

Cannon Roar West of Winchester

N-SSA Fires off its 148th National Skirmish

BY BRUCE W. MILLER





Hardaway's Alabama Battery took 1st place in the howitzer class with Jeffrey Baldwin's 12-pounder Tredegar field howitzer. (Niki Bethke)

The North-South Skirmish Association (N-SSA) held its 148th National Competition October 6 through 8, 2023. Member units competed in live-fire matches with original or authentic reproduction Civil War period arms including cannon, mortars, muskets, carbines, breech-loading rifles, and revolvers. It is the largest Civil War event of its kind in the country and attracts spectators, Civil War enthusiasts, and shooting sports media coverage.

Forty-five cannon participated in the artillery team matches, a crowd favorite. One historical gun was Ken Kurdt's original State of New York 6-pounder. It was manufactured in 1834 by Bellona Foundry, along the James River above Richmond. The markings near the vent say "I.C. & Co. B.F." indicating this gun was manufactured when Major John Clark owned Bellona, before it was purchased by Dr. Junius L. Archer in the 1840s. Another big favorite was the Smithgall Foundation's massive Army 20-pounder Parrott rifle. It was manufactured at West Point Foundry in 1861 for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and was used by the 1st Pennsylvania Light Artillery during the War. In the N-SSA, the 3rd U.S. Infantry competes with these two impressive guns, as well as other artillery pieces and small arms.

The range is reconfigured so cannon fire perpendicular to the small arms firing line and the guns are classified by type: smoothbore, rifled, howitzer, and rifled howitzer. Target frames with paper targets mounted on drywall backers are set at ranges of 200 yards for rifled and smoothbore guns and 100 yards for howitzers. All cannon fire 12 solid projectiles, with a maximum of seven shots, at either of two targets: a bull's eye and a cannon silhouette that represents counter battery fire. The best five shots on each target count for a maximum of 25 points per target, with a perfect score being 50-5V. Howitzers fire a maximum of 12 projectiles at a single bullseye target, with the 10 best shots counted and a perfect score being 50-10V.

In the Smoothbore Class, the Dixie Artillery won with their 6-pounder gun and a score of 47-3V. In the Rifled Class, McNeill's Rangers and their 2.25-inch Confederate mountain rifle won with a near perfect score of 50-4V. All six rifled guns that medaled scored 48-3V or better.

In the Howitzer Class, Hardaway's Alabama Battery won, shooting an impressive 50-4V with their 12-pounder Tredegar field howitzer. The 1st Maryland Cavalry took the Rifled Howitzer Class with their pack Parrott, scoring a nice 49-1V. The accuracy of Civil War period cannon is utterly amazing and shows that Civil War gun crews knew how to get the most out of them.

Forty-three units participated in the mortar team match. The mortar teams fire seven shots at a stake 100 yards down range. Officials then carefully measure the distance between stake and mortar balls, then tally the best five shots for score. The overall winner was the 11th New Jersey Infantry with a terrific five-shot aggregate score of 25 feet, 8 inches. This is

a particularly fun match to watch because with the mortars' low muzzle velocity, you can actually see the flight of the projectile.

One of the most impressive events at the North-South Skirmish Association Nationals is the opening ceremony, which is held on the morning of the final day of competition. On Sunday morning as the sun rises in the eastern sky, over 2,500 skirmishers form up by unit with their flags flying. For as long as anyone can remember, the N-SSA band has led off the ceremonies with the playing of period arrangements of the "Star-Spangled Banner," "Dixie," and "The Battle Cry of Freedom." Bruce Rohrbach of the 149th Pennsylvania is the latest in a long line of band leaders. He has been in the band for over 40 years and plays a Helicon; a pre-Sousa tuba. Rohrbach also plays professionally, as do most of the other dozen band members. While they play a range of instruments from flute to bass drum, all are also shooters. Their performance adds a great deal to the heritage and pageantry of the final day of all N-SSA Nationals.

As for the small arms matches, this National was once again dominated by the 110th Ohio Volunteer Infantry (OVI), who would win two small arms matches and finish second in three others. It seems the near invincible 110th OVI refuses to lose as they won their 29th musket team match since 2000 on this weekend. They won the musket team match with a time of 519.5 seconds for the five-event program, almost a minute and a half ahead of the second-place team. One hundred fifty-two teams participated in this N-SSA signature competition.

The 110th also triumphed over 103 rain-soaked teams in winning the carbine team match. Harlan's Light Cavalry won the smoothbore musket match, defeating 130 other four-member teams. One of the N-SSA's founding units, the Washington Blue Rifles, bested 64 other teams to win the four-event revolver team match by a solid 26.7 seconds. The 149th Pennsylvania Infantry scored the gold medal in the single shot rifle match; the 8th Virginia Infantry won the breech-loading rifle match, and the 1st Maryland Cavalry won the Spencer team match. The most recent addition to the N-SSA small arms competitions is the smoothbore pistol match, which was won by the 1st Maryland Cavalry.

The N-SSA is the country's oldest and largest Civil War shooting sports organization with almost 3,000 individuals that make up its 200 member units. Each portrays a particular unit or regiment and proudly wears a uniform representing the one the original soldiers wore over 160 years ago. At the 148th National, nine members were recognized for 50 years and five for 60 years of membership, quite an accomplishment. The National Rifle Association award for the top Young Skirmisher (under 19 years of age) went to Spencer Ostner, 9th Virginia Cavalry, with an aggregate musket and carbine score of 160-0X and the Senior Skirmisher (over 65) award went to Mark Hughes, also 9th Virginia Cavalry, with a 184-1X.



Frank Potts aims his pack Parrott (rifled howitzer) before the brisk wind blows the smoke from other guns between his gun and the target. (Ericka Curley)



Beau Caire, 8th Regiment Virginia Volunteer Infantry, aims his model 1841 12-pounder mountain howitzer and waits for the smoke to clear from the 3rd Maryland Artillery's firing of Roger Bethke's Austrian 24-pounder field howitzer. (Ericka Curley)



3rd U.S. Infantry loads the powder charge into Ken Kurd's original Bellona Foundry, 1834 manufactured, State of New York 6-pounder gun, which is on a reproduction split trail carriage. (Ericka Curley)



The lanyard used to fire 3rd Maryland Artillery's Austrian 24-pounder field howitzer has barely left the gun as it fires, sending the projectile toward the bullseye target 100 yards down range. (Niki Bethke)

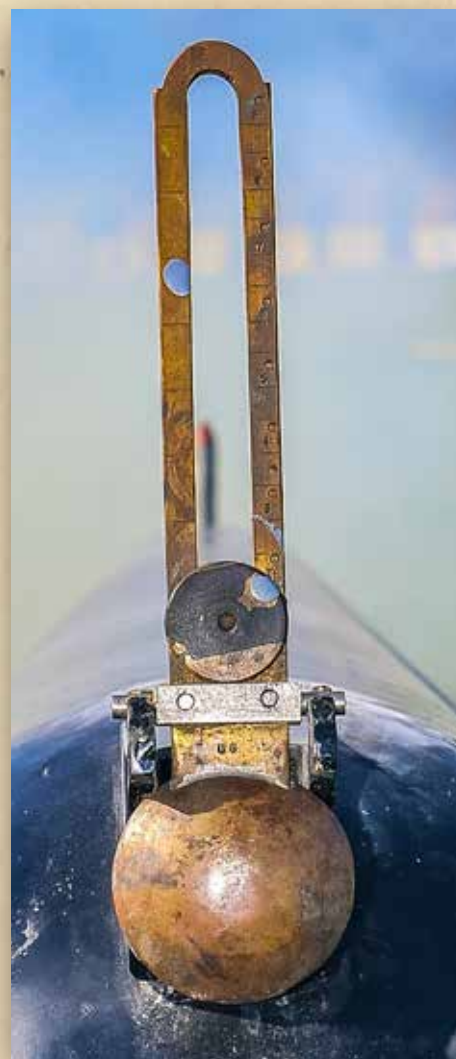
“...The pendulum-hausse serving as a corrective for a faulty position of the trunnions, does away with the necessity for the use of the gunner’s-level or new sighting-points, which it would be very difficult, under many circumstances, to establish. This hausse is derived from the Russian service, and hence is called the Russian hausse.

It consists of an upright piece of sheet-brass, like the breech-sight, and has a movable slider and scale, similarly arranged. At the lower end is placed a bulb or disk, filled with lead. The scale passes through a slit in a piece of steel, and is connected with it by a brass screw, which serves as a point on which the scale vibrates laterally; the slit is made long enough to allow the scale to assume a vertical position, in any ordinary cases of irregularity of the ground on which the gun-carriage may stand. The ends of the piece of steel are formed into journals of trunnions, by means of which the hausse is supported on the seat attached to the base of the breech, and is at liberty to vibrate in the direction of the axis of the piece.

Thus, in any ordinary variations, either in the level of the wheels or in the elevation of the gun, the scale is kept in the vertical position by the weight of the bulb at the bottom.

The seat is of iron, and fastened to the base of the breech by three screws, in such a way that the middle point of the steel bar, or pivot of the scale, shall be at a distance from the axis of the piece equal to the radius of the base-ring.”

(Source: Gibbon, John. *The Artillerist’s Manual, Compiled from Various Sources, and Adapted to the Service of the United States*. Illustrated ... Second Edition, ... Enlarged. United States: n.p. 1863, pp. 287-288.)



A gunner’s view down range through the pendulum-hausse rear sight of a 3-inch U.S. ordnance rifle. The brisk wind during the artillery match kept the black powder smoke blowing around the range. (Niki Bethke)



Walt Zdon, Jr., 2nd Maryland, Baltimore Light Artillery, CSA, performs the duties of line judge for another team, looking through the spotting scope and marking the position of each shot. Each team has a time and safety line judge from another team assigned to their position to time the firing, mark the hits on the score card, and ensure that safe practices are followed. (Ericka Curley)

Fred Bane, 1st Virginia Volunteer Infantry, fires Lars Curley's 24-pounder mortar. Crews fire seven mortar balls at target stakes placed 100 yards from the firing line. Once the mortars finish firing, the distance from the target stake to each projectile is measured and each crew's best five shots are tallied for their score. (Ericka Curley)



Artillery pieces must be fully inspected prior to being fired in their first N-SSA event, and then re-inspected every five years or whenever ownership of the piece changes. Here, National Artillery Officer Rob West uses a scope to inspect the breech and vent of a 6-pounder gun. (Ericka Curley)

Doug Walter, 1st Pennsylvania Rifles "Bucktails," turns the gun carriage's elevating screw to adjust the elevation of their 2.25-inch Tredegar mountain rifle. Rifled cannon fire at two targets: a large bulls-eye and a counter battery target, which is a picture of a cannon that represents opposing artillery. (Ericka Curley)



Matt Galloway, 3rd U.S. Infantry, fires Earl Galloway's 3-inch U.S. ordnance rifle. The Saturday artillery matches at a National Skirmish consist of three relays of up to 16 gun positions each. These matches are a spectator favorite and demonstrate a wide variety of Civil War era artillery pieces. (Ericka Curley)

1st Virginia Volunteer Infantry crew members Rob West (position 1) sponges the bore of his Tredegar 3-inch rifle while Jack Boyenton (position 3) uses a leather thumbstall to keep the vent of the gun sealed to prevent air from entering the barrel and causing premature ignition. This is an important safety activity to avoid injury to the crew. (Ericka Curley)





Barry Reynolds (position 2), 3rd U.S. Infantry, positions the projectile at the muzzle of the Smithgall Foundation's original Army 20-pounder Parrott rifle while Jimmy Murray (position 1) stands ready to ram the projectile toward the breech of the gun. (Ericka Curley)



Frank Potts, 3rd U.S. Infantry, aims the Smithgall Foundation's original 20-pounder Parrott. The rear sight of the Parrott is positioned to the side to align with the forward sight, which is on the rimbase of the gun. The rear sight adjusts both horizontally and vertically. (Ericka Curley)



Jabin Hollinshead (position 1), Dulany Troop, 6th Virginia Cavalry, rams the projectile into Kenny Winklepleck's 3-pounder, muzzle-loading Whitworth rifle. He uses a type of safety rammer, which is designed to help protect the cannoneer in case of an accidental discharge. (Ericka Curley)



Sadie Walsh competes in her first National Skirmish shooting black powder. She and her older sister Emily grew up shooting in the Tenderfoot BB gun matches and have come of age to officially join their team, the 2nd Maryland, Baltimore Light Artillery, CSA. (Ericka Curley)



Terry Donohue, 3rd Maryland Artillery, uses a pendulum-hausse rear sight and the gun carriage's elevating screw to aim the 6-pounder smoothbore gun. (Ericka Curley)



Jabin Hollinshead, Dulany Troop, 6th Virginia Cavalry, aims Mike Klinepeter's 3-inch U.S. ordnance rifle while his sister, Isna, moves the trail to adjust the gun's lateral position. Jabin has only been shooting N-SSA artillery for a year, and is already trying his hand at aiming the gun, with plenty of coaching from his grandfather. (Ericka Curley)



The morning rain clouds gave way to the afternoon sun shining through clouds of black powder smoke. Here, the 3rd U.S. Infantry fires Ken Kurdt's original Bellona Foundry, 1834, State of New York 6-pounder gun. (Ericka Curley)



Smithgall Foundation's original, Army 20-pounder Parrott rifle, registry number 3, was manufactured at West Point Foundry in 1861, for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and was used by the 1st Pennsylvania Light Artillery during the Civil War. The rifling was worn because of the heavy use that the gun saw during the war, and it has a Paulson rifled liner installed to restore the bore. In the N-SSA, the 3rd U.S. Infantry competes with this impressive gun. (Ericka Curley)

Isna Hollinshead (position 2), Dulany Troop, 6th Virginia Cavalry, loads Kenny Winklepleck's bronze Tredegar 2.25-inch Confederate mountain rifle. This gun, which has sawtooth rifling, is an exact copy of one of the four surviving original Tredegar mountain rifles and was made by Seed Artillery, Altoona, Pennsylvania. (Ericka Curley)



Isna Hollinshead, Dulany Troop, 6th Virginia Cavalry, aims her grandfather's 3-inch U.S. ordnance rifle, while directing her brother to move the trail of the carriage to adjust the windage. This artillery match was the first time that Isna and her brother have split the duties of gunner at an N-SSA National, as the fourth generation of their family to service this gun. (Ericka Curley)

Gunner Rusty Ford of Dixie Artillery skillfully aims their 6-pounder gun using a pendulum Housse rear sight. His aim was true, and Dixie Artillery won first place in the smoothbore class with this gun. (Ericka Curley)



Ken Kurdt's (3rd U.S. Infantry) original State of New York 6-pounder gun was manufactured in 1834 by Bellona Foundry along the James River, upstream of Richmond. This gun was manufactured when Bellona Foundry was owned by Major John Clark, before it was purchased by Dr. Junius L. Archer in the 1840s, as indicated by the markings near the vent, which say "I.C. & Co. B.F." The top of the barrel is also stamped with "SNY" and the date 1834. (Ericka Curley)



Kenny Winklepleck fires his 3-pounder, muzzle-loading Whitworth rifle. Artillery field pieces competing in the N-SSA matches vary in size from the smaller 3-pounder Whitworths and 2.25-inch mountain rifles to 6- and 12-pounder guns, 10-pounder Parrott rifles, up to the larger 24-pounder field howitzers, and 20- or 30-pounder Parrott rifles. (Ericka Curley)



The 9th Virginia Cavalry, CSA, is one of 152 musket teams who competed in this National rifle musket match. Two team members skillfully aim their muskets while a third retrieves a percussion cap from his belt pouch to place on his gun. (Ericka Curley)

Tony Shiflett of 1st Virginia Volunteer Infantry uses a plumb bob to aim Lars Curley's 24-pounder Coehorn mortar while his fellow crewmen, Jack Boyenton and Duncan Bartley, check the level and the position of the gun. (Ericka Curley)



As the 3rd U.S. Infantry fires their 24-pounder mortar, you can see the dark blur of the projectile still making its way through the burst of fire and smoke. (Niki Bethke)



Dulany Troop, 6th Virginia Cavalry's 12-pounder mortar fires, sending the projectile flying in an arc toward the target. The muzzle velocity of a mortar is low enough that you can watch the projectile's ballistic flight all the way to the target stake placed 100 yards down range. (Ericka Curley)



Niki Bethke is not only a talented photographer, but also likes to shoot artillery. Here, she pulls the lanyard to fire the 3rd U.S. Infantry's 24-pounder mortar. (Rob Bethke)



Above: Barry Reynolds and Dennis Lenz, 3rd U.S. Infantry, fire Frank Potts' pack Parrott, a small, portable rifled howitzer. Because of the relatively small size of this piece, it fires with significant recoil and a startling report. (Ericka Curley)



The fiery muzzle blast from 3rd Maryland Artillery's 12-pounder mortar makes it easy to see why the crewman firing the piece keeps a safe distance from the gun. Because of this need for sufficient space, mortars are positioned accordingly along the firing line. (Niki Bethke)

The 149th National Competition is scheduled for May 17-19, 2024, at Fort Shenandoah, just north of Winchester, Virginia. For more information about the N-SSA, visit www.n-ssa.org.

