

Who Was Benard “Bernie” Petersen?

Written by Harvey Hughett, Lewiston Pistol Club member, Nov. 2018
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There could be few tributes that Bernard “Bernie” Wesley Petersen would appreciate more than having the Lewiston Pistol Club memorialize a shooting range in his memory. Few people could love firearms and shooting more than Bernie Petersen. Bernie was my treasured friend for many years and I’m pleased to share a few memories of this unique man before the last of us old guys pass on. Bernie should not be forgotten.

Few people experienced a “normal” first meeting with Bernie. His voice was a rich base and his smile was not only constant but genuine and friendly. Often, on meeting someone new, he would make the first move and introduce himself as “Howdy. How are you doing, young man?” (or young lady), no matter their age. Bernie certainly was not shy and you could not help but take a liking to him right away.

Not long after moving to Moscow in 1977, I was walking by Bernie’s office in the University of Idaho Administration Building and he leaned out his door and asked, “Who are you?” I replied, “A guy who likes accurate 1911’s.” (I’d heard from Dr. Eugene Reed that Bernie was an avid shooter and possessed a wealth of firearms knowledge). We were friends from then on, swapping tales and shooting experiences during lunchtimes and breaks. He was a treasure trove of firearms knowledge. Many dozens of times, he invited me to shoot with him at the state road gravel pit by his home on Lenville Road. Visiting with him in his home was like entering a museum. This was in the days before a shooting range was built on his property. His treasured collection is long gone but his memory continues. If you like shooting, you’d have loved Bernie.

Bernie had deep roots; he was also a farmer with considerable acreage, his mother being descended from an area homesteader. His father was an aficionado of fine shotguns, preferably high end Ithaca trap guns. A chip off the old block, Bernie shot in many trap competitions. He once joked that his middle name, Wesley, was in honor of John Wesley Hardin, a folk hero and gunslinger but the fact that his father’s name was also Wesley may have had some influence too. Did I say that Bernie loved plays on words and was a constant font of funny jokes?

Other than his love of firearms, collector knives, antiques, sports cars (how do you say MG Midget?), big-engine 4-wheelers, reading, camping and fishing, his greatest love was his sweet wife and best friend, Jeannine. Bernie and Jeannine regularly packed boxes with handguns and pocket knives and rented tables at area gun shows. They also spent a lot of time with their two daughters (Debbie and Dawn), sons-in-laws and grandchildren. Gun shows were as much a social thing with Bernie as it was a clever way to buy new and interesting items for his extensive collection. The way that Jeannine smiled at Bernie while he was working to cut a deal on a trade revealed her pride in his trading ability. Bernie was an astute trader but he was kind as they come.

How good a trader was Bernie Petersen? Professor Reed once warned me that Bernie could trade a one-eyed goat for an Appaloosa stud horse and saddle and ask for some money to boot. And the

new goat owner would be pleased with the trade! That's a little exaggerated but not a lot. You get the idea.

Personally, when Bernie and I were in the heat of a potential trade, if I saw Jeannine smiling, I learned that I'd probably best back out of the trade. Over the years, we traded all sorts of items back and forth with some frequency. I once asked Bernie if he'd ever bought a bad firearm. His reply surprised me. He said, "Yes, twice! But, I sold them both...and YOU bought one of them!" Another time I asked him what type of guns he liked best and he looked up at the sky, thought for a moment, and replied, "I like them all, except for the two I just mentioned." Then he let go with his unique "Bernie laugh."

Of course, he was joking although he once did try to sell me a gun that had a "hex" placed on it by someone. When I asked him about this, he admitted that he "could never remove the curse from that dag-nabbed gun." On second thought, there's a really good chance that's one I got from him. It fired really great but, no matter where you aimed, most bullets missed the target. It was uncanny. I wonder who owns it now?

Bernie loved to joke, quote humorous sayings and, at the same time, freely share his ample knowledge of firearms. When asked a question about anything, he'd often look into space, act like he was thinking hard, and make a clever quip, shortly followed by a serious answer. Below are a few quips that I remember (Note: While these may at first seem deprecating in nature, all were stated in the context of a humorous situation with no malice intended. Bernie was always cheerful. I never saw him angry. If he were alive today, he'd be a center of attention at the Petersen Pistol range as well as a daily shooter). I'd love to see him shoot pistol competition. He'd quickly figure it out and I'd put my money on him.

Some of Bernie's more memorable sayings that I remember:

"That guy's crazier than a pet 'coon!"

"The only way that boy could be dumber would be to be bigger. I think he stepped in a pile of 'dumb' on his way over here to try and trade me a bolt-action shotgun that had peeling bumper chrome on it and a bulged barrel. And he was hoping to walk away with a .357 S&W Highway Patrolman!" (Note: That wasn't me...that time).

"That man struts around like a stiff-legged rooster with no knees."

"That reminds me of ...a "pointy-headed professor" or "a woman I used to know," or "the Spanish word for 'friend'".

"That's a good story to go with that gun you're trying to sell me. Did I ever tell you that I once owned a bird dog that was the '*step-brother*' to a national field trial champion?" (I'm still scratching my head over that one).

"I only have one nerve and you're about to get on it if you don't make me a serious offer on this like-new Raven Arms P-25 .25 ACP" (As always, said with a smile). Remember the Ravens?

After his stint of shooting competition trap and fine shotguns, Bernie had a heightened preference for shooting handguns. Often, when shooting at his gravel pit, he would challenge me; "I bet you 10 bucks that I can hit that Coke can before you can...and I'll give you a 5-second head start." As Bernie liked to say, I wasn't the sharpest crayon in the box but I knew enough to always avoid a shooting challenge with him. He had absolutely astounding luck when shooting any type of handgun.

He was a strong man and almost always shot handguns one-handed. When he took a shooting stance, I think I might have been able to do pull-ups on his arm. He would stand with his right foot in front of his left foot and arm fully outstretched. His arms and hands were large. I once tried to trade him a tiny 4" long North American Arms 22 LR revolver. He was interested but couldn't grasp it without risk of shooting himself. It's not a gun that can be shot with two fingers.

He shot frequently and seldom missed his targets. I've often wondered how many hundreds of pounds of his bullets are mixed in asphalt roads scattered around Latah County.

Once we were shooting at the gravel pit and a cock pheasant jumped up on a stump about 125 feet away. He said, "Shoot it, you dang Southerner!" I knew that I couldn't hit it with a Model 19 Smith but, just for fun, I quickly drew my sidearm and pulled the trigger in the general direction of the bird. I almost fell over when I saw the bird flop onto the ground. On closer inspection, we found that I'd accidentally hit it in the head! Total, total, absolute dumb luck! For sure, the luckiest shot of my lifetime. Recovering from this unbelievable shot, I expected Bernie to marvel at my prowess with the Combat Magnum and congratulate me. Nonchalantly, his only response was "You dang near missed him, didn't you?" Bernie always had a quick and clever response to any situation.

Once, he pulled me into his office at the University and said, "Harvey, I just heard that the professor woman in the corner office on 2nd floor (UI) has a bottle of hooch in her desk drawer and she's inviting people to drop by and take a drink. You'd better get down there because the bottle is almost empty! But, watch your step, she's crazier than a pet 'coon." Even though I'm a tee-totaler and I sensed a set-up, curiosity got to me and I ambled by her office. Bernie was right. She was about to slide out of her chair and I should have offered to be her designated driver but passed the opportunity on to one of her colleagues. Being a cautious man, Bernie avoided her too but not without a few quips such as, "PhD stands for **P**retty **H**ardy **D**rinker" and "Reminds me of..."

Another time, he was trying to close a deal on a black powder cannon that he was attempting to sell to me. It weighed about 95 or so pounds and shot a 1-1/8" round lead ball. Jeannine was away so we were shooting it off his front porch into a field quite a distance away. The cannon was one of two turned on a lathe by a neighbor farmer from the axle of a 1930's combine. We closed the deal after he lit the fuse on a "proof charge" with three lead balls and a double charge of Dupont FFg black powder. Shortly afterwards, a county sheriff came by and inquired about all the noise. Never caught off guard, Bernie replied, "This guy just bought this toy noise-maker and it went off." No 'obvious' laws were broken. I enjoyed that cannon for more than 20 years...and it certainly was no toy. To add to the excitement, when shooting stiff loads, the naval-pattern cannon often would try to flip over backwards if it hit an obstruction as it recoiled. Like his front door. No dull moments when Bernie was around.

He also was a collector of obsolete ammo. I was a part-time FFL dealer in antique ammo for more than 30 years and sold Bernie quite a bit of collectible ammo. Some of it was for old guns he owned and others were to display on shelves in his man cave. Examples of ammo he bought from me included such items as: 5mm Clement (he had the pistol), 5mm Velo-Dog, .14 Alton Jones, .25-21 Stevens, .276 Pederson, .300 Sherwood, .297-230 Morris, .32-40 Bullard, .38-40 Ballard, 7.65 Frommer, 9mm Flaubert, 12mm Canne Gun, 9mm Pin fire, .40-65 Sharps, .577 BPE, .25 Lip Fire, .42 Cup Fire, .32 Teat Fire, .44 Henry Center Fire (rare), .56 Spencer RF, .577 Snyder, .41 RF, Eley 2 gauge punt gun shotshell, .470 Nitro and others. Additionally, he was proud to display what was left of a .30-30 case that somehow had been fired in a .300 H&H or some such firearm. When I was finishing building a house in Moscow, he once traded me a new shower stall kit in exchange for a 600 Nitro Express cartridge. Interestingly, for every gun he owned, he had at least one cartridge and, for most, a full box (if not several boxes) including ammo for odd-caliber drillings (e.g., 6.5 x 70 R x 16 ga. x 16 ga.) and other no-longer-available ammo (e.g., .401 Herter, 5mm Remington RF Magnum, etc.). I'm old now so I sold all my stuff, except for some collector shotshells. If Bernie were still around, I suspect he'd trade me something for them but I no longer have a use for a one-eyed goat.

I don't know anything about collector knives but, apparently, his Case knife collection was extraordinary, including a rare and large original 1800s glass-top display case. He collected other things too but my eyes would glaze over when he started talking about railroad memorabilia and stuff that I didn't have a clue about. He was all about diversity.

I won't go into detail about his very interesting reloading experiments and will only say, "Dick Casull wasn't the first person to tinker with triplex powder charges."

Did Bernie ever meet the great outdoor writers Elmer Keith (Salmon, ID) and Jack O'Conner (Lewiston)? Yes. We both devoured everything they wrote. Most young shooters today don't have a clue who they were. However, they shot .44 Magnums (Keith innovation) and .270 Winchesters (Jack O'Conner was the lead preacher for this round).

Bernie wasn't the type of person to write linear equations on bathroom walls but when it came to "Kentucky windage," he was an absolute whiz (no pun intended). I once asked him how he could estimate windage so accurately and he said, "Just watch how much the weeds are swaying and use your brain" (as he pointed to his armpit).

The question may come up; Could Bernie shoot a rifle? We almost never shot rifles when I was at his place but I once saw him nail a rock chuck at well over 300 yards with Gene Reed's Ruger No. 1 in .25-06. First shot. He offered to let me shoot the next one but I respectfully declined while I still had some vestige of self-image. Professor Reed was also an excellent shot. His grandfather had won many shooting medals at Camp Perry, leading to a natural friendship with Bernie. Anyone who liked firearms, really liked Bernie. Even guys with **Piled High** and **Deeper** degrees.

On many days, Bernie would cruise around Petersen Loop in his pickup truck stopping periodically to stick the barrel of his Thompson-Contender .410 out the window in search of careless, pheasant egg-eating Magpies. If Magpies could write (and survive his drives) I'm confident that those on Petersen Loop would have written a chapter on "How to avoid the Dane in the Pickup." He wasn't fond of

snakes either. If you see any rattlers around the Petersen Range, they've crawled out of the canyon since Bernie stopping patrolling.

A lot of people were saddened when Bernie passed away in 2004, after a nasty bout with cancer. He was 73. It's both appropriate and admirable that the Bernard "Bernie" Petersen Memorial Range live on in his memory. He'd be grateful and proud.

Those who knew Bernie Petersen will never forget this colorful and very knowledgeable shooter. I'm skeptical about ghosts but, there's a chance that Bernie's spirit lurks around the Petersen Memorial Range, causing flyers and occasional bullseyes. Treat the place with respect and don't take a chance on him haunting you. Just sayin'.

Rest in Peace, good friend. Every shot fired at your range is your favorite music and is an ongoing tribute to you.