

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 10, 2006

Ninety-nine percent of registered trapshooters used 12-gauge "trap guns" and corresponding ammunition. The guns changed little while I was in the sport, 1934–50, but rules for ammunition changed slightly. By 1934, no black powder was used for sporting powder; it was all "smokeless" powder. The gun club at Yorklyn, like all such clubs, needed to cater to the shooters' needs.

Trap guns varied from field guns in that most trap guns had ventilated ribs, which were supposed to eliminate heat waves from the barrel distracting the shooter on a hot day, larger wooden grips surrounding the barrel to prevent burned fingers, and straighter stocks (the straighter a stock was, the less distance there was from the top, or "comb," of the stock to a straight line down along the rib backward from the sights). Field guns, on the other hand, usually had more crooked stocks (or more "drop"), no ventilated ribs, and a smaller grip around the barrel or barrels. Double-barreled trap guns (either side-by-side or over-and-under) were equipped with single triggers for doubles shooting (a shooter shot at two targets at a time). Single guns (breach loaded with one barrel), double guns (side-by-side barrels), over-and-unders (one barrel on top of the other), and pump guns (a single barrel that could be used for one or two shots, the latter needed for double target shooting) were equally popular. Although most large tournaments allowed gun salesmen, gunsmiths, and engravers to operate on the grounds, the club assumed no responsibility for the guns used.

At most tournaments or "shoots," competitors could bring their own ammunition or buy it at the club. To satisfy most needs, several brands were offered. In the mid-1930s, most brands had a "standard shell" and a "superior shell." Remington had Shur-Shot and Nitro Club, Peters had Trap Load and Target, Winchester had Ranger and Repeater, Western had Xpert and Field, and there were lesser used brands, Federal and Climax being among them. The higher priced shells sold for 65 cents and the standard for 50 cents (for 25 shells). The standard trap load was 3 drams of powder and $1\frac{1}{4}$ ounces of shot, usually #7½ shot, although #8 was becoming popular. For handicap shooting, where the best shooters stood farthest from the trap, heavier loads were allowed, and copperized shot was popular for a short time until it was outlawed. Some shooters who were bothered by the recoil preferred "light loads," usually $2\frac{3}{4}$ drams of powder and 1-1/8 ounces of shot. On a calm day, nothing more was needed. A shooter also had his choice of gunpowder, the main manufacturers being DuPont and Hercules, and most ammunition brands were loaded with both. The choice was not so much which powder you liked but which shooting salesman you liked. Both powder and the companies' representatives were of top quality, in my opinion.

By 1937, ammunition manufacturers had eliminated two grades of trap shells and sought to make their ammunition more reliable with new crimps to hold in the shot, which supposedly eliminated the sealing wad that would occasionally distort the shot's path to the target (Steve Crothers in 1931 and Joe Hiestand in 1935 won the "Marathon" at Yorklyn with 499 out of 500 with the old wads!). In 1939 the Amateur Trapshooting Association mandated that a maximum of 1-1/8 ounces of shot could be used for registered trapshooting. From that time on, shells were loaded with either 3 drams or $2\frac{3}{4}$ drams of powder. Backyard shooters complained that they could not win handicap events with this limit, but they soon got much better, and in the 1950s, the maximum distance from the trap was increased from 25 yards to 27 yards, and the best shooters are still winning. (This story may have a sequel in a few weeks.)