

# THE VINTAGERS

by  
Clarke C. Jones

**W**e Americans are drawn to new technology, but we also have a passion for things nostalgic and rare. This has led us to collect classic automobiles, old wooden decoys and fine wines. Many of us also have learned that the value of collectables tends to rise above what we can afford before we can get into the collection game, and double-barrel shotguns are a good case in point. Over the last decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in vintage side-by-side shotguns by more than the occasional collector of antique guns.

In 1994, Ray Poudrier went shooting with friends Jack Dudley, Chris Gilgun and Frank Conroy. All of these gentlemen were associated in some way with gun making or gun engraving in New England and came to know each other because of their involvement with the gun trade. “Many old guns would come through our hands, and at that time they were very inexpensive. So I would buy them,” said Poudrier. The other three men started to acquire old guns as well. “Since we all had these wonderful old hammer guns, we decided to shoot them,” related Poudrier. “We decided to pay proper respect to the 100-plus-year-old guns by shooting in a tie and jacket; after all, the heyday of the mix of high society and the gun came about between the 1850s and



Virginia vintager John Streef. (Photo courtesy of Jent Mitchell)

World War I in Europe.”

During their times together they began to discuss how the competitive aspect of shooting may discourage some people from participating in shooting sports. Poudrier recognized that the big shoots in England in the late 1800s to 1914 were social affairs, and the emphasis was on the food, the drink, the gun and the fellowship of like-minded people. The four men decided that this social aspect of shooting, which had been a dominant part of the sport during the Edwardian era, was missing. They believed there should be more to the sport than just seeing who could break the most clay targets. So Poudrier and his friends felt an organization was needed that reflected that era of al fresco dining, fine

wines, and the camaraderie of people with an interest in shooting.

In the Victorian era of the 1800s and the pre-World War I Edwardian era of the early 1900s, driven shoots were mainly a men-only sport. “After lunch the ladies might be allowed to watch, though it does not sound like much of a treat. As the pheasants flew in droves over the guns, the men were too busy to talk to wives and mistresses – who, anyway, had to stand in the right place or run the risk of being shot. Before smokeless powder was introduced, they would have been shrouded in acrid smoke, which at best smelled unpleasant and at worst would singe the eyebrows if an onlooker ventured too close. To round off the discomfort, the noise was appalling. To



The 2005 Vintager Cup show (Photo by Rick Carey)

Vintagers in Victorian costumes at Pintail Point, Maryland, in 2008 (Photo by Hay Hardy)

see someone hit by a falling pheasant was probably the nearest thing to fun, though considering the quantities of birds being killed, even that did not happen very often," reports Jonathan Ruffer in his wonderful book, *The Big Shots, Edwardian Shooting Parties*.

Today's Edwardians have it far better than those of the period they choose to emulate. Not only are Vintager shoots open to women, "a day's shoot with the Vintagers might include a continental breakfast, some clay bird shooting, lunch, more clay shooting followed by a catered sit-down dinner with fine linen, china, stemware and fine whiskey or wine," says Poudrier. Evidently, there were enough shooters who felt the same as Poudrier, because in 1997 the first Vintage Cup, World Side-by-Side Championships was held in Rhode Island. It is currently being held at Pintail Point in Maryland each September.

The Vintager organization has grown from just four people to a number of Vintager chapters across the United States and into Australia. The Rocky Mountain

Chapter was started by Jack Dellelo in 1999 and consists of 40 members. Member Bruce Koranski says the group shoots at a different location each month along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains to support as many shooting establishments as possible, so no matter where members may live, sooner or later a shoot will be close to them.

Different Vintager chapters offer different events. The Leatherstocking Chapter of Central New York offers has a number of shoots, but their premier events

are their steak and lobster shoot in May and their pheasant shoot in October. Jent Mitchell of Stephens City, Virginia helped start the Virginia Chapter in 2007. "I first started shooting in Vintager events about eight years ago in Pennsylvania and New York, and I figured we could organize the same kind of shoots in Virginia," says Mitchell.

A common interest that also draws Vintagers together is the appreciation of the art of gun making that took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Virginia

Ray Poudrier (L) at an award ceremony of a Vintager side-by-side championship (Photo by Lynn Human)





**Virginia Vintagers at the Homestead Shoot, April, 2009:**  
 (Above) Female vintager Elizabeth Lanier shooting with Dr. LeHew observing.  
 (Lower right, L to R) Milt Fitterman, George Wall and Mike Wood  
 (Photo courtesy of Jent Mitchell)

**Jim Rice (Photo by Dwight Dyke)**



shooter and shotgun aficionado and collector Jim Rice has had a long-term love affair with old classic shotguns. “I remember walking with my father in 1949 to Hick’s Gas station at the end of Chestnut Street in Waynesboro, Virginia. I was five years old and my father was taking me to get ice

cream. Hanging above Hick’s counter was an old 12-gauge hammer gun with Damascus barrels for sale for \$8.00. My father had it taken down and handed me the gun so I could have a closer look. I was smitten and have had a great affection for shotguns since. When I was old enough, I bought my first shotgun at Kable’s Pawn Shop run by Page Kable, who was a Virginia state skeet champion. It was a 16-gauge Stevens 311 side-by-side – and I still have it,” says Rice.

Avid shooter and Level I shooting instructor Elizabeth Lanier from Goochland, Virginia is a member of the Virginia Vintagers. She and her husband Owen enjoy shooting together. “I am very new to side-by-side shotguns but think they are a lot of fun to shoot. At a Vintager event, there is a lot of socializing and just-for-fun shooting, and even during the competition portion, everyone is pretty jovial and just happy to be there,” says Lanier.

Mitchell sums up what Vintagers mean to Virginians this way: “We feel there is something special about our antique shotguns. We embrace the history and culture that surrounds these high quality vintage side-by-side shotguns and the fellowship they evoke. The Edwardian period is considered to be the golden age of shotgunning, and the English side-by-side was leading-edge technology at the time.”

Collectors and shooters of vintage side-by-side shotguns all agree there is something special about owning such a gun. And like all things we choose to own, it more than any other gun says something about what we value. In our ever-changing world of techno gear, these guns, and the Vintagers who shoot them, are a nostalgic link to a past when things could be simple but elegant.

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