

11-14-2017

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Recommended Citation

Granade, S. Ray, "The Game Warden's Gun" (2017). *Creative Works*. 72.
https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work/72

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The Game Warden's Gun
by S. Ray Granade
11/14/2017

Growing up in 1950s Evergreen, Alabama, meant more than growing up in a small, South-Alabama county-seat town. It meant growing up in a rural environment where hunting and fishing were never more than a few minutes away. Field and stream activities lured mostly males above the age of eight, and generous game laws did not obviate a brisk business in poaching. Since it was a poor county, Conecuh had its share of those who poached to put meat on the table as well as those who poached because they did not believe that game laws applied to them. Some prime game woods were controlled by large landowners who fiercely protected their land with the aid of all those who worked for them. Those who ignored "Posted" signs and other game laws usually gave those portions of county lands wide berth. They preferred the odds of taking their chances with the person responsible for protecting game in the whole county, William Anderson Thames.

Thames was of that generation often commonly known by their initials, and I don't remember anyone referring to him as anything other than "W.A." His origins in the rural Brooklyn community southeast of Evergreen and close to the Sepulga River made him a natural choice, in outlook and experience, as a "game warden" as we knew them, or "conservation officer" as they've since come to be called. His county-wide reputation as a "straight arrow" earned him everyone's respect. Even detractors saw him as a man unmoved by the physical, social, or economic stature of anyone he found transgressing game laws in any way. Numerous "W.A. stories" circulated as the common currency of the hunting and fishing community throughout the county (and beyond). Several fellow high school attendees told of losing guns to W.A., inadvertently dropping or actively discarding them as they fled likely capture for some hunting illegality.

My personal favorite W.A. story involved a revered Evergreen Baptist Church member and deacon who owned and ran Miller Trading Company, a local farm feed and supply house—which meant that they handled everything. Clarence C. Miller qualified as one of Evergreen's economically advantaged. He was also renowned for his rectitude and fairness in all dealings and universally known as a kind and gentle man. My maternal grandfather, whose generation matched Mr. Miller's, once characterized him as "salt of the earth."

Most in town bought sporting guns from one of the two local hardware stores or the "feed and seed." So Mr. Miller was no stranger to new guns. Sporting shotguns of that era had large capacities: four shells in the magazine and one in the chamber. One was only supposed to have a three-shot capacity on the dove field, so when a new shotgun came in, the seller invariably inserted a "plug" in the magazine to allow only two shells if the manufacturer had not

already plugged it. But Mr. Miller had just bought himself a new shotgun and taken it straight to the dove field for its first outing.

Mr. Miller took his new shotgun dove hunting without even thinking to check the magazine capacity. Like most of us, his habit was to put a shell in the magazine, move it to the chamber, then put two more in the magazine. For Mr. Miller, whether or not the gun was plugged was immaterial; he would never have even considered seeing if he could get another into the magazine. W.A. Thames did not consider plugs immaterial; shotguns on the dove field were supposed to be plugged, and he would often show up as men were standing around waiting for noon, when it was legal to enter the field. He'd systematically check shotguns for plugs, jaw a little, wish folks a good hunt, mosey back to his vehicle, and move on to his next stop. Woe unto anyone W.A. caught in the field before noon. And woe unto anyone with an unplugged shotgun. That morning, W.A. showed up at the field to which Mr. Miller had taken his new, unplugged shotgun.

No one carried a loaded shotgun in a vehicle. No one carried a loaded shotgun to a field. We'd gather at about 11:30 AM, get out, put on hats and coats, make sure that we had sufficient shells (usually two boxes; only very good shots could consistently bag the limit of a dozen birds with only one twenty-five-shell box), get seats if we had them (usually "stools" of painted aluminum legs with cloth webbing that provided the seat at the top when opened), pick up our shotguns, and collect at the fence. When everyone agreed that noon had come and it was legal to do so, we'd load our guns, have someone hold both our gun and his (I never knew of a female to dove hunt then) while we clambered over the usual three-strand barbed-wire fence, return the favor while he joined us, then make our disparate ways to wherever in the field we'd agreed would be our "stand." Once everyone was in and we started through the field (usually of harvested corn), the shooting started. It lasted until people got their limits, the dove quit flying, or the winter sky began to darken with evening.

When he got to a field to check capacities, W.A. would come to the collected hunters, speaking courteously as he came, and walk up to the nearest man. Everyone knew the routine. Normal jocularity would vanish as the gathering quietened. W.A. would have his left hand outstretched; the hunter would hand over his shotgun. W.A. would look it over, make sure it was completely empty, and hold out his empty right hand. The hunter would put a shell into the open palm. W.A. would put the shell into the magazine, then hold out his hand again. Another shell would drop into his hand and he'd put it into the magazine. The moment of truth came when he held out his hand yet again. Another shell would appear and W.A. would try to put it in the magazine. Usually W.A. would look up for the first time at that point, smile, hand the shotgun and extra shell back to the hunter, and move on methodically to the next person. Unhurriedly and with great deliberation, W.A. would proceed around, following the same routine until the whole group's guns had been checked.

Then he would converse very briefly, wish everyone a good hunt, and be on his way to the next field. This Saturday would be different.

Mr. Miller was third to be checked. W.A. held out his hand and Mr. Miller passed him the shotgun. W.A. admired the gun and asked if it were new; Mr. Miller admitted that it was; W.A. racked and commented on the action's smoothness and allowed as how it was mighty nice; Mr. Miller thanked him. W.A. held out his hand and Mr. Miller gave him a shell. W.A. commented on how smoothly it went into the magazine, then held out his hand again. Mr. Miller handed him another. It followed the first into the magazine and then W.A. held out his hand again. Mr. Miller, smiling and confident, dropped another shell into the outstretched hand. The smile changed into a gape as that shell too disappeared into the gun and W.A.'s hand reached yet again for another shell. Mr. Miller fumbled for a fourth shell and almost dropped it as he handed it to an unsmiling game warden. It too slid smoothly into the magazine.

Gone was the sense of simple, easy routine that had pervaded the group undergoing inspection. Gone was the game warden's smiling, easy way. Palpable tension enveloped the gathering. No one had expected to encounter this, particularly with the upright Clarence Miller! In a small-town setting like this, an individual hunted with friends and acquaintances, not strangers. Implicit in an invitation to shoot birds was a willingness to vouch for someone unknown to the rest by the person issuing the invitation. No one shot dove with individuals who tried to take low birds and in the process endangered (and sometimes shot) fellow hunters. And no one wanted to hunt with someone who flaunted game laws. The game warden had a long memory, and regularly checked and kept tabs on scofflaws and any who ran with them.

W.A. looked at Mr. Miller unsmilingly as he passed the offensive shotgun back. "Hold this for me," he instructed as he turned to the next man and began the routine again. The rest of the inspection passed expeditiously and uneventfully. Noon came and went, but no one ventured into the field. Everyone stood waiting for W.A.'s decision about how he would proceed. His options ranged from ignoring the infraction through banning Mr. Miller from the hunt (from any hunt until the gun was plugged and demonstrably so) to a ticket and fine, or even confiscation. While everyone knew W.A.'s firm belief that people were entitled to their guns for field sports and in consequence his resistance to confiscating one, he had done it often enough to ensure common knowledge of the option. Mr. Miller's known moral probity and the gun's newness weighed in his favor; but W.A. religious adherence to game laws offered no differentiation between greater and lesser sins. In his view, carrying an unplugged shotgun onto a dove field ranked as high on the list of game law infractions as taking game out of season.

When he had finished inspecting all hunters' guns, W.A. returned to Mr. Miller, who had seemingly stood stock still throughout the subsequent time. The gun certainly remained in the same position it occupied when he'd taken it back.

W.A. held out his hand again, then reached for and retrieved the shotgun from a befuddled-looking Mr. Miller. Once W.A.'d regained control of the weapon, he cleared it of all shells. Then he cleared a space around them with his eyes. It was not hard to do; while each person possessed a healthy case of curiosity, no one wanted to be too close when W.A. talked with Mr. Miller. If Mr. Miller wanted to tell the story (as he subsequently did), it was certainly his to tell—but only later.

Mr. Miller later recounted (with embellishments by those present at the time), that W.A. was reasonably solicitous. He elicited the story of the gun's purchase, Mr. Miller's taking possession, and his acknowledged negligence in not checking its capacity. He queried Mr. Miller's intention at that moment to shoot dove if the shotgun wasn't surrendered to the law. He studied the ground for a moment as he mulled. Then he drew himself up to all of his considerable height and went quickly through his options with Mr. Miller. Finally, not keeping his subject in suspense longer than necessary, he told Mr. Miller that he planned to write up the infraction, but that if the gun were plugged and then resubmitted successfully for inspection before day's end, he wouldn't file the ticket. Each kept to his side of the implicit bargain, leaving the abashed Mr. Miller free to see the situation's humor—eventually—and tell the story on himself far and wide.

Good press, like Mr. Miller's humanizing story, could be very useful to W.A. So many aspects of his life lent themselves to a very different narrative. He rarely appeared in public except in uniform, a conspicuous part of which was his sidearm. And in an era when police forces armed their men with blued-steel .38 revolvers and lawmen regularly wrote paeans praising "wheel-locks" and denigrating automatics as unreliable, W.A. armed himself with a nickel-plated .357 magnum. It fell within the norm of revolver usage; but in size, power, and appearance, W.A.'s weapon of choice deviated from that norm significantly. It also, like his uniform, figured highly in his self-image. That combination led to a stand-off with his local church.

Living in Evergreen and having grown up Southern Baptist, W.A. had affiliated with the town's only Southern Baptist church, Evergreen Baptist. Later it would birth Bower Memorial Baptist Church, but at the time of this story it alone served the local Baptist community. Rarely did he attend, for scofflaws often chose the Lord's Day to abuse game laws, knowing that they'd run less risk of encountering someone who would turn them in. And nothing got in the way of W.A.'s duty as a game warden.

Like most small, rural, Southern towns, Evergreen was over-churched. Baptists and Methodists vied for pre-eminence, separately, among both whites and blacks, though a healthy religious community supported a variety of other denominations. The town's only Jewish family worshipped away, as did its lone Catholic; a small Episcopalian church collected for worship in a white frame building near the white elementary school. My father pastored the white Baptist

church, though prior to the advent of what we came to call “the Civil Rights movement” he also occasionally filled the black Baptist church’s pulpit.

While a few of the younger men were Korean War veterans, most had served in “the big one, WWII.” My father had interrupted his education to volunteer, and had served on sea-borne transport duty before volunteering for jump school. The Army could assign men to glider duty; once so assigned, a man’s only “out” was to volunteer for jump school, to which one could NOT be assigned. One trip aloft after being assigned to gliders had convinced Daddy that jumping was safer, and he wound up in the 82nd Airborne. Given the high percentage of the population that had shared the experience of military service, few locals were unfamiliar with firearms. Rare was the home that lacked both a .22 rifle and a shotgun, and German or Japanese war trophies (mostly handguns but also commonly Mauser rifles) were just as common.

Despite the commonness of firearms in the general population at large and in the homes of Evergreen Baptist Church members, those who worshipped in that turn-of-the-century Tudor building shared a common belief. They remembered their Lord’s command to Peter to put up his sword in the Garden, and they heard loudly His statement that those who lived by the sword died by it. They universally agreed that no gun should ever enter the sanctuary, reserving for the location its appropriate noun. My father went a step beyond the general sense of the inappropriateness of firearms at the church. Despite his ownership and use of shotguns and rifles, he could not abide pistols. As he once said to me, “a pistol’s only purpose is to kill someone.”

The show-down between W.A. Thames and the Evergreen Baptist Church began innocently enough. He showed up, in uniform, for a service. As part of his uniform, he wore his sidearm holstered on his Sam Brown belt. As did everyone else, he ascended the steps to the front gallery, then the few more and through the double doors into the vestibule where ushers waited, bulletins in hand. Even in the subdued lighting his gleaming sidearm shown like a beacon. The head usher gently informed W.A. that they couldn’t seat him unless he left his pistol either in their care in the vestibule or locked in his vehicle. W.A. turned on his heel and strode out, letting the ushers know in no uncertain terms that this wasn’t over.

W.A. did the courteous thing by taking his concern to his pastor. Daddy, ever the gentleman, thanked him for his courtesy but also reminded him that, in a Baptist church, decisions were the congregation’s prerogative, not that of a pastor. Perhaps, as an intermediate (and more timely) step, W.A. would like to talk with the church’s deacons about the matter. They were due to meet the next week.

While both knew that deacons in a Baptist church were not a governing “board,” they also recognized that the congregation’s most influential men comprised the deacon body. The congregation had chosen them for their usefulness, rectitude, doctrinal soundness, and good judgment; their voices had

greater weight than those of the general congregation. They were men like Clarence Miller. So the two men agreed on the step's appropriateness and Daddy called the deacon chairman to get W.A. on the next meeting's agenda.

Although the deacons met at the church, they were not in the sanctuary. W.A. appeared in full uniform, including his sidearm, and no one demurred. When the deacon chairman called upon him, W.A. briefly stated his case. It was a utilitarian defense of his being a game warden and the gun being part of his uniform and necessary to his function. He never spoke of the Second Amendment or the congregation's safety; nobody ever did in those days. Nor did he speak of his rights as a member of the congregation and how excluding his firearm from the sanctuary effectively excluded him from participating in worship. Everyone recognized that it was a choice he'd made to attend in uniform; other uniformed law enforcement members always chose to attend in mufti.

Following W.A.'s brief request that he be seated for a worship service in the sanctuary while armed and in uniform, the chairman asked the question on everyone's mind: "Brother Sam, what do you think?" Daddy's response was a theological one. He mentioned the long Jewish and Christian tradition of the sanctuary's essential "sanctuary-ness," as a place of refuge. Exceptions (like the scandalous slaying of English clergyman Thomas Becket near the altar) always prompted outrage and often crisis. Weapons had no place in a sanctuary. He mentioned the words of their Lord telling Simon Peter to put up his sword and that those who lived by, died by, it. He reminded the group of the story's context; Peter had been acting to defend Jesus. Then he pointed out that the Messiah was a Man of Peace. While he respected the congregation's right to allow weapons in the sanctuary, he could find no scriptural justification for such an action. If we meet God in the sanctuary, then that is holy space and not to be violated lightly.

There followed a dispassionate airing of the situation. All wished to accommodate W.A.'s desire to worship; all wished to leave the meeting place unprofaned by weapons. In the end, there was no practical solution available. In the end, the religious rather than the worldly argument won out. The chairman voiced the group's respect for W.A. and his desire and argument, but confirmed for the game warden what he had heard already. The group could not support a move to seat someone armed in the sanctuary. W.A. could obviously raise the question at the next business meeting, but none of the deacons would support the proposition and when, as usually happened, someone asked "Have the deacons talked about this?" the answer would have to be honest: they have and they don't believe that we should change what we do.

After that meeting, W.A. reverted to his usual pattern of non-attendance. No one ever raised the question again, even when the Civil Rights movement was at its height and tensions ran high in Evergreen. Even when the church suffered a series of vehicles being ransacked under cover of darkness when

congregants gathered for evening worship and Wednesday night prayer meeting, no one suggested coming armed. The deacons liaised with the small local police department, which (alerted by church watchers) caught the culprits red-handed. To my knowledge, the church never changed its policy, however much the game warden's gun may have tested it.