By Peter Caroline

Some months ago, I received an invitation from my buddy, Bill Berlat, to attend the 2012 Shootists Holiday, to be held at the NRA Whittington Center in Raton, New Mexico. The Shootists, I discovered, are a group of firearms enthusiasts *par excellence*. They convene once a year at the Whittington Center for four days of shooting, chatting and showing off new acquisitions. I am not exaggerating when I say that I saw more rounds of ammo expended in those four days than in a year of weekly shooting with my local groups, and that’s a lot!

Bill and I stayed at the Melody Lane Motel in beautiful downtown Raton. Our rooms were immaculate, and the service was friendly and surpassed some of the finest expense account hotels I frequented during my days in the advertising business.

The Whittington Center...how can I describe it? Imagine 33,000 gorgeous acres encompassing seventeen active shooting ranges in the shadow of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in northeastern New Mexico, just south of Trinidad, Colorado. This is literally “where the deer and the antelope play,” large herds wandering around, ignoring us as we drove to the various ranges. As you enter the facility, you can stop at the NRA administration building, which includes a gift shop that even sells guns and ammo, an incredible museum and a well-stocked library with every gun and hunting-related book you can imagine. Driving past the admin building, we stopped for photos at the equestrian statue of Charlton Heston as “The Scout, Providing Everlasting Vigilance Over The Santa Fe Trail.”

The Whittington Center is, conservatively stated, a gunny’s Valhalla.

Our first day began in the living room of one of the spacious residence cabins. There was a brief opening prayer and a no-B.S. safety lecture, and then we chatted a while as we looked over the raffle prizes to be awarded at the closing banquet. But we were there to shoot, and we quickly proceeded to the silhouette range, where most of our activities took place. Although the silhouette targets were restricted to lead bullets only, a large variety of other ranges were available for long-range rifle, long-range pistol, practical pistol, trap, skeet, sporting clays – you name it.

And there were guns, guns and more guns. Displayed at the benches and tables at the range were everyone’s guns...everyday working guns, fancy custom guns, both privately owned guns and displays from such manufacturers as Freedom Arms and XS Sight Systems. And every gun was there to be fired. Everyone was eager to share his or her pride and joy. I fired a suppressed Walther P22, a Pedersoli Sharps .45-90, a beautifully patinaed original Colt Bisley, an FN 5.7x28mm carbine with a 30-round horizontal magazine, and more single-action sixguns than I imagined existed.

One intriguing device I tried out was the Slide Fire Solutions™ Slide Stock, a buttstock device that can transform your AR, AK or even S&W AR-22 into a close simulation of a full-auto carbine. It’s totally legal (BATFE letter to prove it!), actually allows aimed fire, and can crank out up to 100 rounds in seven seconds. Total klutz that I am, I figured it probably wouldn’t work for me, but it most assuredly did. More fun than the proverbial barrel of simians!

Lunch was freestyle. Some took off for town, just a few short miles away. Bill and I brought our own goodies...assorted cold sausages, cheese, sardines, tortillas and beverages, in a small cooler. And while we ate, at a bench under a ramada, we shared tall tales and compared notes with our compadres.