

GET YOUR GUNS

Author: Amanda J. Crawford

Issue: October, 2010



Photos by Amanda J. Crawford

Amanda Crawford, Melanie Kiser and 62 others like

INSIDE THE PHOENIX GUN SHOW

The white-haired man leans across the table of assault weapons so I can hear him over the din of voices that fills the coliseum at the Arizona State Fairgrounds: "These are from a private seller," he says without prompting as soon as I approach his table of semi-automatic assault rifles and pistols. "So, there is no paperwork required."

"How many can I buy?" I ask him.

He scans the table of about a dozen firearms. "How many are there?" he replies.

There is a fine line between freedom and lawlessness. Arizona's gun shows straddle that line. What is one man's liberty is another man's loophole. What is one man's constitutionally protected sporting equipment

could bring another man's death, especially if it ends up in Mexico.

Authorities say Phoenix's gun shows are a steady source of weapons for Mexican drug cartels and homegrown criminals. The shows amplify an exception to federal firearms law that allows people to sell their personal gun collections without conducting background checks or recording sales. The show is filled with private sellers – some have tables full of guns, others walk the crowd selling weapons on their backs. While some states have closed this so-called "gun show loophole," Arizona has not. In fact, when Democratic Senator Ken Cheuvront of Phoenix successfully amended a bill this year to require the same proof of citizenship for private party gun sales that is required to vote, the sponsor – none other than immigration hawk Senator Russell Pearce of Mesa, who is a staunch gun rights supporter – killed the bill.

Gun shows are also exploited because of their size, authorities say. They provide one-stop shopping for all the weapons, ammunition and equipment that any law-abiding gun enthusiast, Los Angeles gangster, war re-enactor or Mexican narcotrafficante could desire. If you are turned down at one table, you can move on to the next. And the crowds help mask any suspicious activity.

The Crossroads of the West gun show held at the fairgrounds several times a year is the largest in the West, according to organizers. It is a sensory overload of weaponry and raw Americana: Row after row of handguns, shot guns, assault rifles, knives, bayonets and body armor are interspersed with innocent collectibles, jewelry and shiny porcelain nick-knacks. There are Zip-lock bags and boxes full of bullets, crates of banana clips and large drum magazines. There are several tables of antiques, World War II era weapons and Nazi memorabilia. Some tables test the First Amendment more than the Second: T-shirts and posters compare President Barack Obama to Hitler, threaten illegal immigrants



or suggest AK-47 gunfire to make our voices heard in Washington. At one table, a half dozen diffused grenades are available, two for \$25. The man at the table shows me the hole in the bottom of each. Some people buy them because they know how to make them lethal again, he confides. "But that's on them."



Most of the people at the shows are gun collectors and enthusiasts, like Cliff Thomas, 74, of Sun Lakes. Thomas came to the gun show with his buddies, all of them sporting NRA hats. Over lunch at the concession stand, Thomas tells me that he and his wife enjoy firing assault weapons at the shooting range once a week now that they are retired. A man sits down at the next table with a backpack and a sign on his chest advertising a dozen guns he has for sale and the asking price for each. Thomas says the individuals selling guns at the show trouble him. "He don't care as long as he gets the money in hand." Still, he insists that drug cartels don't exploit the gun shows. They probably get their guns in bulk from Eastern Europe, he tells me.



Guns sold at the gun show have shown up both at crime scenes in the United States and in Mexico, according to investigators and court records. The day after the July show, ATF agents raided the Mesa home of a man who was selling guns as a private collector there and seized about 1,000 firearms. The ATF says the man used to be a licensed firearms dealer but allowed his license to lapse years ago while continuing to sell hundreds of guns at gun shows in Arizona and other states. He didn't do background checks or keep records of his firearms sales. Guns traced to him were linked to crimes in five states, including a deadly courthouse shooting in Las Vegas earlier this year and a drug bust in Tennessee, the ATF says.

A few weeks after the gun show, federal prosecutors sentenced the leader of a gun trafficking ring accused of purchasing at least 117 firearms for the Sinaloa drug cartel. According to plea agreements, the 10

defendants purchased many of the guns at gun shows in Phoenix, including those held at the state fairgrounds. At least 15 of those guns have been recovered so far in Mexico.

At the gun show, I visit with gun rights expert and author Alan Korwin, who is autographing his books with a pen shaped like a large silver bullet. He gives me a "Guns Save Lives" sticker and tells me the media keeps getting it wrong: As gun restrictions relax, "We're more safe," he says.

"As a free person I can buy something from you and you can buy something from me, and it is not a loophole: It is freedom," he says. We don't need new laws to restrict illicit gun trade, just better enforcement of existing laws, he says.

Down the crowded aisle at another table, John Collins says he doesn't think Americans should worry about what's going on in Mexico. Collins runs Black Gun Stuff, an online and gun show business that specializes in accessories for AR-15 and AK-47 type assault rifles. Collins tells me we just need better border security.

A few weeks later, I think of my conversation with Collins when Pinal County Sheriff Paul Babeu issues a plea for donations so he can buy semi-automatic assault weapons for his officers so they aren't "outgunned" by Mexican cartel members.

"I don't think Arizona has any responsibility to keep guns out of Mexico," Collins tells me. "The violence in Mexico is Mexico's problem."



Amanda Crawford, Linda Crawford and 62 others like