

64 LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT (OR NOT)

By Peter Caroline

When I was living in Massachusetts, the only individuals I ever saw carrying handguns openly were the police. And many of them seemed a bit annoyed by this departmental requirement. Back in the early '60s, I helped friend of mine who was on a local police force find a Colt Cobra .38 revolver to serve as his duty weapon. I ran into him on duty one day, and asked him how the Cobra was working out for him. "It's great," he exclaimed, "it's so light I can hardly tell I'm wearing it!" "How's it shoot?" I asked. "How the #\$%@ should I know?" he answered.

Moving to southern Arizona in 1995 was a revelation. I'd be standing in line at the supermarket checkout and see a shopper in front of me wearing a handgun. Right out in the open! It was certainly a bit startling and a new dose of culture shock for this recently arrived Easterner. But I got acclimated rather quickly. Several years ago, I was at a local greasy spoon, having lunch with my every-other-Thursdays shooting group. Several members of the group were carrying holstered handguns. I noticed that a pair of tourists (I knew they were tourists because they were wearing shorts and t-shirts in February) were eyeing us with great curiosity. Finally the male got up and came over to our table. "Are you in law enforcement?" he asked. I replied that we were not. "Then why are you carrying guns?" he asked. I answered, "Because we can. Welcome to America!"

Although I have been known to carry a "barbecue gun" at special gatherings with like-minded friends, I am of two minds on the subject of open carry. My libertarian self says, "Why not? It's my right!" On the other hand, I can see the tactical deficit of this practice. Should you be forced into an unpleasant situation, you've lost the element of surprise that you would enjoy with a concealed handgun. There's a lot to be said for just blending in with the scenery.

And then there's that whole damn thing about public image.

Recently, after an early morning shooting session, I was having breakfast at a local deli with

several fellow shooters. One of our group, a gentleman in his 80s, a retired graduate engineer and lawyer, is known to his compatriots as "Yosemite Sam," thanks to his distinctive western garb and openly carried sixgun. We finished our breakfast, paid up and left. A few days later, I discovered that we had unwittingly fomented an incident. Word got around that, right after we left, some woman in her 50s got up and loudly announced to the waitress, "Did you see THAT? That man had a GUN!" In fact, we were all carrying guns, but Sam was wearing his openly. Okay, he's a CCW instructor, and perhaps he believes it pays to advertise. The waitress explained that we were regular customers, and that open carry was quite legal in Arizona. The woman persisted, getting even louder, and repeated the complaint to the deli owner and his wife. They very politely deflected her complaint, and emphasized that this was not a matter for concern, in fact they felt safer because of our presence. "Oh," said the angry customer, "so you want gunfights going on in here all the time?" She left, vowing never to return. One may hope.

Fortunately, this woman's overreaction is not typical. There are, however, a great many individuals who have little or no familiarity with firearms, who feel a bit

uneasy when encountering someone openly carrying. Yeah, I know...that's their problem. But consider this: every one of us in the firearms-owning fraternity is to some extent representative of the group as a whole. **WE** know that we're solid citizens, safe and responsible with guns, vetted by the FBI, ATF and our state and local law enforcement agencies. But the average onlooker has no idea of our background or predispositions; he or she just sees the gun. If it's not Halloween, and you are arrayed like Wyatt Earp or a G.I. Joe action figure, people are going to have some concerns about your stability.

If I'm in some public place, minding my own business, and some individual wanders in, bent on armed robbery, mass murder or impressing Jody Foster, I'd prefer to be as inconspicuous as possible. That's just my take on the matter; YMMV.



"... WHY ARE YOU CARRYING GUNS?" HE ASKED. I ANSWERED, "BECAUSE WE CAN. WELCOME TO AMERICA!"