
Meet the Powder Creek Cowboys: the fastest guns in Lenexa

God Bless 'EM, is it possible to live in THE MYTHICAL AMERICAN WEST?

Powder Creek Cowboys give it their best shot.

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Croaker (Dennis Ryan) was last year's Prince of Pistoleers.

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The revolvers hanging from his belt are loaded, but at the moment, Croaker's hands are busy with the tin coffee cup suspended less than an inch from his lips. He's a big man of 52, and he carries his weight in front, mostly in a great stomach now clothed in a red shirt underneath suspenders, and pants the same black that his mustache must have been in his younger days. On his head is a white Stetson. He peers into the near distance and finally lets the cup fall, clattering to the wooden railing next to his shotgun, and yells, "Your days robbin' banks is over, Dalton!"

Croaker is left-handed so he draws the revolver on that side first, squeezing the trigger with his fast hand while pulling back the hammer with his right. The bullets meet each red, steel, cowboy-shaped target with a sonorous ring. When the gun is empty, he tugs at the other revolver. "Damn it," he says, as the gun snags against a stray bit of leather. He frees the pistol and fires again, this time aiming wide of the target on his fourth shot. The bullet embeds in the dry, bare soil of the [Powder Creek Cowboys'](#) shooting range, so abused by missed rounds and mists of gray gunpowder that only a rare patch of grass survives.

When the revolvers are finished, Croaker shuffles in an awkward crab walk a foot to the right, where more guns are waiting to be fired. The rifle is next. As he shoots and reloads, spent shells spin wildly from the stock. Again, a shot goes wide. He finishes with a shotgun, knocking back four diamond-shaped metal targets in succession.

Behind him, spotters are watching. The range is hidden from the suburban [Lenexa](#) homes that surround it, and no one fires a gun without at least three witnesses. Part of this is for protection. The revolvers don't have safeties, and the only hardware here is what was available in the 1800s. If there's a misfire and a bullet lodges in the barrel, the spotters are there to warn the shooter before the next shot blows up the gun and the shooter's hand. The other reason is to watch for accuracy. Each of Croaker's monitors raises a hand with two fingers up to signify his misses. He has fired all four guns in a whisper under 27 seconds by the timekeeper's watch, but each stray bullet will add five seconds.

Croaker picks up his weapons and walks to a nearby gun cabinet made to resemble an outhouse. The barrel of his rifle is still smoking. He lays out his guns to make sure that they're in good working order and all of the bullets fired correctly.

As Croaker services his firearms, another man in Old West gear takes his place at the Corral. This man fires both of his revolvers at once, shooting and cocking a gun in each hand. This method makes him look more like an action star but doesn't do much for his speed or accuracy.

Beyond the Corral is a small street scene, where another 70 shooters are poised at assigned spots near banks and jails and saloons, waiting to pull their triggers: It's the annual Prince of Pistoleers Tournament, the fifth to be held at the Powder Creek Cowboys' shooting range.

The competition involves scripted encounters, often with an imaginary Dalton gang. "Here's a necktie for that outlaw Emmett!" says a man at the Alamo Saloon before he starts cracking back the lever of his own [Winchester](#).

Still at his guns, Croaker bends forward. Four spent shells tumble from the brim of his hat. He looks at the dented golden casings lying amid his weapons and sighs. "Shouldn't have missed that pistol," he tells himself. "No reason to."

Outside the shooting range, Croaker is known as **Dennis Ryan**. He has been a **Leavenworth County** paramedic for close to 30 years, treating wounds from car crashes and farm accidents but almost never gunshots. At Powder Creek, he's just Croaker — one of the fastest guns in east Kansas and the man who won the Prince of Pistoleers last year.

Croaker was raised around guns but didn't start competing with the local chapter of the **Single Action Shooting Society** until last summer. The organization has just two rules: You can shoot only the guns that were around in the Old West, and you must wear period clothing while doing it.

"I don't spend a lot of money on clothes," Croaker says. "Lots of people like to dress up. They have more money in clothes than guns. I have more money in guns than I do in clothes."

In many ways, Croaker perfectly represents the Powder Creek Cowboy. For one, there's the mustache — at the Prince of Pistoleers, a clean-shaven face is a rarity, and the mustaches vary from neatly trimmed to curled like Snidely Whiplash's.

Most of the Powder Creek Cowboys also have permits to carry concealed handguns. "Violent crime is up," Croaker says. "I've had my house broken into twice and my guns stolen twice. The last time was December 1998. We put an alarm in since then and a gun safe in since then." One morning, he says, a neighbor couple woke up with a robber standing at the foot of their bed. "He came in through the garage."

Then there's the **John Wayne** fandom. "We watched *Cheyenne* and all those old shows, and we watched a lot of John Wayne movies," he says of his childhood. "I think everybody likes John Wayne. He's everybody's hero."

In Croaker's living room, one bookshelf is populated entirely by VHS tapes of old Westerns, most starring the Duke. After attending his first shootout and discovering that seven men were already arguing over the handle he preferred — "Doc" — Croaker picked a new name from the dialogue in *Horse Soldiers*.

With a week left until the three-day Prince of Pistoleers weekend, Croaker has agreed to demonstrate how he became the deadliest paramedic in Leavenworth County. His ranch-style home sits along a gravel road surrounded by acres of farmland. A makeshift shooting range in the backyard includes a wooden table for guns and a big box of ammunition; three steel targets in the same cowboy-silhouette shape as those at Powder Creek; and a five-point star with weighted tips that can be blown off, causing the target to spin crazily like a broken windmill.

Croaker answers most questions in monosyllables; if he has ever had a moment of introspection about why he's so attracted to guns, he doesn't share it. But when the time comes to describe the mechanics of reloading and firing a shotgun in record time, or the quickest way to pull a pistol without blowing off a toe, he lights up. Through years of practice, he knows the best way to place a rifle on the table with its butt ready to be pulled up against a shooter's chest. He knows how to keep a shotgun barrel from pulling away after a blast, so he doesn't have to waste valuable time re-aiming.

After a few rounds at the cowboy targets, he wonders aloud how the shotgun would fare on the star. He leans forward just slightly and starts to fire. "Oh, yeah," he says with palpable joy as the points fall to the ground. He grabs a fresh shotgun shell from the table. "Oh, yeah! That's fun!" For now, he doesn't seem concerned about defending his title. "If someone beats me, that's OK. I don't think about it. It's if I beat myself that I mind," he says. "It's a game. When it quits being a game, it's time to quit."

It's been six years since the Powder Creek Cowboys dug into the dirt and laid the first boards for their very own western town — or at least a quarter of one. The firing range is made up of five facades. There's the Drover's Store, the Alamo bar, the **CMA Condon Bank**, a jail, and the **Dewey Cattle Company** Corral. A wooden sidewalk runs along the front of the establishments, where, during the Prince of Pistoleers, spotters wait for the shooting to stop.

"Everything we have has some story behind it," says **Jerry Elliott (Paolo Slick)**, the club's president, a 72-year-old whose mannerisms resemble **Wilford Brimley's**. "The bank is exactly the bank the Daltons robbed in Missouri. It's all historically accurate."

That goes for the makeshift graveyard, which marks the remains of the Daltons and includes a tombstone that gives Slick a laugh. It's supposedly taken from a marker in **Nevada**: *Here lies Lester Moore/four shots from a .44/No Les — no more.*

Ask the cowboys at Powder Creek why they spend thousands of dollars on reproductions of old guns and tasseled vests, and their answers will have something to do with **Roy Rogers** or **Gene Autry**. "We're just a bunch of guys who didn't get to play cowboys and Indians enough when we were kids," Slick says.

When they talk about the Westerns that inspired them to be here, it's as if **Clint Eastwood** never stepped in front of a camera. They don't mention the morally ambiguous films made in recent decades that now dominate the cowboy fantasy. These men prefer to dream about heroes who'll shoot the gun out of the black hat's hand rather than plug him in the stomach. And they're not unique.

Started in California in the mid-'80s, the **Single Action Shooting Society** has gone from seven men dressing up in their backyards to a national sport with hundreds of chapters and an estimated membership of more than 80,000. Skills are measured by success in different "stages" (target scenarios and settings). The biggest national event, the End of Trail festival and shooting contest in **Albuquerque**, New Mexico, attracts 500 competitors from around the world, the best of whom can run through one of the required stages clean in 15 seconds. The sport is growing fast. National marketing director **Coyote Calhoun** estimates that 25 percent of the clubs started in the last three years.

On this Saturday afternoon in mid-June, Gary "Danite" **Madison** is helping the society live out its fantasies. Behind the fake town is Madison's tent, stocked with cowboy outfits and guns for anyone who wants to buy. Madison says he picked his name from Mormon history; the Danites were bodyguards hired to kill for the church, he says. They also saved sinners by shedding sinners' blood and, in turn, got closer to heaven for helping save a soul. "I like that theology," Madison says.

"If I had it to do all over again, I'd like to live somewhere between 1800 and 1956," says the 52-year-old. "I think it was just a closer-knit society. People helped people. When I was a kid, it was 'Mr. and Mrs. Franklin on the corner.' Now kids say, 'Those are the old farts on the corner.' And the respect for rights was different. One thing about shooting here is, it's family-oriented, it's about building the family unit. When people holler today about the blacks and the Mexicans and everything like that, well ... I think everyone who wants to make a better life for themselves should have that opportunity. I have nothing against blacks or Mexicans. But I do think if they're going to come to this country, they need to speak English." Madison isn't the only ranch hand who feels nostalgia for a time before he was born. Most of the people at Powder Creek express some affinity for what they think is a lost America — a time when roles were clear and people were safer.



It's not just middle-aged men who are attracted to this, either. Maci Fry is a 19-year-old student at **Johnson County Community College** who's known as Jade Star at Powder Creek. The name is meant to reflect her green eyes and love of astrology. (Because no two cowboys anywhere in the country are allowed to register with the same name, Star's paperwork lists her as **Jade Jewell**. Her preferred alias is popular outside of the cowboy world as well. She's aware that **Jade Star** is the screen name of an adult actress and model whose last three film credits are *Electric Cherry*, *Girl Train* and *King Cobra*.) Fry sticks out among a group of people almost old enough to be her grandparents, but she enjoys the contrast. "I think I'm pretty modest, unlike a lot of my generation. I like to be dressed elegantly and classically," she says. She's wearing a button-down shirt the same shade as her eyes. "And there was so much going on around the founding of our country — I feel like that was such a real grassroots beginning, and to be part of that world would've been phenomenal. I look around today and I'm discouraged at how we're still struggling as a society. There are things that disturb me as a person morally, like all the abortion, and I'm not super thrilled about gun-control laws right now." Fry sees no conflict between her enthusiasm for an earlier time and the Old West's consideration of women.

"I think the way I interact with men and stuff, I would've been more like an *Annie Get Your Gun* kind of person," she says, and shifts her revolver across her hip. "I would've blended in more with the cowhands and crossed gender boundaries. Like out here. These men see me as a female, and they respect my figure, but they also see me as someone out here who's dedicated."

There are sharpshooters who disagree with this. But Powder Creek's philosophy is accepting enough to allow differing opinions. Among those who know that a miner's outfit is a correct period costume, there's also room for the one who appears to have used a **Bedazzler** on every tasseled shirt he owns.

When **Dennis Roland** (aka Shaky Merlot) isn't playing cowboy, he's working with Indians. At 52, the affable man — one of the few who's clean-shaven — researches trust documents for the **Bureau of Indian Affairs**. He also has a history degree.

"My heroes were Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy, but you can't look at everything through rose-colored glasses," he says, sitting at a picnic table with a plate supporting a loose-meat sandwich and at least two handfuls of potato chips. "I know a lot of folks here wouldn't mind being back in the 1800s. I think as a group we've really romanticized it. I think if you give people a day in the 1800s, they'll be happy to come back to the 21st century."

But Roland and Madison agree on other points. For one, even though Madison makes his living selling rifles, he believes that there should be stricter gun control. So does Roland.

"The gun laws were written for a time when everyone knew you didn't give the village idiot a gun," Roland says. "Now there are a lot more village idiots, and not everyone knows who they are."

After Saturday morning's dark clouds scatter, Paolo Slick tilts his head to the sky and blows through the hairs on his mustache. "I forbid it to rain!" he declares. The club still has 36 hours of shooting to finish.

One hundred twenty people pay dues to be Powder Creek Cowboys; 70 of them are shooting this weekend, and 100 are in attendance. Slick is tuckered out from organizing the whole thing. It's not just the shooting and keeping track of everyone's times and accuracy — there's also a dance later tonight, when the formalwear comes out.

As much as the popularity of cowboy action shooting has increased this decade, there's always the question of how long the sport can survive if its biggest advocates remain men and women who are drawing Social Security. "There have been a couple deaths in the last few years," Jade Star says. "If we don't get young people involved, I get worried about it. And the way the suburbs creep up, I get worried about whether or not the range will still be here in another 10 years. For a while, with the long-range rifle shots, they were finding shells in the neighborhoods around here. I don't want people to be fearful of guns or [afraid of] coming out to see how great this sport is."

Slick, at least, is not a fearsome man. He carries a revolver in a leather holster in his pickup truck, but it's hard to imagine him ever wanting to use it. He won't even hunt anymore.

"I used to shoot geese, then I heard they mate for life, and if you get one, the other one spends the rest of its life looking for it," Slick says. "I don't need that shit on my conscience."

By Sunday morning, Slick is in a lighter mood. Croaker is back at the Dewey Cattle Company Corral. He has had a bad weekend. Friday afternoon with the sidearms didn't go as well as he had hoped. Yesterday he missed shots that he shouldn't have, and today hasn't been much better.

Before Croaker can start his final stage of the weekend, a rippling moan comes through the crowd. He looks toward the bank at the other end of town and starts running while the cowboys at the Corral are still trying to figure out what has happened. An elderly woman wearing a white top and long blue skirt is hanging limp between the arms of two cowboys. Her mouth is open, and her eyes are shut.

Croaker points to one of the picnic tables, and the men pick her up and place her across it. They pull a tent over for shade. Someone calls the paramedics. Because Croaker is one, they let him do what he thinks is best. Another man, who bears a passing resemblance to **Joe Walsh** and yesterday announced to the group that he was a grandfather, says that he, too, is an EMT. He joins Croaker while the woman's husband, bald and frail-looking, stays by her side. Croaker pinches her wrist and puts his head to her chest. She's taking shallow, rapid breaths.

On-duty paramedics arrive with two ambulances. They place the woman on a gurney and open the white doors to load her in. The vehicle idles instead of rushing away, which everyone takes as a sign that things must not be urgent. The woman's husband is going to ride with her to the hospital, still dressed in his western gear. He needs to leave his weapons and truck behind. Croaker and the rest promise to take care of his stuff.

As Croaker watches and waits, a pair of cowgirls outside the bank size him up. One of the women says she thinks the on-duty paramedics dismissed Croaker and his helper because they didn't have their EMT uniforms on. "It's hard for the paramedics to listen to them when they're dressed like that." "I'd never guessed Croaker was a paramedic," the other replies. "Yeah. He's a real good one, too. You'd never guess it talking to him. He keeps so quiet." If Croaker could hear them, he might be happy to hear that the exchange sounds like old movie dialogue.

"He can come off like he's mad at the world, but I know when he opens up, he's a real good man." "He's just a man of few words." Croaker tells the waiting cowboys that he expects the woman will be all right. She has a heart condition, and being in the sun must have exacerbated the problem, but she was already stable before the ambulances left.

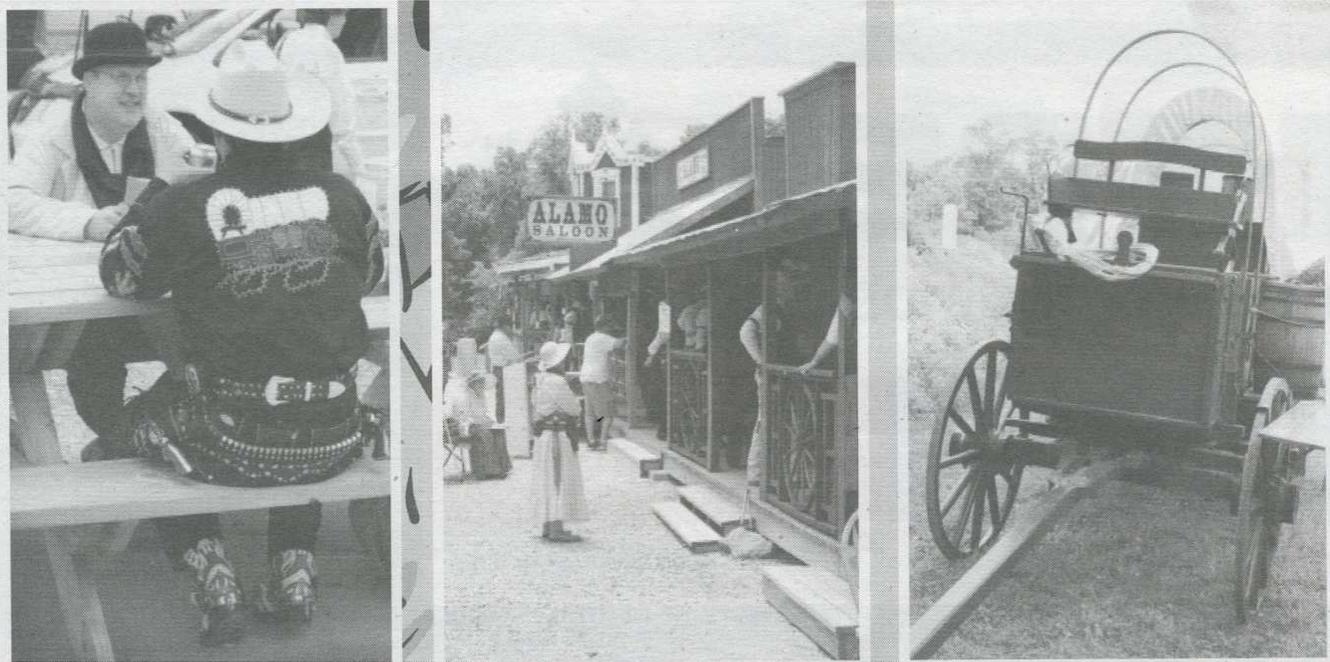
They pause for a group prayer, and then they pick up their guns again. The last stage is the Monticello Jail. Like all the stages, there's a story behind what's about to happen. This time, it's Kansas in the late fall, and the town marshal has left Croaker in charge. As he rests by the potbellied stove, he hears hollering and is supposed to go to the door to see two members of the Dalton gang wearing kerchiefs and heading for the bank.

Croaker's hands are cupped around his mouth, as if there's a chill in the air. "Robbers at the bank!" he shouts. "The Daltons! The Daltons!" For the next 27.87 seconds, Croaker is the infallible **John Ford** hero he has always idolized. His revolvers leap cleanly from his holsters. The shells from his rifle fly over his shoulder and hat. He's almost modest in the way he thumbs fresh shotgun cartridges into the gun. "Clean!" the spotters say in unison when his bullets are spent.

As the scores are tallied over the next hour, Croaker helps gather up the sick woman's things and her husband's guns and loads them in the back of their white pickup truck. In three days of shooting, Croaker has spent 318.36 seconds on the trigger, plus five seconds added for each misfire. He comes in second behind a white-haired man, **Doc Hurd**, who logged 257.88 seconds.

"I don't mind. I wish I could've gotten out of my own way more," Croaker says, a toothpick jutting from the side of his mouth. He nods toward the white truck loaded up with the old man's guns. "I'll say this: How many other sports can you leave behind \$50,000 worth of stuff and the keys to your truck and know you'll get it all back?"

OTHER PICTURES THAT APPEARED IN THE ARTICLE



Clockwise from left: Jade Star (Maci Fry) says she would have crossed gender boundaries in the Old West; Croaker (Dennis Ryan) was last year's Prince of Pistoleers; Paolo Slick (Jerry Elliott) is president of the Powder Creek Cowboys; a shooter takes aim.