

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women's History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible. (Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor: Patti See

Dept: ASC and WMNS

Course Number and Name: WMNS 210: Culture of the Third Wave

Semester completed: Summer, 2004

Title of Nominated Work: "Where are the Damsels in Distress? Guns and Women"

CATEGORY: **Sampson:**
 Undergraduate Research Paper ~~___~~ See ___
 Undergraduate Project X Olson ___
 Graduate ___ Kessler ___
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STUDENT INFORMATION:

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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.



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February 10, 2005

To: Women's History Month Awards Committee

From: Patti See

RE: Nomination of Katie Atherton's Undergraduate Research paper

I am pleased to nominate Katie Atherton's paper "Where are the Damsels in Distress? Guns and Women" in which she explores issues and stereotypes surrounding women's firearm use.

For an assignment in my summer course WMNS 210: Culture of the Third Wave, she challenged herself by shooting a gun and researching women and gun-use. She does a fine job of incorporating research and her own experiences into a well-written paper.

Excellence. Our measure, our motto, our goal.

Academic Skills Center • phone: (715) 836-5844 • fax: (715) 836-3418
web: www.uwec.edu/admin/ASC/ASChome/htm

Undergraduate Research Category

**Where are the Damsels in Distress?
Guns and Women**

Katie Atherton / Senior, chemistry

WMNS 210: Culture of the Third Wave

Patti See, Instructor

Women and guns....what's the big deal anyway? Why is it so taboo for a woman to own and/or operate a gun? Racking my brain as of late, I cannot think of one female I know who owns a gun for either self-defense or hunting purposes. I do not even know any women who have ever merely shot a gun other than a super-soaker or one of their older brother's Nerf guns. Personally, I do not know of any girls who even hunt. Many of my friends' fathers and brothers hunt and enjoy owning guns; however, the girls in their families are never a part of the gun wielding experience. Is this simply a manifestation of patriarchal stereotypes? Are men supposed to band together and protect the meek womenfolk? Is it so preposterous for a girl to shoot a gun? Is it fathomable for a girl to want her own firearm? What about owning more than one?

I've never actually wanted to shoot a gun. I have no interest in hunting simply because I can't stand to witness something die and know that I was responsible for it. A bird flew into my windshield once when I was driving, and I almost had to pull over because I was crying so much. Another time I only thought that I ran over a chipmunk. After the tears stopped and I spent some quality time praying to the porcelain gods, I calmed down, but to this day, I cringe every time I drive over the spot of the potential chipmunk murder. So my complete distaste for guns stems only from my personal issues with a sensitive stomach and sometimes overwhelming empathy – not from the belief that guns are inherently evil. Many of our friends and family hunt and own guns; my own grandpa is even a member of the NRA. I've always been a firm believer in the fact that guns don't kill people – people kill people, as cliché as that may sound. So even though I'm not in the crowd that believes in extreme gun control, when I stumbled into my liberating act I was more than a little uncomfortable with the idea of it.

I went to visit my friend Troy in his tiny hometown one weekend. We spent most of the day in his boat, walking around town and riding on his four-wheeler. However, during a lull of activity in the late afternoon, Troy asked me if I'd ever shot trap. "What's a trap?" was my innocent reply. He then proceeded to explain to me about shooting the clay "pigeons" that get propelled through the air out of some sort of contraption. Apparently it's a common and popular sport, but little did I know. After hearing his explanation, I confessed that I'd never in fact shot a gun before. His shock over this fact was only matched by my own disbelief that even his eight-year-old little sister shot guns all the time. He told me that I just *had* to try shooting one, and my immediate response was a firm, "no." But after watching him, his little brother, *and* his little sister shoot, and after some intense coaxing on his part, I finally conceded and decided to try.

I ended up shooting two different guns that day. One was a rifle that I used to shoot at a soda can and the other was a shotgun that I used to try shooting trap. I didn't hit any of the clay pigeons, but I did hit the can. The gun in my hands was scary – I was afraid of the kick and the feel of pulling the trigger. Oddly enough, the earplugs I wore were strangely frightening for me too. I felt somehow less complete than normal, as if the dulling of one of my senses was going to hinder my ability to understand what was going on and have success in my shooting. After shooting the gun a few times, I became less afraid of the kick and more just uneasy about the weapon in my hands. I didn't shoot for very long, and I politely declined when I was asked whether I wanted to try again later.

Many of the women I've read about who discuss owning/shooting guns describe their first experience as empowering and liberating. They seem to get a rush of adrenaline from the sheer power of the weapon. Not only that, there seems to be some

sort of newfound confidence and stimulation not from the shot itself, but from knowing that they are socially rebelling...and enjoying it. But during this experience which should have (from what I've been reading) been liberating and thrilling, I look back and realize that I felt nothing of the sort. Is there something wrong with me? Have I just accepted the stereotype that girls and guns do not belong together? Rather than being excited by the new experience, I felt scared and uncomfortable with the gun in my grasp. Perhaps it's that I've grown up in an era of the Million Mom March agenda, even if the actual march had not yet materialized. It was a time when even our former first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton announced that she "would ban handguns outright if she had her way" (Thompson, 1). Although these seemingly prevailing national sentiments were not enough to penetrate my conservative familial views on the issues of gun control, it still instilled in most people my age that guns are dangerous, accidents happen with guns, people die. Now, this may be extreme, but aren't many social movements based purely on extremes?

But guns seemed such an everyday part of Troy's life – even for his mother and sister. Was that "normal," or was I "normal"? Perhaps there's an entire culture of women shooting guns that I just never knew about – other than female police officers and the girls on crime-fighting TV shows – which is all fake of course....or is it? I've always considered myself to be a fairly open-minded, non-judgmental person, however, this entire gun shooting experience made me realize that I've never personally questioned my intrinsic stigma that girls and guns just do not belong together. And was I ever wrong.

Approximately 11 to 17 million women now own guns and forty percent of American households contain a firearm. The burst in divorce rates and subsequent single

parent homes has been partially responsible for the increase in female gun ownership. The National Rifle Association reported a record 170,000 female members in 2003 – based partly in fact, to the creation of Women On Target, a program aimed at arming women and training them to properly use firearms for self-defense. More than ten thousand women are “Second Amendment Sisters” and belong to an online pro-gun group which was created to counter the Million Mom March. There are magazines and publications these days that are targeted specifically for women who own and use guns such as *Woman’s Outlook*, a monthly magazine by the NRA and *Women & Guns*, a periodical with about eighteen thousand readers (Kelly, 20). Women with guns are everywhere; you just have to open your eyes.

As part of my endeavor to discover the truth about girls and guns, I decided to stop by a local Gander Mountain to see what I could learn. Marching straight back to the gun counter, I was met by the quizzical stares of the three men behind the counter. I searched the area for any pamphlets on hunting or guns that catered to women, but I found nothing. Furthermore, there wasn’t a single picture anywhere that portrayed a woman enjoying hunting or gun ownership. Finally, two out of the three clerks came over, and we began chatting. At first, I simply asked them to tell me what they knew about women and guns – a vague question which I thought would be open-ended enough for a starting point, but it wasn’t. They stammered uncomfortably until I started asking some more pointed questions. I learned that only an estimated one to two percent of gun sales at that particular location are made to women, although many of these purchases are intended as gifts for men. So then I asked what kind of gun a woman would typically purchase, i.e. are there specific guns made for women that are perhaps better suited to fit

smaller hands and present less kick? The Gander Mountain employees told me that there were no such guns available, and that women should just buy guns intended for children – children being typically pre-teen boys of course. They were wrong.

The American Derringer Corporation produces a unique gun that fires only two cartridges from twin barrels. Since it is so light and small it has often been marketed as a “lady’s gun.” Coincidentally enough, up until recently, it was the only American gun manufacturing firm run by a woman, Elizabeth Saunders, whose husband founded the company in 1980 (Kelly, 212). In 1989, the first firearms leader to market their product to women was Smith & Wesson, another prominent gun retailer (Glick, 1). They have an entire section of their revolvers and pistols, aptly named “LadySmith,” devoted to women. No, they aren’t pink “Barbie guns.” The LadySmith guns are “full-service” and offer plenty of features that make them desirable to either men *or* women even though they’re marketed solely to females (Hidalgo, 1). Several other companies have targeted women since then, such as Beretta USA, Davis Industries and Lorcin Engineering although Smith & Wesson remain the leaders of the feminine gun industry (Glick, 1). A survey of six hundred American gun dealers all reported that the number of women who were purchasing firearms has increased 17 to 19 percent. The majority of women when purchasing a gun, reportedly chose a .38 special (53%), because it is smaller weapon that is often less rough on smaller female hands due to its lighter weight (Kelly, 29).

Self-defense is the predominant reason for a woman to buy a gun, according to most surveys. But many people believe that this is a result of marketing techniques used by the gun industry to combat slumping sales. According to the National Victim Center, “The gun industry’s pitch to women is simple: you’re a woman; some stranger’s going to

try and rape you; you'd better buy a handgun" (VPC1, 1). When in fact, most of the techniques used to market handguns to women are centered on myths pertaining to violence against women (Glick, 3). Beginning with issue of rape, it is highly unlikely that a woman will be raped by a stranger – in truth, women are most likely to be victimized by people they know, and an overwhelming 75% occur in such a fashion.

And sadly, as the National Victim Center points out,

Rape in America is a tragedy of youth, with the majority of cases occurring during childhood and adolescence. More than six out of every 10 rapes occur to children and adolescents under the age of 18. According to the Gun Control Act of 1968, persons must be at least 18 years of age to purchase a long gun and 21 years of age to buy a handgun from a licensed dealer. (VPC1, 1)

Nobody argues that rape is a not a serious problem facing our nation, because it is.

However, the argument that every woman is going to be raped by a stranger just doesn't hold water. It does not mean that right-to-carry laws have not spared lives thus far though. Studies have shown that by adopting shall-issue laws (those that give citizens with clean criminal records the right to carry concealed weapons), states reduced rapes by five percent (Lott, 1).

Another myth to be avoided when considering firearms is that a woman will be invincible from homicide if she is carrying a handgun. As with rape, most women are well acquainted with their murderers. The FBI reported that in 1992, for example, less than ten percent of female victims were killed by strangers (Glick, 3). In that same year, for every time a female used a gun to justifiably kill a stranger in self defense, 239 other women were killed in handgun homicides. Sadly, over the past twenty years, only about two percent of homicides committed with firearms in the United States were deemed justifiable self-defense homicides by citizens (VPC2, 2). Again for 1992, 37 out of 50

states reported zero cases of justifiable homicides by women in the case of self-defense (Glick, 4). For the sake of making a point, more people are struck by lightning every year than use handguns to kill in self-defense (VPC2, 2). Disturbingly, a study in 1997 showed that having one or more guns in a household made a woman 3.4 times more likely to be the victim of a homicide. In addition, a woman with one or more guns in the house is 7.2 times more likely to be the victim of homicide by a spouse, relative or intimate acquaintance (Bailey, 777-782).

One simple consequence of shall-issue laws however, is that the rate of violent crimes falls significantly. To a criminal, the knowledge alone that any person could be carrying a concealed weapon is oftentimes enough of a deterrent to keep a potential crime from happening. The ironic factor is that people in large cities tend to favor and push for strict gun-control laws because these areas have the highest crime rates, yet it is right within these busy cities that right-to-carry laws have produced the greatest drop in violent crimes (Lott, 1). At present, thirty-seven states give their citizens the right to carry a concealed weapon, and the issue is being discussed in Wisconsin (Kelly, 224).

One of the largest problems concerning gun laws today is that they are so inconsistent. They vary so drastically from one place to another that things legal in one county may be illegal in the next. Can citizens really be expected to uphold each law for a particular city when moving from one place to another? For example, some towns have banned guns completely, while other towns have made it illegal for the head of a household NOT to own a firearm (Kelly, 25). That is why the absolute removal of handguns is not a solution to the problem of violent crime. As long as there are people,

there will be guns – and treating them as a blight in society will only serve to exacerbate the problem of homicide, rape, theft, etc.

Women have been carrying guns for more than a hundred years. Eleanor Roosevelt carried a handgun when she moved in to the White House. So did Nancy Reagan – a pearl handled revolver to be more exact (Kelly, 232). These days, women are empowering themselves economically, sexually and politically – and the movement to pass right-to-carry laws is part of the same process (Kelly, 247). Our society is one of violence, which creates an obligation to protect ourselves and our loved ones. Women have to realize this and put it into practice (Thompson, 2).

In this era of 3rd wave feminism, you can be pro-gun and still be a feminist. All over the country there are dozens of groups of women that support the right to arm oneself if one chooses. Grabbing guns out of the hands of people is taking a constitutional right away from American citizens. And no, these groups of women (and sometimes men) who support the 2nd amendment are not all branches of the NRA. In fact Women Against Gun Control, or WAGC, maintains that the femininity of its members is the reason for all the attention and support they receive. The group's members range from stay-at-home moms to doctors to police officers (Thompson, 2).

Many women who own guns will never carry them out in public – using them for hunting and other recreational purposes. Some women will win Olympic medals for sharp-shooting, and many little girls have the ability to participate in the 4-H shooting program – a step forward on winning the war on gender inequality. On the other hand, apart from initially learning how to shoot, some women's guns will never see the light of day again. Concealed in night-table drawers or at the bottom of purses, they offer a sort

of security blanket for many women. Because of obvious physiological differences in size and strength, many women will always be at a disadvantage when it comes to self-defense – regardless of how strong, angry, or trained in combat she may be. Police and self-defense experts agree that when faced with a life threatening confrontation, a firearm is the only weapon that truly levels the playing field between men and women (Kelly, 11). So if even in rare situations, owning or carrying a gun can save someone's life, how can it be seen as disadvantageous to our society? Accidents with guns happen, true, but then the focus should be on improved weapons education and safety. Studies prove that just not knowing whether a lone woman walking down a dark street could be packing heat may just be enough to prevent another rape or murder statistic. And saving even just one life is good enough for me....after all....who's to say it hasn't already saved mine?

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