

Gun Country: Are Too Many in the Hands of Public?

By EDDIE S. HUGHES
West Texas Bureau of The News

FORT WORTH, Texas — Just recently, a Fort Worth insurance salesman pulled up to a street light at a darkened East Side intersection.

Out of the shadows, a figure jumped into his car and held a knife at his throat, demanding billfold and car. The insurance man, stunned, was not quick to respond.

His throat was slashed. His billfold with \$12 was taken. His car was later found wrecked in a ditch.

"It won't happen again," the salesman related to police later. "I've got a gun and I'm going to use it next time."

THIS WAS Story No. 1 in perhaps a hundred like it.

Everybody, or so it seems everybody, has a gun.

Sheriff Lon Evans figures that in Tarrant County alone there are nearly a million guns in the hands of citizens.

Some of these gun-toting citizens are the most honest to be found; some are on the shady side.

Salesmen, businessmen and even housewives carry guns in their car, or have them at their homes, to protect themselves from thugs.

The thugs have guns to intimidate their victims.

IF THERE are a million guns in Tarrant County—and most lawmen tend to agree with Sheriff Evans—then that's almost two weapons per man, woman and child.

Countless .22-caliber pistols, shipped into Texas as non-firing collectors' items, have had the plugs removed, thus transforming them into deadly instruments in the hands of ordinary teen-agers and criminals alike.

Some of these foreign-made pistols sell for as little as \$7.50 in the pawn shops.

Fort Worth Crime Lab director Wendell Sowell says that 40 different types of .22 pistols have been run through his crime lab since it began operation in 1961.

Hundreds of other weapons are shipped into Texas by large gun dealers in Eastern cities. (It was such a weapon that killed President John F. Kennedy and wounded Gov. John Connally in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.)

And in Fort Worth, as in almost any large city, anybody can buy a gun. That includes a teen-ager, if he should pass for an older person. Because rarely are any questions asked.

PAWNSHOP OWNERS admit, rather guardedly, that gun sales are on the increase.

"My gun sales have never been so high," said one Fort Worth pawnshop dealer. "It hasn't been a sudden thing. It's been a gradual climb."

When did the rise begin?

Reports are rather sketchy, and some gun dealers can't pinpoint any special date. But they do give a general idea: When integration riots erupted in Mississippi.

A top investigator under Sheriff Evans said he doesn't blame citizens for buying weapons for protection.

"I never go anywhere without mine," he said.

THE LAWMAN said part of the reason for the buying surge of guns is the growing tension between whites and Negroes. But he does not feel that is the only reason.

"Crime is on the upswing, and it's not all Negroes who are contributing," he allowed.

The sheriff's investigator didn't think that the gun buying spree should unnecessarily alarm anyone. He doesn't believe that times are returning to the Old West.

"About 80 per cent of those guns are at home, and not hanging from the hip."

He felt a good percentage of guns owned in Tarrant County were in the hands of "responsible people."

These guns are registered with either the police department, gun dealers or pawnshop operators.

He pointed out that most pawnshop dealers keep a strict tab on registration of their guns, and that "we've been able to trace many guns, thanks to them."

THE TROUBLE comes when one individual sells his gun to another. And this occurs most frequently with police characters.

Firearms taken from known criminals and ex-convicts in Fort Worth are generally returned to relatives, not destroyed.

Official police files in the Fort Worth Police Department revealed that a pistol was confiscated twice by detectives.

In May, 1963, the pistol was returned to its owner after one man had been killed with it. Two months later, in July, it was back in the hands of the lawmen with a second gunshot victim near death.

In November, 1963, that same pistol was returned to its owner again. He presumably still has it.

SHOULD there be concern over the rise in gun buying?

Those who sell guns point out that a pistol is no more dangerous than five beers.

Those who are opposed to the untamed sale of guns point out that anyone, in a fit of temper, can buy a weapon and kill with it before he has time to give it a second thought.

Police files are packed with such cases.

A recent example occurred on the afternoon of Good Friday, 1961, when the wife of a Fort Worth hoodlum entered a downtown department store and purchased three pistols.

No questions were asked, she later testified in court.

Less than 48 hours later, on Easter morning, Charles Allen was found slumped in the front seat of a bullet-riddled car on the South Side of Fort Worth. A slug from one of those three pistols had ripped into his brain.

DOES TEXAS lack strong gun laws?

A report from the National Rifleman's Association recently indicated that Texas gun laws are actually among the more strict in the United States.

But it also pointed out that enforcement of those gun laws is the most lax.

Do gun laws prevent murders and shootings?

An official FBI report recently declared that 70 per cent of all murders in Dallas last year were committed with guns. The figure was similar in Fort Worth.

However, in New York City, sometimes called the crime capital of America, only about 25 per cent of murders were committed with firearms.

New York has the Sullivan Act, which controls guns—and the people who own them.

FORT WORTH Homicide Lt. Oliver Ball believes the present Texas gun law encourages impulsive murders. He has six unsolved murders now — each with robbery the apparent motive.

"Robbers are impulsive. They don't plan to kill—only when it's necessary, or when they get scared," said Lt. Ball.

"An ex-con can walk into a store and purchase a gun to commit a robbery. Then if he has a beef with his victim, he either has to use his gun or eat it."

Lt. Ball's boss, Police Chief Cato Hightower, who is a member of a national rifle association, is aware of the widespread opposition to gun legislation.

And the police chief realizes that a permit to purchase or possess a gun will not prevent firearms from coming into the hands of criminals. A firearms registration law will not disarm the criminal, he points out.

BUT the police chief does have some ideas that might be added to Texas' gun law. They are:

—Strict registration of weapons that can be concealed, such as pistols, though not of shot-guns used by hunters. Registration of rifles may also be included.

—A waiting period of three days before a gun is delivered to a buyer, to discourage crimes of passion and suicides.

— Destruction of firearms used to commit crimes, or those taken from ex-convicts.

—Outlawing the sale of guns to ex-convicts. Every gun buyer should produce proper identification and submit to a check of police records.

— Requiring out-of-state gun dealers to file reports to a state agency, listing purchaser and the serial number of each weapon shipped through the mails.

This, Chief Hightower says, would make the job of Texas lawmen easier.

It is also a gun law, he said, that would not hurt the law-abiding Texan who believes that the ownership of a pistol is his birthright.