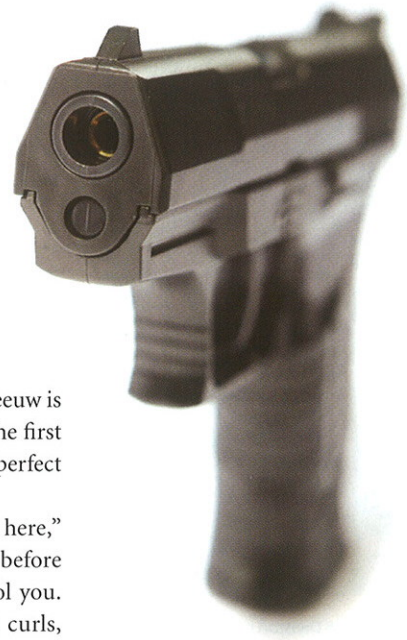


Heat Packin' Mamas

Utah women are taking up arms—
some for protection, others for sport



I'm not a gun person, never have been. As a liberal-minded East Coast transplant, I'd certainly never own a gun, much less touch one. But after making Utah my home, I was shocked to learn that female gun owners are as common here as oversized SUVs. And it made me stop and think. Just who are these women? Are they militant, angry, gun-toting vigilantes? What does a gun feel like? I had to know more, and that's when I met Sue Igo, the epitome of a hard-core lady shooter.

Dressed in a camouflage vest, her long chestnut hair stuffed under a hunter's cap, Igo confidently swings her double-barrel shotgun at a clay pigeon arcing across the cloudy sky. She points, and when the sight alignment is just right, pulls the trigger, smoking her target. Clay becomes dust, dissipating in the wind. She's one hell of a shot. Satisfied, Igo declares, "Women and guns belong together."

It's Thursday night at the Magna Gun Club. Thunderclouds and rain deter no one at this outdoor range. More than 100 men and 18 women arrive, shotguns in hand, for the weekly trapshooting league. Pauline DeLeeuw greets

me as other ladies trickle in. At 71, DeLeeuw is a champion trapshooter and, in 1987, the first woman in Utah to shoot 200 straight, a perfect score, a record she held for 18 years.

"The girls call me grandma around here," says DeLeeuw, manning the snack bar before loading her gun. But don't let that fool you. Spry, energetic, with a head of white curls, this great-grandmother still shoots with the best of them. Years ago, resenting her husband who spent hours trapshooting, she decided, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

Igo bounds in the door. At 5-foot-8 she has the ideal build to handle most guns right out of the box, a challenge for many women who have to cut down or alter the fit of their firearms. "Guns have become my life," says the 2002 Western Zone Ladies Champion and NRA-certified shotgun instructor. A 47-year-old cancer survivor, Igo knows life is short. She's thrown away antiquated notions of what women "should" do and pursued her passion. Now all of her free time revolves around guns: competing, hunting, participating in Cowboy Action Shooting

“Guns have become my life.”

—Sue Igo



ABOVE: Sue Igo credits the Division of Wildlife Services “Becoming an Outdoors Woman” program with fostering her initial interest in guns years ago.

Lady shooters like Patti Smith are a common sight at the Magna Gun Club. According to *Women & Guns Magazine*, there are well over 10 million women in the United States who own a firearm.

OPPOSITE: Packin’ and proud of it, these heat-packing gals—Christina Snowball, Colleen Humphrey, Ellie Peterson, and Pauline DeLeeuw—are serious about their guns.

events, or entering ViMBAR (vintage military bolt action rifles) matches.

A graphic artist by training, she left a job she loved designing Santa sets and Christmas décor for shopping malls to become senior advertising designer at Browning, a Utah-based gun manufacturer.

Does either of these lady trapshooters carry a concealed weapon? “Not yet,” DeLeeuw says, but she does intend to get her permit just in case. “In this day and age you almost need it.” She’s ready, having received a .22 caliber pistol for Mother’s Day years ago. Igo brings a weapon along when traveling alone and is happy to let people know she’s armed. Turns out lots of ladies are packing heat, and shopping for a weapon is surprisingly easy.

The Crossroads of the West Gun Show is a Utah tradition. It’s nine o’clock on a Saturday morning and hundreds stream into the South Towne Expo Center. Rows of tables are crammed with rifles, shotguns, and pistols. There are stacks of ammo in hunter orange boxes, knives, beef jerky, and curiously, beanie babies. A man struts by sporting a T-shirt that reads: “How do I solve my problems? It depends how close they are.” Others browse casually, some with rifles slung over their shoulders. Guys in full Confederate garb stroll through the aisles sipping coffee.

A few folks offer me advice on revolvers vs. semi-automatics, and which is the best gun to carry. “Get what you can handle,” counsels one vendor.

Next to a rack of holsters I spy a handgun that looks about my size: a Walther P22 semi-automatic pistol. Feeling bold I pick it up. Cradling it, I finally understand. It fits like a glove. The weight, grip, and balance feel good in the palm of my hand. And then it hits me—What am I doing? I don’t like guns. Gingerly I place it down and walk away.

Unlike Igo and DeLeeuw, Katy (last name withheld) is reluctant to talk. Sipping a cup of green tea at Starbucks, the 5-foot-11 former model is attractive, quiet, and unassuming. But she’s got a gun. She bought one for protection when auditioning for work.

Then her house was robbed and she went from feeling victimized to wanting revenge. Would she shoot to kill? “Yes,” she says. “If something very bad is going to happen, I might have a chance.”

Bad things do happen. According to the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, one in three Utah women will experience some form of sexual violence during their lives. But experts say just knowing how to shoot often makes women less likely to be victims. The way they walk changes, they carry themselves with more focus and awareness. This confidence spills over into other parts of their lives.

“Rule number one: Don’t point a gun at anything you do not want to shoot, kill, maim, or destroy,” says Terry N. Tate, firearms instructor at an NRA First Shots class. He keeps a close eye on the students staring at the semi-automatic pistols and revolvers spread out on the table. Like a child, my first impulse is to grab one.

Tate tells horror stories of gun accidents, blowing holes through innocent victims; a father cleans his gun and kills his daughter instantly, not knowing the gun was loaded; two brothers play, one mistakenly pulls the trigger. My stomach tightens. I can’t help but notice the bullet holes in the walls, floors, and ceilings, scars left from careless instructors.

When Lorna Brown’s 4-year-old son found a loaded gun in a nightstand at a friend’s house, she was angry. “No mother should have to worry about this,” she says. As the Utah Chapter President of the Million Mom March, a nationwide organization aimed at reducing deaths and injuries due to firearms, Brown wants to see federal legislation, tighter restrictions for secondary gun purchases, and safer gun storage in homes.

But Igo sees it differently. To her, gun control is “having a good aim and a steady trigger squeeze.” She stresses education as the key to protecting children, not just safety locks.

Brown disagrees. “I don’t think educating kids is a safe bet,” she says. With 23 children checking into Utah’s Emergency rooms in 2005 for gunshot wounds, more needs to be



done. “Your risk goes up when you have a firearm in the house. Kids are smart and they find them.”

Some people stash loaded guns under their couches or over door mantels, but DeLeeuw forbids loaded guns in her house and Igo stores her guns safely. After Katy got her concealed-carry permit she considered the responsibility that comes with owning a gun. “It’s changed my lifestyle,” she says. Often toting her weapon in her purse, Katy adds, “My normal daily pattern has been altered because I need to know where the gun is at all times.”

I head to the Lee Kay Center shooting range on a quiet Wednesday morning, the pros and cons of guns still ringing in my head. My instructor hands me a fully loaded Smith & Wesson .22 revolver, and I turn to him and in a final plea say, “I’m afraid when balloons pop at birthday parties.” He merely smiles and tells me not to worry, that women

often make better shooters than men.

Resigned, I secure my ear protection, aim at the target, and remember to breathe as I place my finger on the trigger and ... squeeze. I did it and hit the target. After a few more rounds, I graduate to a Smith & Wesson .38 Special and 9mm Glock semi-automatic; learning how to load and unload, building more confidence.

I silently curse the two Rambo wannabes flanking me, blasting their firearms as the noise of a .357 magnum reverberates through the air. “I’ll show them,” I mutter. Standing, I aim, concentrating on the sight alignment. I wait patiently and squeezeeeeze. Bulls-eye.

After two hours and two dead-on shots, my hands are tired, but I leave proud, head held high, showing off my targets to anyone who’ll humor me. Am I a gun person? Who knows? But now I understand what attracts women to firearms. I’m already looking forward to a few more rounds at the range. **SL**

RESOURCES:

Lee Kay Center for Hunter Education

(public shooting range)
6000 W. 2100 South, SL
(801) 972-1326

Great Salt Lake Gun Club

(located at the Lee Kay Center)
(801) 972-2258

Magna Gun Club

(public shooting range)
4006 S. 8400 West, Magna
(801) 250-9818

For more information on other local shooting ranges, visit the Utah Shooting Sports Council at utahshootingsports.com.