

oregon territory

The collector behind the gun

By **BILL BOYCE**
Of the Statesman-Journal

Like many people in Oregon, he is a gun owner.

Like many gun owners in Oregon, he is a collector. His 75-gun collection is small, as gun collections go, he said.

Like many gun collectors in Oregon, he likes to take some of his guns to the target range when he has the time.

But unlike all the other gun owners, collectors and target shooters in Oregon, he is the governor.

"I JUST LIKED guns and started gathering them," said Vic Atiyeh, who has been collecting firearms for close to 40 years. "I can't really explain it."

"Everyone needs a hobby, a release valve," he said. "I love to take old guns apart and clean them up. My hands get dirty, the oil gets under my nails — it's great."

"When I'm working with a gun it's like I'm not even on the face of the earth."

Atiyeh was a boy when he got his first gun, a .22-caliber rifle with a loose mainspring, by trading away some broken headlamps for it.

"I convinced this other kid to trade, took the gun apart and fixed the mainspring," he said. "I was always good with a screwdriver."

WHILE HE WAS in college he bought a .22-caliber pistol, but he said he did not start collecting seriously until the mid-1940s.

"At first I just collected American guns in general, but then I started to specialize in small guns: Derringers," Atiyeh said. "Then I started collecting Colts stamped with 'U.S.," moved on to muzzle-loaders, and now I'm back where I started, collecting American guns in general."

Atiyeh said he gets most of his guns by trading and negotiating with other collectors individually and at gun shows. But like many aspects of a politician's private life, hobbies often get squeezed out by official activities.

"I've got some leads on guns in my briefcase that are three or four months old, but I just can't get to them," he said. "Those guns are gone by now."

WHAT MAKES A particular gun collectable?

"I like something that's scarce, but still in fairly good condition — whatever happens to strike my fancy," Atiyeh said.

"For me, guns represent history," he explained.

"Some people look at guns today and shudder. But the gun was as

needed a tool as a shovel or pots and pans (were needed) for settlers. It was something they needed to live."

Among the historic pieces in Atiyeh's collection is an 1860 Colt Army pistol with the inscription "Hon. J.W. Nesmith" on the handle. Atiyeh donated it to the Oregon Historical Society.

"Nesmith was the second senator to go to Washington from Oregon, and there's no question in my mind, although I don't have the documentation, that Colt gave it to him personally" Atiyeh said.

ANOTHER HISTORIC gun in Atiyeh's collection is an 1873 Sharps hunting rifle. According to company records, the gun was shipped on Feb. 21, 1873, to Mark Biedell, a Sharps agent and buffalo hunter in Kit Carson, Colo.

"You can say for sure that this buffalo gun was used to shoot buffalo," Atiyeh said, rather than as a decorative or target gun.

And there are the guns which just might have been used in historic events, like another 1860 Colt Army pistol in Atiyeh's collection. "It could have been used in the Civil War, but I don't know for sure," he said.

Although job constraints don't often allow it, Atiyeh likes to shoot target practice with his muzzle-loading rifles. Of course, you need bullets to shoot target practice.

"I MAKE MY own musket balls for these rifles," Atiyeh said. "You have to measure the diameter of the barrel, and get the right-sized mold for it — you want to make the balls just a little smaller than the barrel."

"All guns have a character of their own," he added. "Some need a lot of powder, some don't. You have to clean some rifles after every shot, others can wait until five shots."

Atiyeh is one of about 50,000 National Rifle Association members in Oregon. He makes no apologies for the affiliation. In fact, he appeared in a national NRA advertising campaign earlier this year, and was a featured guest at the May 1983 NRA convention in Phoenix, Ariz.

"I DECIDED TO become a life-member in 1946 because I knew gun collecting was something I was interested in and would continue," Atiyeh said.

"I really resent some people's attitudes towards the NRA," he said. "We're portrayed as kooks and right-wing nuts."

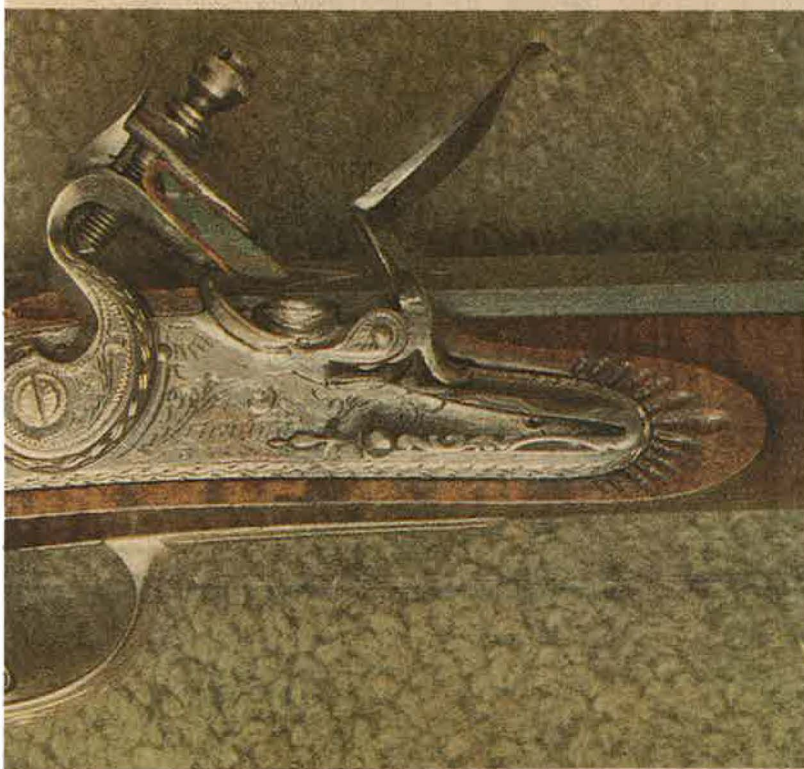
Atiyeh said that was part of the reason he appeared in the "I'm the NRA" advertising campaign earlier this year, which ran in magazines



including the American Rifleman, Reader's Digest and Smithsonian.

"The whole idea was to portray who the NRA is — a bunch of normal people who like guns and believe in our country."

"YOU GUARANTEE a criminal won't get a gun, and then I'll stand behind gun control." But, Atiyeh said, "That guarantee can't be made."



COLLECTOR'S ITEMS — Above, Gov. Vic Atiyeh proudly displays an 1876 Sharps target rifle: The weapon has a spirit-level front sight. Left, flintlock rifle features elaborate engraving work. The hand-crafted rifle was presented to Atiyeh by retired NRA president Keith M. Gaffaney when the governor spoke at the organization's convention earlier this year.

Statesman-Journal photos by Dean Koepfler

"Some view gun control as a panacea, but it's really just an effort to find a simple answer to complex questions. I believe in stronger punishment for commitment of crime with a gun."

Despite the sensitivity of the issue, Atiyeh doesn't think his gun collecting and NRA membership have hurt him politically.

"I'm sure that some people voted

for me because I'm a gun collector, and some voted against me because I'm an NRA member," he said.

"But I don't try to hide what I am," he added. "I'm a gun collector. I like to fish. I like to go to flea markets."

THE INTRUSION of gun-control arguments into conversation about his hobby bothers Atiyeh.

"I don't like to get into this, but it

comes up," he said.

He has other collections too: antique scales, memorabilia from the Lewis and Clark Exposition of 1905, interesting knick-knacks. But those are secondary to the gun collection.

"I think of myself as a steward of these guns," he said. "I'll take care of them for a while, and then pass them on."