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Culture

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Gun shows are not only for buying and selling. For some unlicensed vendors and attendees in particular, it appears that buying and selling is not even the primary purpose of being at the show. That purpose is social: to meet up with friends and renew acquaintances. Over the course of a show, there is a continuing undercurrent of friendly banter among members of this group.

There seems to be a tacit acknowledgment of a broadly shared body of knowledge and experience. Simple signs at one show alerted everyone to the presence of a crewmember from the *Enola Gay* and a survivor of the *Indianapolis*, the absence of any further information likely reflecting the belief that none would be needed. In Houston, Jimmy Doolittle's co-pilot on the Tokyo raid and an officer who flew with the Flying Tigers were celebrities.

The demographic homogeneity at some shows, particularly in the Midwest, is remarkable. Well under 10 percent of those present are other than white males, and most of these men appear to be well over 50 years of age. In other parts of the country the overall population is much more diverse, but older white men account for a large majority of gun sellers nearly everywhere.

The firearm industry is acutely aware of the long-term decline in hunting and other sporting uses of guns. Through the National Shooting Sports Foundation's STEP Outside program,



A young boy at play, Tucson, Arizona.

At the flea market.

*—A Salvation Army bell-ringer, when asked whether donations were better when he stood at the entrance to the gun show or “at the flea market next door,”
Tupelo, Mississippi.*

Yes, I have plenty of change, you homeless piece of shit. Thanks for asking.

—T-shirt worn by an attendee, Phoenix, Arizona.

You have to be 18 to have a handgun. Come to think of it, you have to be out of my house to have a handgun.

—A father to his son, age about 5, San Antonio, Texas.

I'm just starting. I've never been shot or stabbed.

—A young man carrying a handgun, to his companions, Jacksonville, Florida.

the industry is working to recruit new users of its products.¹ Several studies have shown that examples set by parents and other family members are of great importance in determining children's ownership and recreational use of guns.^{2,3}

A serious study of the social and cultural aspects of gun shows will have to be taken up by other researchers with skills appropriate to the task. The purpose of this brief chapter is to note for further exploration three aspects of the social environment at gun shows that have the potential to contribute to firearm violence. These concern 1) the relationship between men and women, 2) children's access to firearms, and 3) violence as a tool for problem-solving.

First, consider these two cautionary notes. Some of the photographs are of materials clearly designed to be humorous. The humor truly succeeds, however, only if the viewer agrees with the premises on which it is based. Second, as gun owners are diverse in many ways, there is no unitary gun culture. Nor can there be, as a subset, a single gun show culture. Among those who attend gun shows there will be a range of views; the photographs may, in fact, depict a minority opinion and be offensive to others. But those alternative views are not expressed in a way that allows them to be captured by observation alone.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Women are active at gun shows, both as vendors and customers (pages 5-4, 5-5). There are nonetheless frequent expressions of misogyny in both the products available and sentiments expressed by attendees (pages 5-6, 5-7). These treat women as objects of sexual gratification, devalue them, and in one case (Photo 18 on page 5-7) encourage violence against them.

Children receive a steady stream of messages encouraging gun use, largely untempered by information or behaviors promoting gun safety (pages 5-8 to 5-10). Their involvement progresses from observation and imitative play in preschool years through independent exploration to active participation in the buying and selling of guns by early adolescence. Children also participate in gun show commerce as vendors. Girl Scouts sell cookies; Boy Scouts sell popcorn; children occasionally sell gun accessories and assist with gun sales.

Messages endorsing the use of violence—sometimes indiscriminate violence—to address complex social and geopolitical

problems are widespread (page 5-11). Support for alternative approaches was never observed.

John Wayne is venerated at gun shows (page 5-12). Posters for other actors and the occasional political celebrity can be found for sale, but Wayne’s status is unique. The perhaps too-easy conclusion is that his approach to leadership is what some at gun shows believe the country and the world need. Many of Wayne’s characters were known for an approach that reduced the complex to the simple, even when that was the wrong thing to do; that never altered course; and that made quick resort to violence. Wayne shared those attributes, by his own admission.

Politically very conservative, he also was deeply angered by dishonesty and injustice. It is interesting to speculate on what this action-oriented moralist would do in confronting the frankly illegal straw purchases and the ambiguous ask-no-questions gun sales that occur at gun shows.

If everything isn't black and white, I say, "Why the hell not?"

—John Wayne

Fill your hand, you son of a bitch.

—John Wayne as U. S. Marshall Rooster Cogburn, challenging an outlaw to a gunfight, in True Grit.

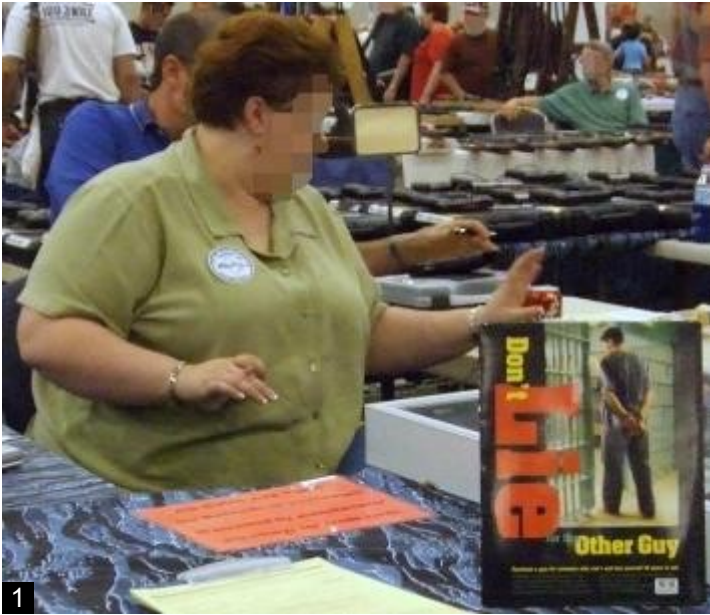
References

1. The National Shooting Sports Foundation. Step Outside Program. Available from: www.stepoutside.org
2. Lizotte AJ, Tesoriero JM, Thornberry TP, et al. Patterns of adolescent firearms ownership and use. *Justice Quarterly*. 1994;11:51-74.
3. Vittes KA, Sorenson SB. Recreational gun use by California adolescents. *Health Education and Behavior*. 2005;32(6):751-766.

*Class III.
Yes, they are machine guns.
Yes, they are expensive.
Yes, you need a special license.
Yes, I like that thing your sister does with her tongue.
Yes, Justin will give your wife the THRILLER.*

—Sign posted by a licensed retailer, Orlando and Tampa, Florida.





Women

Women both sell guns (1-4) and buy them (5,6) at gun shows. The occasional bright pink gun (7-10) presumably represents an attempt to appeal to female purchasers. The photographs were taken in Houston, TX (1,9); Dallas, TX (2); Phoenix, AZ (3,5,6,10); Denver, CO (4); Indianapolis, IN (7); and Tucson, AZ (8).



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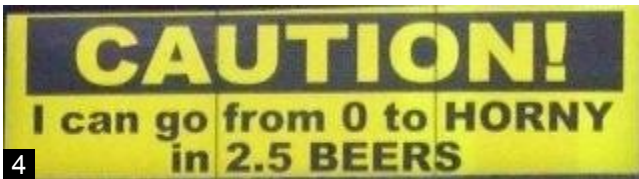
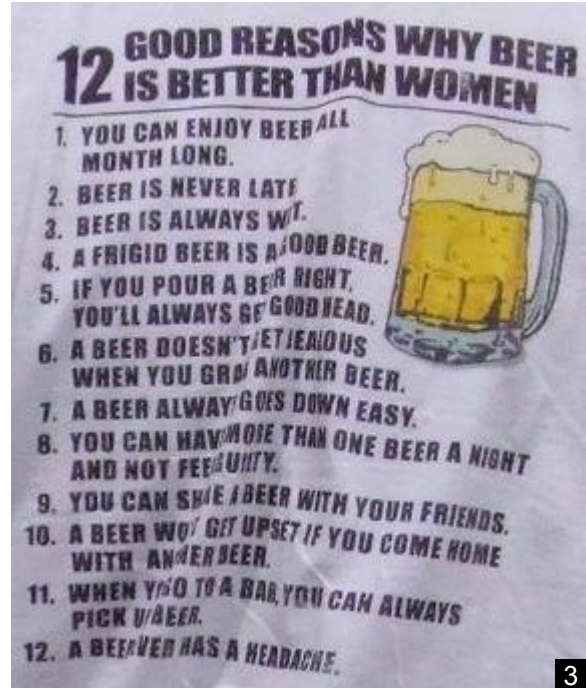
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Men and Women

The ephemera at gun shows have a great deal to say about men's relationships with women. Except for Photos 1-3 and 18, the photographs are of items being offered for sale, many of which are bumper stickers. The photographs were taken in San Francisco, CA (1); Dallas, TX (2,7); Richmond, VA (3); Denver, CO (4,12,14,16); Indianapolis, IN (5,6,15,18); Dayton, OH (8); Tampa, FL (9); Jacksonville, FL (10); Spokane, WA (11); Las Vegas, NV (13); and San Jose, CA (15,17).

Top 10 Reasons Handguns Are Better Than Women:

10. You can trade an old .44 for two new .22's.
9. You can have one handgun at home and another when you're on the road.
8. If you admire a friend's handgun and tell him so, he will be impressed and let you try a few rounds with it.
7. Your primary handgun doesn't mind if you have a backup.
6. Your handgun will stay with you, even if you are out of ammo.
5. A handgun doesn't take up a lot of closet space.
4. Handguns function normally every day of the month.
3. A handgun won't ask "Do these new grips make me look fat?".
2. A handgun doesn't mind if you go to sleep after you've used it.

AND THE NUMBER ONE REASON A HANDGUN IS BETTER THAN A WOMAN:

1. You can buy a silencer for a handgun





Children, 1

Younger children are generally spectators, learning by watching as nearby adults handle, buy, and sell guns (1-7). As they get older they become active participants, discussing and handling guns with adults (8-10) or by themselves (11). The photographs were taken in Las Vegas, NV (1,2); Jackson, MS (3,6); Dayton, OH (4); Richmond, VA (5); Akron, OH (7); West Palm Beach, FL (8); Orlando, FL (9,10); and Tucson, AZ (11).



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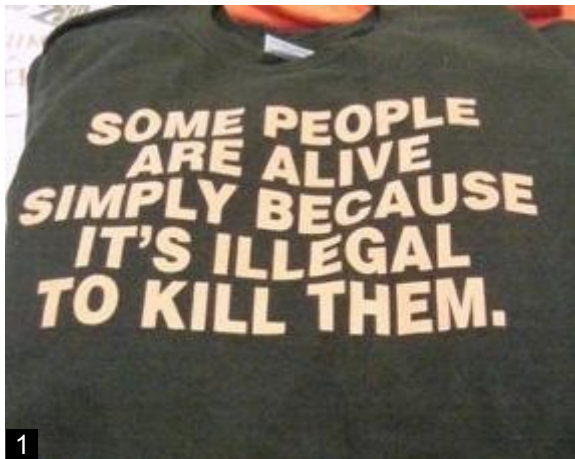


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Children, 2

Older children may be armed themselves, as are these boys carrying a shotgun (1), SKS rifles, (2-4), and an AR rifle (5). The girl in Photos 6-8 is assisting with private party gun sales. The photographs were taken in Phoenix, AZ (1,5); San Francisco, CA (2,3); Ventura, CA (4); and Jacksonville, FL (6-8).



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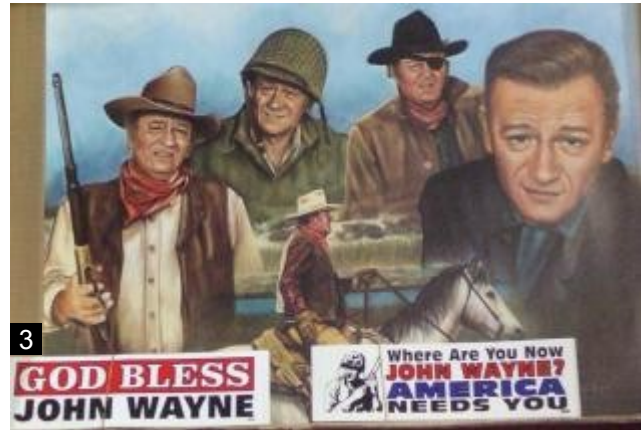
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Promoting Violence

Materials carrying traditional pro-gun messages—"When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns" is an example—are ubiquitous. Somewhat less common, but perhaps of greater concern, are materials promoting violence and irresponsible gun use. The photographs were taken in Atlanta, GA (1); Tucson, AZ (2,3); Jacksonville, FL (4); Denver, CO (5); San Jose, CA (6,7); Dallas, TX (8); and Phoenix, AZ (9).



John Wayne

John Wayne's status is unique. Other cultural and political figures can be seen occasionally, usually where posters are for sale. Wayne's image is typically in a place of honor. He seems to be considered a hero, not so much displayed as invoked. The photographs were taken in Reno, NV (1); Spokane, WA (2); Denver, CO (3); Jacksonville, FL (4); and Phoenix, AZ (5).

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