



FIREARM FAIR Buyers look for bargains at a gun show in Great Falls. Part of Montana's culture, gun shows are a modern equivalent of the early 19th-century fur trading "rendezvous."

Pistol Whipped

Turns out a gun is only worth what someone is willing to pay for it. **By Michael J. Ober**

Over the past century and a half, countless firearms have been made with the care and craftsmanship of a fine Swiss watch—delicate but deadly combinations of machining, actioning, filing, engraving, and finishing. That's certainly how I viewed my vintage Colt Model 1903 .32 semiauto handgun. I suspected its enormous value when I received it, via old family connections, then confirmed its worth with some homework and preliminary phone calls. It was no less than a collector's dream, one of the first hammerless Colt semiautomatics ever made, complete with the right serial number. Sure, I hadn't tested its real worth at an actual gun

show, but I could just see collectors there begin to salivate once they saw it. Since I didn't have any particular attachment to it, I calculated that with the proceeds I could invest in something I really had an interest in, like a Parker side-by-side or other fancy English shotgun.

So with an admission stamp on the back of one hand and my precious pistol in the other, I passed the security people and waded into the shoulder-to-shoulder mass that is one of Kalispell's numerous gun shows. The Northwest Montana Arms Collectors Association's two Kalispell events—in April and September—have become huge successes since they began in 1958. Held at

the Flathead County Fairgrounds, each show draws up to 1,000 visitors per day for three days. The shows feature from 60 to 250 tables and are sponsored by the association's 70 to 100 members. Across the state, gun shows are generally rated by the number of tables exhibitors rent. The smallest are in eastern Montana (Circle and Terry, with fewer than 20 tables), and the largest is in Missoula at the University of Montana's Adams Center, with more than 400 tables.

Each year six gun shows are held at the Kalispell fairgrounds. Three separate professional show "promoters" sponsor each event. It's big business for the whole community. Like a farmer's market for sportsmen and sportswomen, each show creates its own retail culture but also generates spin-off trade for other local businesses. Fairgrounds manager Mark Campbell estimates that the six shows have a combined economic impact to the Flathead Valley of nearly \$250,000. "There's a social aspect to all of this too," he says. "And folks are always

searching for that one particular piece to complete a collection." Kind of like a birder's life list or a stamp collector hoping to find a missing imprint.

Gun shows, then, are part of Montana's cultural and business landscape. Whether you like or approve of firearms is a moot point with Montanans. Our fiercely independent nature values the opportunity for ownership and use. And a public showing of sporting arms for displaying, trading, selling, or buying is at the center of that independence.

Gun shows are modern versions of the fur trading era's "rendezvous," where early 19th-century trappers gathered each year to restock supplies, tell stories, renew acquaintances, and swap trade goods. Our contemporary gun exhibitions have the same trademarks. But instead of

horses grazing in a nearby pasture, today's gun rendezvous features a parking lot next to the fairgrounds full of RVs, campers, utility trucks, and trailers with colorful license plates from all over the Pacific Northwest and Canada. Like rodeo performers, most exhibitors attend all the shows on the state circuit, says Campbell. It's the just-right venue for small entrepreneurs in search of a retail outlet with minimal overhead and no property taxes.

The Kalispell show held roughly 250 tables of guns, scopes, ammunition, and shooting accessories. The devices had been chiefly engineered to help deliver meat to the freezer, punch neat holes in faraway pieces of paper, or defend a person's life and home, judging by the staggering assortment of firepower on display. A gun show also contains wares of skilled artisans. I saw handmade leather clothing and purses, beads, handcrafted knives, hats, gun safes, and scabbards, and lots of down-home

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camaraderie. It was a close-knit bunch, celebrating history and lore.

As for the firearms, many were inexpensive old guns and a few were authentic collectibles, such as a \$500,000 rifle supposedly owned by Czar Nicholas IV. But most were known simply as "shooters." They weren't valuable collectibles destined for a showcase but were used for hunting, target practice, or self-defense.

Many attendees seemed to be pondering ways to part with a paycheck for another



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firearm—and pondering even more how they would justify to their spouse why they needed another gun when they so seldom shot the ones they had.

If you are a browser, a gun show can be entertaining and educational. If you are an earnest seller, like I was, you need to know how the process works. One exhibitor advised me to locate someone with similar makes and calibers on display, someone who "knows Colts." Of course. Go right to the experts and engage in the spirited art of negotiating, making offers and counter-offers. It's an old art form, played out expertly at all gun shows.

Unfortunately, I never got the chance. Though I was certain my beautifully crafted antique Colt .32 would fetch a small fortune, I quickly learned that a firearm is worth only what someone will pay you for it. I went to one Colt expert after another; none were interested in my heirloom.

"You got a shooter here," explained one exhibitor after careful examination of my gun. "If you can find the right person, you might get \$125 for it. But, like I say, it's a shootin' piece and not a collectin' piece."

One hundred and twenty-five dollars? I was crestfallen.

He suggested that I talk with a gentleman he knew (they all knew each other) who was stationed at the far end of the room. He handed the gun to me. I thanked him and shuffled on, melting into the large crowd. Finally, I arrived at the Colt exhibitor's table. The fellow didn't hear well, so I had to lean right into his ear to ask him to evaluate my handgun. "This gun?" he asked in a booming voice as he withdrew it from the plastic bag I had carried it in. After a long pause, he looked up at me and smiled through a large beard. "Now, understand I'm not trying to knock your gun just so's I can buy it. I don't want the gun. I've had 'em all, probably a dozen of 'em around this period. You know, '03 to '09. It's probably the crappiest gun Colt ever made. Even had to pay a guy to get rid of one. A 'shooter,' you know."

By this point I could see I'd been on a fool's errand, and my dream of walking out of the gun show with a thick wad of cash was fading faster than gunsmoke in a windstorm. "Out here in Montana they ain't worth a tinker's damn," the old firearms dealer continued. "Now, if you was in Ohio or Illinois, you might get three bills for it straight up. No fight. Don't ask me why."

I put my pistol into the bag and walked away, giving the gentleman a wave and mouthing the words "Thanks," because I knew he couldn't hear me.

"Don't understand why they made so many of 'em," he shouted as I continued toward the exit. "I'm not puttin' your gun down, you know. It's just that..."

I took my priceless hammerless Colt .32 semiautomatic to the nearest pawn shop.

Weeks later, I took up fly tying. 🐟