a cost of about \$20 for ammunition; but it can take up to an hour to shoot 20 rounds with a muzzleloader, which "gives you a longer time to enjoy your hobby." And Trifillis makes his own bullets from free scrap lead, costing him "almost nothing."

The retired pharmacist's patient attention to detail and precision serve him well in handling gunpowder. Haldeman, a retired Army master sergeant who specialized in explosive ordnance disposal, is also well suited to the task. He's now certified by the state as a master hunter to cull deer for farmers. (He uses a modern "inline" muzzleloader for this; it can be reloaded in only 10 to 15 seconds, uses smokeless powder, and fires a hundred shots before needing to be cleaned.)

Regardless of the particular firearm, both men emphasize the importance of safety, and urge those interested in shooting black powder muzzleloaders to learn from qualified sources. ■

— Mary Ann Benyo

READY, AIM ...

Free classes on muzzleloaders (covering precision sighting, range and marksmanship techniques, trajectory and ballistics) are occasionally taught through the Hunter Education Program at the Division of Fish & Wildlife. The course also offers a proficiency qualification segment for the Master Hunter Program. Check it out at fw.delaware.gov or call 735-3600. ■

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