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Minutemen Help Spur the Growth of Gun Clubs

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NORBORNE, Mo., Aug. 1—The number of private gun clubs in the United States has doubled in the last few years. One group that has made a contribution to the proliferation is the militantly anti-Communist Minutemen organization, headquartered here.

Robert B. de Pugh, national coordinator of the right-wing group, said in an interview that it was "a common tactic" for minutemen, never disclosing their affiliation, to organize or join gun clubs in order to gain access to rifle ranges for target practice.

Each Minuteman is under instructions to fire at least 500 rounds of ammunition a year to maintain proficiency as a marksman. Minutemen believe the United States will be subjugated by Communism by 1973 and as patriots they must be prepared to resist as guerrillas in "an effort to restore constitutional government."

Finding a place to shoot is no problem around Norborne, a town of 950 population and several cornfields, but it can be a problem in more densely settled places. Mr. de Pugh said gun clubs were being formed rapidly in order to lease and reserve land for ranges while land was still available in or near cities.

The Minutemen, organized in small bands throughout the nation, also train in the countryside at night for the role they believe they will soon have.

Mr. de Pugh, a 41-year-old drug manufacturer, founder of the three-year-old organization, says there are more than 25,000 Minutemen now. They are, he says, "the most dedicated, most active and best disciplined American organization in the fight to preserve our constitutional republic."

Each supplies his own rifle, shotgun, sidearms and other "survival" equipment.

U. S. Provides Weapons

Some, the Norborne chemist said, get weapons and ammunition free from the Department of Defense. This is possible through a Federal program little known outside circles of gun enthusiasts.

The program was started in 1903 to promote skill in use of firearms for the benefit of the armed forces in case of mobilization.

Under it, the Army's director of civilian marksmanship leads rifles and gives ammunition to rifle clubs affiliated with the National Rifle Association.

Thousands of Minutemen have joined the association, Mr. de Pugh said, partly because their dues support the association's campaign against passage by states of legislation restricting possession and use of firearms.

Head of Anti-Communist Group Says They Join to Gain Access to Rifle Range

Membership in the association has doubled in the last four years. It now stands at 650,000. Affiliated gun clubs have doubled in number in the same period, to 11,500. More than half make use of the Army program. Other clubs have been formed outside the association.

Mr. de Pugh, a "lifetime" member of the association, said Minutemen accounted for only a "small part" of the increase in membership.

He said Minutemen did not rely on the Army's program, because the rifles are subject to recall in case of war or other emergency.

Members have no trouble buying all the guns and ammunition they want, he added.

Several states require permits to buy guns, but the Missourian said only New York further regulated possession by periodic registration and fee "harassment." He charged that this amounted to "confiscation by legislation."

Growing Arsenal

In Missouri, he said, citizens have no trouble getting the necessary purchase permit at the sheriff's office except in Kansas City and St. Louis, where crime rates are higher.

St. Louisans simply cross the state border to Illinois and Kansas Citizens to Kansas, he said, and buy guns without permits.

The arsenal in the hands of civilians has been growing rapidly. It is now estimated by the National Rifle Association at a billion pistols, rifles and shotguns and several billion rounds of ammunition.

A million mail-order guns, such as the one bought by Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin of President Kennedy, are sold in the United States annually.

Mr. de Pugh contended that efforts to require registration and other restrictive firearms legislation were being led by Communists because after they "take over" the United States, he said, the registration lists would alert them as to whom to disarm.

However, some Congressmen doubt whether all civilians should be trusted with the unregulated use of arms.

Representative Henry B. Gonzales, Democrat of Texas, has noted that On Target, the Minuteman newsletter edited by Mr. de Pugh, recently warned "Communists and fellow travelers" that "only their leaders" restrained patriots who had learned to hit sparrows at 200 yards with a target rifle.

The newsletter told "traitors" to "beware" because "even now cross-hairs are on the backs of your necks."

Pro-Communists Listed

Mr. de Pugh said his organization had files listing 67,000 "pro-Communists" whom the Minutemen were watching. Two months ago, he said in the book-lined office of his Biolab Corporation here, the Minutemen files were cross-indexed with those of six other "conservative" organizations.

He said that "intelligence" operations were as important as weaponry in the Minutemen program and that 600 periodicals were read regularly as an aid in spotting suspects and building the files.

Why not leave such surveillance to the Federal Bureau of Investigation? "No law-enforcement agency," Mr. de Pugh said, "can watch all the people all the time. The basic duty of patriotic American citizens is to be vigilant to protect his country in every way he can."

A recently issued Minutemen booklet casts doubt on the loyalty of a wide range of elected officials.

"What do you really know about the State Senator or State Representative from your district?" it asks. "Could any of these men have been indoctrinated in Communist ideology at some time in their career or past education?"

"There are several men who are now known Communists who once served as U. S. Senators or Representatives and were in all probability Communists all the time."

Representative Gonzales said the Minutemen had published "a thinly veiled threat" against him and some colleagues who voted against increasing an appropriation for the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Weapons Seized

Others have expressed concern about some of the uses to which Minutemen have put weapons. When Mr. de Pugh conducted a class in guerrilla warfare in Shiloh, Ill., three years ago, sheriff's deputies seized mortars and machineguns as well as rifles. Richard Lauchli, a Minutemen leader from Collinsville, Ill., was arrested.

Last May Mr. Lauchli was arrested again, this time near Clinton, Ill., by Federal agents posing as arms buyers for Cuban revolutionaries seeking to overthrow the Castro regime. They seized a truckload of bombs and automatic weapons.

Mr. Lauchli is free on \$20,000 bond. Mr. de Pugh says he is now a former Minuteman.

The handsome, black-haired Missourian said the Minutemen were more interested in quality of membership than quantity "because we are training future military leaders."

Mr. de Pugh said only 10 per cent of the population would qualify as sufficiently conservative, patriotic, dedicated and self-sacrificing for Minutemen membership.

Seven thousand members have been "weeded out" in the last year, he said, for failing to measure up. Some were spies, he said. They were not dropped, simply "isolated."

"When they found they were not being included in anything of importance," he said, "they decided it would be easier to quit and infiltrate the John Birch Society."

Mr. de Pugh recently dropped out of the Birch Society. He said it "wasted too much time" on impractical efforts like its movement to impeach Chief Justice Earl Warren.

Movement in Colleges

Mr. de Pugh is taking the Minutemen's youth movement, which he considers vital for maintaining anti-Communist vigilance, into the nation's colleges.

Last summer 15 college-student sons and daughters of Minutemen were trained in counterpropaganda techniques to combat "left wing influences" on their campuses.

This summer, the national coordinator said, 100 students from major colleges and universities are taking a six-week course. The classes are conducted at three unspecified places, one in the East, one in the West and one near St. Louis.

The first two weeks are devoted to a study of "the American heritage," the second two to Communist propaganda techniques and the last two to counterpropaganda.

"We want the students to be able to recognize Communist agitation for what it is," Mr. de Pugh said, "and use whatever forums are available at their colleges to counteract it."

Mr. de Pugh, soft-spoken and articulate, said he planned to embark on a round of speeches himself this fall.

The oldest of his six children will enroll as a freshman in September at the Kansas City Art Institute.

The de Pugh teen-agers already are well trained in weaponry. Even his 12 year-old daughter, the chief Minuteman said, is "a pretty good shot" after two years of rifle practice.