So, I Ain’t the Sundance Kid

As Robert Redford plays him in that great 70’s movie, “Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid”, the Sundance Kid is the fastest gun in the West, and the best shot. Never misses. He was awesome. In the movie, Redford/Sundance shoots the belt buckle off the bad guy’s gun belt without harming a hair, or a navel, on him. Just jerks that pistol out of his holster and fires, without aiming. Fanning the hammer of his Colt .45, Sundance shoots a silver dollar out of the air, and hits it five more times before it hits the ground. Makes it look easy.

I grew up watching all the old cowboy movie stars: Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Lash LaRue, Tim McCoy, The Lone Ranger. Any one of them was every bit as good a shot as Sundance. All those guys got their man with one shot, without aiming, generally while astride a galloping horse. And Gene, Roy, Lash, Tim - always shot the gun out of the bad guy’s hand. They almost never drew blood with a bullet. Lash was pretty good with a bullwhip too.

All of them had pretty fancy rigs, wide leather gun-belts, fancy-tooled holsters. And Colt .45 pistols. Roy Rogers had a set of gold .45’s. The Lone Ranger used silver bullets for his two silver Colts with ivory handles. Old Gene carried just a simple gunmetal blue one with wooden handles.

I wanted one of those “real” Cowboy guns from the time I was 8 years old. One Christmas, I was probably 10, I prayed for a Colt Cowboy .45 - a realistic looking plastic toy out of the Sears catalog. A black one with white plastic handles and a longhorn steer molded on the handle. I prayed hard for that plastic pistol.

Christmas morning came. Just shirts, socks and underwear. I was mad at God for weeks.

I finally got my real Cowboy .45 two years ago. I saw the one I wanted standing in line at the grocery store in a magazine called, “Cowboy Shooting.”

Have you noticed the sheer number of magazines available these days? Pick a subject, and there’s a magazine devoted to it. Can’t find a magazine on your hobby of collecting toenail clippings? You’re not looking hard enough. Or, better yet, start one! Charge $8.95 a copy. Use a lot of pictures, and start looking for a place in the Hamptons. You’re on your way to making a million bucks. People these days will buy a magazine about anything. Just spend 20 minutes in the magazine area of Borders, or on the checkout line at the grocery. I added “Cowboy Shooting” to my cart that day.

I got a good deal from a friend who knew a gun dealer. The Cowboy .45 cost me $179.85 over the trade allowance on the old single shot shotgun I’d bought at a garage sale. And because you couldn’t very well carry your Cowboy .45 in your pocket, I sent off for a
gun belt and holster advertised in “Cowboy Shooting.” The ad said it was identical to the one John Wayne wore in all his movies.


On Saturday, I went to a gun store on the north side of Indianapolis and bought a box of .45 caliber bullets. The box of 24 cost me almost $30.00. More than one dollar for each stinking bullet. That got my attention. Hell, no wonder those old time cowboys got their man with one shot! An extended gunfight would have forced a gunslinger into bankruptcy.

Soon, my gunfighter rig had arrived. Big wide belt. Cartridge loops for those one dollar bullets. A tooled leather holster. I strapped that rig on, stuck my cowboy pistol in the holster, and walked over to the full-length mirror in our bedroom. Man, did I look the part.

Look out, Liberty Valance, Deadeye Ed’s hit town. Hell, Eastwood couldn’t look any more cool or deadly.

I was a formidable, armed and dangerous gunfighter. Except for the white tee shirt. And the checkered Bermudas. And the dock shoes with no socks.

I tried a quick draw, crouched down, stared squarely in the eye of my mirror image, and whipped out my deadly .45. Tried to anyway. The holster was so stiff, the gun wouldn’t come out; All I managed was to pull the pistol up to about chest level, the gun still in the holster, the belt riding ridiculously up my tee shirt.

This fast draw stuff would take some practice.

I’d have a pair of jeans on next time I strapped on the rig.

Couple of weeks later, we went back to our West Virginia farm. One hundred acres of pasture and woods. Lots of groundhogs, raccoons, deer, bear. And it’s legal to carry a handgun on your own property. I resolved never to go out without strapping on my gunfighter rig.

My wife had her own thoughts. “Why are you putting that stupid gun on to go out and trim the hedge? Think a tribe of Indians is going to ride up out of Seebert? If the neighbors drive in and see you with that thing, they’re going to think you need therapy.”

She obviously failed to realize the awesome power of the Colt .45, or the True Grit of us Cowboy Shooting devotees.
The next evening, when I walked out to the barn, I spotted the raccoon. A big raccoon, sitting on a fencepost, his back to me, grooming himself. And there I was, without my cowboy gun. Living proof I should have never listened to my wife’s protests.

I carefully backed away, so as not to scare the raccoon. These stupid coons were destructive, digging under the barn, getting into the garbage. Some may even be rabid. I was doing West Virginia a favor by ridding the farm of these pests. I headed for the house, and my cowboy gun. It was mine. It would be my first kill with my .45.

I strapped on my rig, and picked up 3 cartridges that had fallen out of the box. I hadn’t filled the loops on my gun belt with bullets yet. Just picked up the three loose ones. Besides, I was a Shootist. I was only going to need one. Just like Roy and Gene. One shot. No sense wasting ammo.

As I walked back to the barn, I loaded the 3 cartridges into the cylinder of the gun. I thought to myself, this was just how Roy and Hopalong loaded their guns. I was living the Legend!

I eased around the barn, and there he was. That big, stupid raccoon was still grooming himself. He had no idea I was anywhere on the planet.

I raised my cowboy gun, cocked the hammer, took a John Wayne stance, and pulled the trigger. The explosion was deafening. A foot of flame roared out of the muzzle, and that raccoon leaped straight up in the air. Good Lord! Did I miss him? How the hell did that happen?

Yep. Missed him. That raccoon came down on the ground, landing on his feet, and looked around frantically to find the source of that noise.

I had 2 shots left. The raccoon was crouched in the high grass, staring at me. This time, I assumed the two-handed Clint Eastwood stance, aimed carefully, and fired. BOOM! The pistol jumped in my hand. My eyes closed inadvertently. I opened them quickly, fully expecting to see the raccoon lying dead in the grass. No such luck. That stupid coon was still crouched in the grass, looking at me.

One shot left. I couldn’t miss this time. There was no way I could walk back to the house empty handed, the smoking gun in my hand. Roy and Gene would be shaking their heads in disgust.

I crouched down. Held the gun as steadily as I could and aimed at the widest part of the coon I could see. Surely I’d hit something.

You guessed it. Missed again. That coon is probably still laughing his striped ass off.

My Old Man was an officer in the Federal Prison Service. He had to qualify at least twice each year on the range with handguns, rifles, and machine guns. As I walked back to the
farmhouse, I remembered his words, as he watched TV. “Look at Roy, shooting that gun out of that guy's hand! That's impossible! Roy would have a better chance actually hitting the guy if he threw his gun at the bad guy!”

Maybe I’ll try that next time.