

A Brief History of Organized Shooting Sports in Lethbridge

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Shooting sports in Lethbridge include a variety of activities ranging from rifle and handgun shooting to trap and skeet shooting, along with various archery competitions. The existence of shooting sports in Lethbridge can be traced back to the March 8 1886 formation of the Lethbridge Rifle Association, Lethbridge's first sport club.

Prominent community leader **Sir Alexander T. Galt** lent his considerable prestige to this organization when he was elected the club's first patron. Galt's son E.T. Galt became the first president. It is not surprising that a rifle shooting club would be the first sport organized in Lethbridge given the federal government's promotion of shooting throughout the new country as a means to affordably train citizen soldiers following the post-Confederation departure of the British garrisons.

The first shooting contest took place in Lethbridge on May 3, 1886 between teams representing the married and single members of the rifle club. Members of the club who hunted were also concerned with game laws along with competitive shooting. The rifle club held a variety of competitions including an annual Arbor Day match during the 1880s. In 1889 the Lethbridge Rifle Association competed in a telegraph tournament against clubs from Regina, Fort Saskatchewan, Calgary, Prince Albert, and Macleod. This competition held over several months provided clubs throughout the North-West Territories a way to compete without having to travel.

During the mid-1890s the primary shooting club in Lethbridge was the Alberta Gun Club. However, in September 1896 the Lethbridge Rifle Association emerged with North West Mounted Police Captain Deane as president, **Harry Bentley (2010 LSHOF, Special Inductee)** as Secretary and N.T. Macleod as Treasurer. It is not clear whether this was the reorganization of the Alberta Gun Club, or the formation of new organization. Whether one or two clubs existed at this time, evidence suggests that individuals such as Bentley held memberships in both the gun and rifle club through the 1890s.

In May 1900 the Alberta Gun Club accepted an invitation from the Fernie Gun Club to attend a shooting tournament to celebrate the 24 May holiday. Newspaper records of weekly shooting competitions suggest an active season for shooters in Lethbridge in 1900. The Lethbridge (Alberta) Gun Club served as the sport's local organizing body in the city through the early 1900s.

Trap shooting became a popular form of shooting at the turn of the twentieth century. The Alberta Gun Club held a trap shooting competition in April 1915 that was won by J. Livingston who averaged a success rate of 91%. The site used for trap shooting at this time became, by the 1950s, Eckstrom playground located roughly at the intersection of 5th Street and 7th Avenue South (close to present day Kiwanis Park) Trap shooting in Lethbridge continued after the First World War, and a news report from September 1922 described how K.A. West bested his fellow members at "the local scatter-gun artists...winding-up shoot and club championship." In 1938 the Lethbridge Skeet Club was organized and held its inaugural event in May of that year. This new form of moving-target shooting replaced the traditional trap shooting by the end of the 1930s.

In 1915 the Lethbridge Rifle Club held a competition for the prize of a silver dessert-spoon valued at \$2.50. This competition, open to members only, served as an inducement for payment of their annual membership dues. It is unclear when the city rifle club reorganized after World War One. The first evidence of a rifle club operating in Lethbridge is 1931 when several young shooters announced their intent to organize a city club. The Lethbridge Rifle Club seems to have been reestablished by the mid-1930s as it continued to send competitors to national competitions, including Fred Watson who in 1936 won "a silver spoon top-flight prize at the Dominion marksmen .22 sporting rifle competition in which he registered a perfect score." Therefore, at the outset of the Second World War Lethbridge gun enthusiasts enjoyed both rifle and skeet shooting competition.

The sport of archery did not appear in Lethbridge until after the Second World War. The Lethbridge YMCA attempted to form an archery club in 1940, although this undertaking did not last through the war. By the 1950s, athletes from Lethbridge competed in a variety of archery competitions and an archery club organized the sport in the city by at least 1959. In April 1952, as part of the city's 'Recreation Week', an archery competition was held in the city ice centre. In 1957 Mike Popson won in two Alberta Archery championship events, and **Marie Popson (1985 LSHOF Athlete Inductee)** topped the competition at the 1962 Canadian Archery Championships

in the Ladies Freestyle event. By the mid-1960s, the Lethbridge Archery Club had become well established providing its members with year-round indoor and outdoor training and competition. From the early 1970s, the sport of archery has continued to flourish represented by the Lethbridge Bowbenders Archery Club. **Jude and Dennis Hooey (both 2007 LSHOF Athlete Inductees)** are among the more prominent athletes and coaches of more recent history.

It did not take long for rifle shooting in Lethbridge to reorganize after the end of the Second World War. By 1951, the Lethbridge Gun Club had been operating for two years at a site just east of the Lethbridge Flying Club (with whom the club was affiliated). In June 1951, the gun club organized a regional skeet shooting competition for the Frank Pilling Trophy. This competition honoured Pilling, a “trap and skeet shooting ace”, for his work in reestablish the sport following the war. In 1958 **Mr. J Allan Jarvie** donated land to the Lethbridge Fish and Game Association for a range that, by 1964, held organized trap shoots each Sunday. At this time, a membership in the organization could be purchased for \$2. By the late 1960s the Lethbridge Trap Club continued to hold competitions at the Lethbridge Fish and Game Association’s range, the same range where the Lethbridge Rifle Club held their competitions. Shooting sports continued to grow in popularity particularly with a permanent home at the Fish and Wildlife Range.

In 1985, following the city’s re-zoning of the river valley, the Lethbridge Fish and Game Range relocated to its present site in Peenaquim Park. The following year, the city began constructing berms at the new facility to accommodate separate ranges including: a handgun, small bore and silhouette range; big bore range; black powder range; skeet and trap range; and an archery range. **Frank Leffingwell (1986 LSHOF, Builder Inductee)**, a prominent marksman in Lethbridge, served as the first Range Chair, assisted by his wife **Evelyn (1987 LSHOF Athlete Inductee)**. Well-known local Marksmen, **Stan Wills Jr. (1991 LSHOF Athlete Inductee)** and **Ralph Oler (1996 LSHOF Athlete Inductee)** used the range to hone skills ahead of their many high-level competitions. The new range officially opened in December 1989. One of the primary users of the new range is the Chinook Country Shooters Club, formed in 1988 to oversee and promote firearm safety and training and shooting sports in Lethbridge.

The Fort Whoop-Up Black Powder Club was first formed in 1966 by a few dedicated Black Powder shooters and registered with the Societies Act of Alberta in 1972. The club started with just eight members, but now include over 80 members with many second and third generation shooters. They gather monthly to compete in a variety of events including pistol, rifle, shotgun, primitive bow and cannon, long range and silhouette shooting as well as tomahawk and knife throwing. A yearly rendezvous sees participants coming from many provinces and some American states to compete in a variety of events in Lethbridge. Local members still travel far and wide to participate in other clubs’ competitions as well. The local club has hosted provincial and western Canada competitions and the Lethbridge club is well known and respected for hosting these events.

In 1993, the province approved the inclusion of an Air Gun Event in the 1996 Alberta Winter Games to be hosted by the City of Lethbridge. There was much community support to assist the Local Organizing Committee to host a successful Target Shooting event. **Kurt Berndtsson (2014 LSHOF Inductee)** and **Stan Wills (1991 LSHOF Inductee)** volunteered to be Zone 1 coaches, the Hubertus Shooting Group of the German Canadian Club granted the use of their air gun range for team training, Peter Gerling of the Alberta Smallbore Rifle Association provided Technical Official clinics in Lethbridge for local parents. As such, the community legacy included trained technical officials, a training venue and coaching.

Gold medals for both rifle and pistol teams were won by southern Alberta, Zone 1. Following the 1996 Games interest in the air gun sport was very high resulting in **Bev McKillop** creating the LA HotShots Junior Air Gun Club.

Several LA Hotshots shooters have had success over the years. Under coach **Gerrald Mathison, Marina McKillop** won the Shooting Federation of Canada National Champion and attended the 1999 Canada Winter Games. Under coach **Susan Eymann, Michael Erickson** and **Brandon Hardy** made up the two-member Men’s Rifle Alberta Team for the 2015 Canada Winter Games in Prince George with Hardy winning bronze and setting a National Record Qualification Score and Michael Erickson went on to make the Junior National Team in 2016 and 2017. In 2017 **Susan Eymann** joined the World Shooting Para Sport National Team to a Grand

Prix in Poland as Team Leader. **Stan Wills** continues to dominate on the national podium after decades of competing at an elite level.