The Christmas Shooters

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There are many different and time-honored ways to welcome Christmas. Some people attend midnight service at their church; others raise a sentimental glass of grog beside the Christmas tree.

A bunch of fellows down in Berchtesgaden, though, just raise their pistols and shoot.

Not so savage as it sounds, the custom of "shooting in" Christmas originated there at least 285 years ago, and has today only the most devoutly religious connotations. When one of the band known as the United Christmas Shooters' Association raises his blunderbuss to fire, he is "shooting away" all evil spirits and honoring the festivals of the Catholic Church.

The Christmas Shooters ritual originated in and was primarily a continuation of pagan rites inspired by the fear of demons, malicious spirits and witches. The evil spirits were most active during dark winter nights, and could be best combated by incantations, magic ceremonies and above all, by the creation of noise. Hence, the custom of some 500 guns, in unison, on Christmas Eve.

First Definitive Proof for the practice of Christmas shooting is found in a decision passed by the court of justice of the Prince Bishops on Oct. 25, 1666, which specifically prohibited shooting activities at Christmas and on other occasions and threatened all noise and disturbances with severe punishment. That the custom was at that time already a very old one can be seen from the wording of the document.

Berchtesgadeners apparently had an irrepresible passion for shooting, or so it would seem from the decrees issued (in 1708, 1737 and 1798) reiterating the ban on firearms. However, after each decree had been in effect a short while, the ban would be lifted and the hordes of shooters would turn up on some hillside, blasting away to its heart's content.

The dignity of official acceptance apparently was bestowed on the society during the 17th century; there are documents extant which authorize a "burguer guard" to fire salutes at receptions and such other ceremonies as the founding of a Franciscan monastery in Berchtesgaden in 1669.

It was this monastery which wrought the transformation of the shooters' ritual from a pagan fetish to a religious ceremonial. The Franciscans exercised a profound influence over the solemn villagers. In the beginning, the shooting custom was wisely tolerated; later it was completely adopted by the Catholic Church which instead of combating it, used it to draw the shooters more closely to religion. Since that time, the custom has become so firmly entrenched in church ritual that it carries tremendous religious significance for the simple native farmers who comprise the association.

Shooting in Berchtesgaden commences a week before Christmas. At 3 p.m. each afternoon, the bells of the Stiftskirche ring and some single shots are fired to hail the birth of Christ. The first large-scale shooting,
by all the scattered clubs of the shooters' society, takes place on the fourth Sunday in Advent (last Sunday before Christmas).

Thereafter, wholesale firing occurs on the three rauch nights: Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and, until lately, on the fifth of January. The word rauch has two interpretations. It can mean "rough," referring to the over-activity of demons on these nights, or it can mean "smoke," referring to the religion-inspired farmer custom of burning homemade incense and fumigating houses, stables and fields to drive away evil spirits. Further definite dates for shooting are Whitsun and Corpus Christi.

In addition, however, various religious or semi-religious festivals draw the shooters to their stations. Especially significant to the outside world was the society's participation in October in the Freedom Bell dedication. Some 500 members mounted the hillsops of Berchtesgaden and surrounding communities to give a salute at noon of Oct. 24, showing their sympathy with the Freedom Bell, just then tolling its first message in far-off Berlin.

THE OCCASIONS FOR SHOOTING vary with the communities in which society members live—at harvest-time, or when churches are consecrated, or when young priests celebrate their first masses. But when the occasion is so universal a one as Christmas, the shooters of each community in the Berchtesgaden area take part.

Shooting as a rule takes place on a traditional spot, usually on a hill and overlooking the community. Sometimes, particularly on Christmas Eve, single shots may be fired by farmers coming out of the mountains to attend midnight mass. Each farmer fires one shot to signal departure from his home, and further shots as he joins up with streams of others proceeding into the valley.

On New Year's Eve it is customary for small groups to shoot honorary salutes before the houses of priest, mayor and other notables.

Opposing itself to the somewhat ecclesiastical side of the rites is the purely secular function of Brautwecken (bride awakening). Here, the society lets go a volley at 4 a.m. outside the home of a prospective bride (daughter of one of the members) on her marriage day. Tradition demands that the aroused family invite the shooters to a substantial breakfast which is washed down with copious quantities of alcoholic drink. Many shooters are said to prefer this work to shooting at church celebrations, as the reward received is corporeal, immediate and of this world.

BEFORE THE LAST QUARTER of the 19th century, no actual organization of Christmas shooters existed; individuals or groups of farmers acted on their own. The first of the local Christmas shooter clubs was established in the community of Salzburg in 1887. In the years immediately following 15 local organizations were formed in nearby villages. In 1925 these were consolidated into the Vereinigte Weihnachtsschuetzen (United Christmas Shooters) with a total membership of some 2,000 persons; at the same time each club retained its independence and bears its own richly-embroidered banner at the shooters' rally each July.

The association is exclusively for males and only persons born in the county of Berchtesgaden are accepted as members. The regular annual subscription is DM 4 (less than $1), and non-active members pay less; the association spends something over DM 5,000 (about $1,190), which scarcely covers the cost of necessary powder and percussion caps.

The shooting is performed with large-size, large-bore, muzzle-loaded iron pistols of the blunderbuss type. They have heavy wooden shafts and are fired by percussion caps. Many of the pistols are antique, others were made by local smiths before World War II and a few new ones were apparently made in the area within the last few years. Weight of the pistols is considerable, varying between 13 to 17 pounds.

The powder used is generally wrapped in paper and jammed into the barrel; to heighten the noise of the explosion a wooden plug is driven into the muzzle with a mallet, an essential part of each shooter's equipment. When fired, the plug is ejected three to five yards into the air. The pistols are fired either in volleys or individually at short intervals down a line of shooters.

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