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Will history know us as the Bullet Hole People?

JEAN SHEPHERD

• "Damned if I know *why* they do it. They just do it."

"Have you ever thought about it?" I asked. "I mean, what goes through their minds, and what kind of guys do it?"

"Huh. If you've been in this game as long as I have and seen the stuff I've seen, you don't think about things like that." The Indiana state trooper carefully lowered his doughnut into the coffee and let it hang there for just the right amount of time before it started to crumble into the cup.

"Yeah, I guess that's so," I mumbled as a blast of cold air whistled through the diner. Four truck drivers wearing mackinaws and leather jackets came in out of the cold, blowing the frost before them.

"Yep," the cop went on, "I seen the road gang put one up at an S curve one day. I went in a gas station for a Coke, and when I come out five minutes later she was already riddled. They must get wind when we're putting up a new one or something."

"No kidding. Did you hear 'em shoot?" I asked. "I mean, it must have made some kind of racket."

"That's what gets me." The officer tilted his hat back so he could see the ceiling better. "I never actually seen 'em do it. Sometimes I think it ain't real people do it."

"Great Scott!" I barked. "You mean maybe it's gnomes or elves or something?"

The trooper laughed. "Hell, one time my partner Homer come up with this idea: He figured they come from the factory already punched out with all them holes. That Homer sure is a card. You oughta hear him talking on the radio back to headquarters. One time he played *The Wabash Cannonball* on his harmonica into the radio, then asked them at headquarters if they had any requests. So you sure can't believe in nothing he says."

"Jeez, did they request anything?" I could picture Homer blowing away into his Hohner for the entertainment of the sergeant on the radio and whoever else might tune in.

"You're damn right they did. They told him what he could do with that mouth organ and he better do it quick or they'd stick him back on paperwork so long there'd be paper clips coming out of his ears."

"I'll bet that shut him up."

"Are you kidding? Not Homer. Well, I'll be seeing you, buddy. And you better get that safety sticker renewed. I notice she runs out in a week." The trooper pulled on his ele-

gant leather gloves and—after a long, cool glance at the truck drivers, who fell into an uneasy silence—left the diner.

So I still had no answer to one of the roadside mysteries that has always nagged at the edges of my consciousness. Just who is it who shoots all those holes through road signs? And even more sinister is the question: Why? I have traveled pretty much around the world and have yet to see road signs anywhere else covered with mysterious gunshot wounds like you do back here in the old U.S. of A. Is it because guns are available to almost anyone who can make it down to the local Sears Roebuck? I doubt it. I have been in countries where even toothless grannies tote Lugers, yet I have never seen a perforated road sign anywhere else but here (with one curious exception, which I shall go into some other day—but that was a very local phenomenon and one with ideological overtones).

Our own road-sign potting seems to have no political or philosophical undercurrents, just an uncontrolled desire to ventilate

MARVIN MATTELSON



signs. How is it done? Does one roar past in the dark and blast away in the night at a yellow, inoffensive piece of sheetmetal marked DANGEROUS CURVE AHEAD? Or does one creep up on it through the undergrowth, dressed in camouflage clothing?

I've even seen signs—one in particular in West Virginia—that had the look of being on the receiving end of a sustained blast of machine-gun fire. It was nicely hemstitched from top to bottom in a fairly tight pattern that I instantly recognized from my recruit days when I had to qualify on the Thompson. My memory of firing one of these lethal

(CONTINUED)

babies is one of barely controlled terror, since it is a mean bugger that leaps and bucks and gives you the feeling that it's going to turn on you any second. It is not a weapon found in your average glove compartment, and a submachine gun is rarely used to fill the pot with small game. Whoever did the dirty work in West Virginia knew what he was doing, and it was done at close range. It was an expensive caper, too, since one of these tommy guns uses up \$10 worth of ammunition quicker than the time it takes to dive into a culvert and start praying.

Then there was the one that I spotted along a state road in New Hampshire that I swear had been hit by a medium-caliber armor-piercing shell. Now that must have taken a little planning as well as a fair amount of exotic equipment. My first thought when I saw that example of road-sign blasting was that MGM must have shot a war picture in the vicinity, or some local sportsman using a bazooka on the deer population had fired off a round just to clear the sights.

Judging from the countless holes I've seen around the country, a ballistics expert could really have a field day. The calibers range from #6 birdshot all the way up through countless grades to what appeared to be a 16-inch explosive shell of the kind fired by the *Bismarck*.

I believe it is now time to recognize this very native and exciting American art form. ABC's *Wide World of Sports* could do worse than to have a full-color segment narrated by Howard Cosell devoted to the mysterious heroes who so selflessly and with little or no recognition carry on this sport. Who does it? Are they angry at road signs? I mean, you know, they're always nagging you to PROCEED WITH CAUTION, TRUCKS USE LOW GEAR, BRIDGE MAY BE SLIPPERY, SCHOOL CHILDREN CROSSING, 25-MPH ZONE, SPEED CHECKED BY RADAR. Forever nattering, crying doom, threatening punishment. Is that why they are foully shot in the night?

For example, would someone blast away at a big yellow-and-black octagonal sign that reads STRAIGHT STRETCH AHEAD—FLOOR IT! or PASS ALL YOU WANT ON THIS HILL—WHAT THE HELL YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE or WELCOME TO LOUT, MINNESOTA—SPEED LIMIT 145 MPH or FLAG MAN AHEAD SCARE HIM GOOD. I doubt it, since I believe nowhere on earth is there a people so deeply opposed to authority of all kinds and so secretly devoted to personal anarchy as my fellow Americans. Let's face it, those road signs are continually talking to us in the stern tones of some cosmic parent telling us we can't go out until we put our rubbers on or we won't have dessert unless we eat all our carrots. There must be millions of perpetual mental adolescents among us who keep hearing voices in their head saying over and over: *Ain't nobody gonna tell me what to do. Which, naturally, goes along with: Ain't nobody gonna push me around.*

Do these sign-shooters sit around after the hunt and tell tall tales of great signs that got away, and ones that were bagged under great difficulties? I can almost hear the scenario now:

CLEM: You fellers won't believe what me and Art done last night.

FRIEND [wearing red corduroy hunting cap with green earflaps]: Go ahead, Clem, you might as well tell us. Wouldn't do us no good to say we don't want to hear it. You'd tell us anyway.

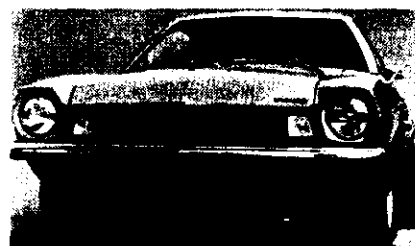
CLEM [taking a deep drag on his White Owl Imperial]: Me and Art was driving along Route One last night in his pickup. Art had her doing 85 easy, in the rain, when all of a sudden this DANGER RAILROAD CROSSING AHEAD comes up sudden-like on my side. Come right out of the trees. I squeezed off a full clip with my Winchester thirty-ought-six on the fly, while Art was skidding. Damn near put her in that ditch past the Grange hall. And I put as nice and tight a pattern right inside the "D" for "Danger"—you coulda covered all of them holes with a Kennedy half-dollar. And I finished off the job by reloading and knocked three insulators off them high-tension poles on the way back. Now I call that shooting!

FRIEND: And I call that bullcrap. I been shooting signs all of my life and I ain't never seen nobody empty a clip in one sign going eight-five in the rain.

Despite years
of investigation, I've
never heard
anyone admit that he
shot a sign—or
even that he saw *someone*
else do it.

CLEM: If you don't believe me, you can ask Art. He damn near dropped his teeth when he seed what I done.

On the other hand, are sign murderers solitary men who strike out of their own mysterious needs and never mention the deed to anyone else? That makes sense, since in all the years I have investigated this phenomenon I have never heard anyone admit that he shot a sign—or even that he saw *someone else* do it. The wounded road signs could very well be the true folk graffiti of our age. Ten thousand years from now, archaeologists will puzzle over those mysterious holes found by the countless millions in the surviving road signs of our times. We may even become known to future generations as the Bullet Hole People as other tribes are named the Flint Arrowhead People or the Bronze Ax People. And the historic beauty of it is, it will be as mysterious to them as it is to us.



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