

The Freaky Types Who Dig Machine Guns

By Charles Howe

Just why, one might ask, would an otherwise respectable citizen have an uncontrollable mania for owning a machine gun?

Aside from such obvious answers as self-defense, shooting at rabbits and possibly keeping up one's manual dexterity by taking the thing apart of an evening, admittedly the why's of tuckings, say, a Gardner Mountain Cannon away in the garage for a rainy day are not, truly, among the great questions plaguing the Western World.

But to a little-known agency of the Federal government, there are a hell of a lot of loose and unlawful machine guns floating around, as witness the rise and demise of William E. Thoresen III, the late gun czar of Pacific Heights.

AGENCY

The agency is the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Division of the United States Treasury Department. In addition to machine guns—about 100,000 of them are lawfully owned throughout the country—this agency also rides herd on moonshiners, people who make and sell



Malcolm Warner and Bob Skopeck checked an M-4C grenade launcher

bombs, and those of a James Bond persuasion who make

silencers for guns, saw off shotguns, and own other tricky firearms whose ownership is proscribed by law.

Chief of the agency's enforcement division here is Malcolm F. Warner, whose 92 agents — and he's short-handed—check on the activities of both legitimate firearms dealers and owners and gun freaks in nine western states.

As Warner explains it, while a citizen of good morals can lawfully own a machine gun if he buys a \$200 tax stamp and fills out sheaves of paper, there are God-

imaginable, in racks, neatly tagged!

Currently, Warner said, his agency is running an average of 30 gun cases through Federal court a month here, about half of them machine gun-type violations.

How does an investigator determine, without breaking any laws himself, that a meek-looking man of particular politics may have a closet full of Browning automatic rifles?

SHOWS

"You go to gun shows, read periodicals and the like," said Bob Skopeck, special Treasury investigator and currently in charge of Warner's training program.

A big, bluff type who, when he worked undercover usually posed as a right-winger, Skopeck said in a chance gun freaks have a parlance as distinctive as that of narcotics addicts or safeblowers.

"They'll speak of a piece (gun) as being winged, or plugged up and deactivated," Skopeck said. "They know the workings of a machine gun as well as the inventor does, and some of them will talk about their weapon like another man will talk about his girlfriend."

WORKS

Indeed, while the Treasury men may not have read the

complete works of Kjaft-Eb-ling nor taken advanced classes in sociological courses on deviance, they strongly hinted that many of those who own hot machine guns may be as kinky as a broken bicycle chain.

They hasten to make clear, by the way, that these Freudian filips do not apply to the vast majority of firearms owners, whose right to possess lawful weapons they most stoutly defend.

Do people who covet illegal machine guns have common political views?

Skopeck and Warner don't think so. For, while Nazis and extreme left wingers may show an abnormal interest in guns that make noises like ripping sheets, so do purely commercial types, interested in turning a fast dollar by peddling to would-be revolutionaries.

POWERS

The big commercial type, other lawmen generally agree, has been largely supplanted by the various major powers — the Soviet Union and the United States among them — who give away for free what the old gun-runner charged a pretty penny for.

A classic machine gun freak, Warner said, was a humble tractor driver whom

he "baggged" years ago, when he first joined the Federal agency.

"The guy was driving around with the thing attached to his tractor," Warner recalled. "When I went out to bring him in he said:

"Mister, before I got that machine gun I was just another drunken tractor driver. No one respected me. But the minute I strapped that baby on my tractor, I got nothing but respect!"