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For National Public Radio, this is Jo Magleno reporting.

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PROGRAM All Things Considered.... STATION WETA FM Radio

DATE December 17, 1989 5:50 PM CITY Washington, DC

SUBJECT Gun Controls in Britain

LYNN NEERY: Great Britain has some of the toughest gun laws in the world. It also has the lowest homicide rate in Europe. In the last installment in our series on guns and gun control, Chris Losemore reports on the attitudes in Britain toward gun ownership.

CHRIS LOSEMORE: Here in the middle of London, the streets are by no means completely safe. But they're still a lot safer than many others in the world's major cities. The chances are that nobody in the traffic or pavements around me is carrying a gun, not even the two policemen I can see across the road.

To own a gun in Britain is very much the exception, not the rule. In fact, to actually buy a weapon isn't easy.

At the moment, I'm standing outside a small, but well respected gun shop. Now in some parts of the States, I'd be able to simply walk in and come out with a gun straightaway. Here it's not so easy.

Good morning.

MERCHANT: Good morning.

LOSEMORE: Good morning. I'd like to buy a pistol, if I may, a handgun of some sort. Can you sell one of those?

MERCHANT: I can't to anyone unless you have a certificate actually specifying what weapon and actually giving you permission.

LOSEMORE: So that's a certificate from, where?

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MERCHANT: You have to apply to the police for a certificate. But first of all, you'll have to go through a probationary period with a club for six months before you even qualify.

LOSEMORE: That's a shooting club of some sort.

MERCHANT: Shooting club, correct. Yeah.

LOSEMORE: So not being able to buy a real gun, I turned to the shop's range of fake guns, which look like real guns, but don't fire at all. They're harmless. But in Britain, you can't even get one of these easily.

But what if I want to buy one of these replica handguns here, which do look very real? How easily would it be for me to buy one of those?

MERCHANT: Well, we would first of all, when you walk in the shop, we would assess you. We would then, providing you're over 18 years old, and we think you're okay to have one. This is more of a commitment that we take on rather than a legislative one.

We would show you a range of replicas. Some are blank-firing. Some are just replicas that don't fire at all. And we would insist, before you could actually purchase and take away, that we take your name and address and some confirmation of your person.

LOSEMORE: And what if I didn't really want to give a name and address?

MERCHANT: You wouldn't get one.

LOSEMORE: The fact is that most people in Britain simply aren't interested in owning a firearm. The general level of violence in Britain is such that outside of sporting circles, gun ownership is still comparatively rare.

Terrence Morris is a professor of sociology, specializing in criminology, at the London School of Economics. He believes that the British public's ambivalent attitude towards firearms is, in part, due to a relatively stable recent history.

PROFESSOR TERRENCE MORRIS: We haven't had a civil war for 300 years. We haven't been invaded by anybody for 800 years. Police in Britain have never been armed, as a matter of course. And what that has done, I think most people would agree, is actually set the threshold of the use of force at a very, very high level.

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LOSEMORE: But in recent years, Britain, like America, has experienced indiscriminate mass shootings. In America they hold the headlines for a few days. When it first happened here, the nation was shocked to its very core.

NEWSCASTER: Twelve people are still in [the] hospital this morning after yesterday's bloodbath at Hungerford and Botchshire in which 15 people died. Among the dead was the....

LOSEMORE: When Michael Ryan rampaged through a quiet Botchshire town in 1987 killing 12 people in a six hour reign of terror, the repercussions reached all the way to Parliament. The outrage and grief felt across the country was such that the already strict gun laws were immediately reviewed and eventually changed. Now Britain has some of the toughest laws on gun ownership anywhere in the world.

As Conservative Member of Parliament Colin Shepard emphasizes, the government is firmly committed to keeping guns out of the community.

MP COLIN SHEPARD: We've always had a view that firearms have been something rather special in this country and that there should be a very wide dispersal of ownership, that there should be controls.

Our whole public feel for firearms is that they have been weapons of defense for use by authorities.

LOSEMORE: And according to Professor Morris, that's an approach likely to meet with general approval. The British character, he says, lends itself well to a fundamental respect for authority. In America, authority has traditionally been associated with power, a bigger gun or bigger army. In Britain, authority has for hundreds of years been couched in familiar institutions and social conventions.

PROFESSOR MORRIS: British people are, for the most part, very compliant and very sensitive to authority. They queue for buses. You know, they wait in line in shops or check-outs. They don't raise their voices. They are very reticent in talking to each other on trains, and so forth, in contrast to a number of other cultures where people get very excited, very animated, often very disorganized. And so there's a contrast, I think, between the, if you like, sort of British culture, in this sense and what you will find on mainland Europe and also in the United States.

LOSEMORE: Britain prides itself on having one of the best firearms records in the world. But the government looks with dismay at changes due to take place in 1992. At that time,

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Britain will become more closely tied to Europe than ever before through the implementation of the single European Market. Part of that process will include a lessening of border controls between member countries, and Britain is worried that more liberal gun laws in Europe will undermine the British firearms' laws.

Hans Claudius Tashna (?) is head of the EC division responsible for abolishing cross-border controls. He acknowledges that there are fundamental differences between member states in their approach to weapons' legislation.

HANS CLAUDIUS TASHNA: We have in the northern part of the European Community, in states like the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, but also Denmark and Luxembourg -- we have very strict legislation concerning weapons. In general, they are more or less forbidden.

This is different compared with France and also Belgium. The French believe that it's one of the big results of the French Revolution that a free man can have a gun, can carry a weapon.

LOSEMORE: The British police force is still the only one in Europe that doesn't carry arms in normal duties, and there's a real fear that as Britain moves closer to Europe, such a position would be difficult to maintain.

Brian Eastwood, chairman of Britain's Police Federation:

BRIAN EASTWOOD: We oppose any restriction on border control. There has to be a control at a border. And we have the perfect border being the English Channel, and that has stopped firearms entering the country to such a great extent. That is why our gun laws are quite so successful, because we are an island.

If there were to be no borders and all the EEC citizens were allowed to bring in their firearms, shotguns, whatever, it would be disastrous.

LOSEMORE: Perhaps a greater threat, though, lies in the subtle changes in British attitudes towards violence and the use of weapons. Many feel that increasing levels of violence on television will glamorize Rambo-style characteristics.

Professor Morris believes that such influences may become behavioral triggers towards a more gun-oriented British society.

PROFESSOR MORRIS: These are influences which help to desensitize people from the full effects of violence. And I

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think we have to ask serious questions about whether we should allow people to continue to make money from this sort of production simply because there's some demand for it. And I'm not sure that that isn't perhaps an abuse of freedom.

LOSEMORE: Despite everyone's fears, though, for a while at least, London streets are likely to be a safe place to be.

For National Public Radio, this is Chris Losemore in London.



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DATE December 17, 1989
TIME 6:55 PM (ET)
NETWORK National Public Radio
PROGRAM Weekend Edition

TRANSCRIPT

Leanne Hanson, anchor:

This past week on National Public Radio, the subject was guns; their use and their misuse, their role as both weapon and symbol, as well as legislative attempts to regulate their sale. Today, guns in the wilderness. Earlier this fall, NPR's Alex Chadwick stayed at a hunting camp in Idaho as the elk season began.

Alex Chadwick reporting:

The first night of the hunt, hands that carried guns all day picked up guitars. A dozen people sat around the fire and ate the dense, flavorful meat from an elk killed the previous year. I took it as a sign that this occasion mattered a lot to them; it must, that the hunters would eat game from the previous hunt, almost as a ritual, I thought. And each of them had arranged lives, with all the normal complications, so that they could meet at Squaw Meadow, in the Payette National Forest, in the mountains of central Idaho. Some had been hunting this place for several years, others were new to it. They had married into one another's clan or had worked together. Most were from Idaho, although it was a man from back East who got the first elk that morning.

Everett Toll (Hunter): One of the amazing things about elk is they have some power to suddenly appear where you least expect them and disappear as quick as you blink an eye. And suddenly, in this thick brush there was this elk just standing there looking at me.

Chadwick: Everett Toll (sp) of Washington, D.C., who was hunting with his son, Leonard. Everett had a new rifle with a fine, clear telescopic sight mounted on it. But that morning, when he saw the elk and put the gun to his shoulder, his first shot was no good.

Toll: I think I shot a little too quick; it was in the brush. I could only see his head and tried to shoot him in the neck and missed. And he went behind a tree, and when he stepped out of the tree he turned and looked right at me, and I shot him again in the head. So he dropped instantly and there was about five miles from here, which meant the work began then. It took- what- four of us, the best part of the afternoon just to get him out.

Chadwick: Why wouldn't you just come out here to the forest to hike around the forest for a day? What is it about hunting and shooting that is an attraction?

Toll: I think, first of all, I do like to come out and hike around, but I think the hunting is an extra dimension, it's a challenge to you. It's something that you can do as a team. Somehow it just adds another dimension to being out here. And I don't consider myself an avid hunter. I like the outdoors, always look forward to getting out hunting for some reason with a gun. It's something that Leonard and I enjoy doing together.

Chadwick: Do you agree with that?

Leonard Toll: Yes, I basically agree with that. And it is to some extent- it is kind of thrilling. We see probably more wildlife every year than the normal person does in their lifetime that doesn't hunt, and that's got to be worth something. We enjoy the animals as much as anything; even though we may end up killing one doesn't mean that we don't like them. We really enjoy wildlife. And not many people get up at odd hours and hike fifteen or twenty miles a day to see wildlife.

Chadwick: The hunter said the real work began after the kill. He meant carrying the animal out, carrying the meat out. Even gutted and quartered, elk are big creatures and the cut-up portions are heavy; they're awkward to carry down miles of trails and back to camp. The camp was a site between a dirt road and a wide, shallow stream. Some horses were tied by trees near the water. There were tents nearer the road, some the new colorful nylon dome types, others were big, dull army canvas, and there was one beautiful place of light and warmth, a heavy white cook tent with a peaked roof and a small steel shepherd's stove and a cook.

Is there a trick to being a camp cook?

Judy Feet (Camp Cook): No. Fortunately, I don't have to get up and cook them breakfast. I fix coffee the night before and take the grounds out of it, and then I just say, 'It's ready, all you got to do is turn it on.'

Chadwick: Judy Feet (sp), the wife of one of the two men at the center of the hunting crew. Other women came to visit the camp occasionally, although I saw only men go out to hunt. Judy was there almost all the time. We talked at dawn one morning after everyone was gone. We had coffee by the fire. She was in a pale flannel nightgown that was turned inside out, and worn over red longjohns, and old white leather high-top sneakers. She seemed completely at home in the hunting camp.

Judy Feet: It's my thing to be out here, see them when they bring big meat in and listen to their stories when they come in, and I like fooling with the horse. I like cooking. I wouldn't like to just sit at home while they were out hunting. This is gathering information for my book- book of hunting stories and what they go through, and things that happen to them while they're hunting. Hunters can never find anything, 'Where's my gun? Where's my shells? I can't find my sleeping bag.' Like I used all this stuff. So they can't get ready for

the hunt, unless the wife tells them where everything is. So it'll be fun. It's a funny story already.

Chadwick: One time, she said, her husband and some of the others were camped somewhere and they'd taken along with them a man who was too old to hunt anymore. He didn't even have a license; he had to stay in camp. But when they returned there in the evening, the old man had a fresh-killed elk hanging from a limb. 'Why did you shoot it?', they asked. Some of them worked for the Forest Service, and they wondered how they would explain this if they were caught. 'I didn't shoot it,' the old man replied, 'Someone did, but I didn't.' 'It wandered into camp bleeding and it keeled over and died.' This story was so unlikely they all agreed it might be true.

Judy Feet: I can give you lots of hunting stories. It's not real unless it's coming from the guys sitting around the campfire, or at home around the table with a can of beer. They actually get this paper out, like they're going to really make a list, you know- list of what they're going to take, things they're not going to forget, and secretly things they don't have to ask where it is. But they never get anything down on this paper but a bunch of scratches and doodles. The first thing that's always on the list is the name of the guys that are going, and that gets added to by ten-fold before a hunting trip ever gets here. And they talk about the food they're going to take, like they're hungry already, you know? They can't wait till they get there, 'Now we want this and we want that, and are you going to fix this and are you going to fix that? The hunting trip gets here and they, I don't care. What do you guys want? I don't- fix anything, I don't care.' But during the year- see these flat elbows? These flat elbows come from leaning through hours of these hunting stories. And every story changes. And I'm sitting there going, 'Well, that's not how you told it the last time.' And it makes me laugh. I could sit for hours and listen to them.

Chadwick: At night in the camp, it was so cold you would wake-up again and again and think about sleeping in a bed. It was still dark when the hunters got up- six or seven or eight of them. They wore heavy clothes and hats and gloves. They were all green and brown to blend with the woods. Some wore orange so they wouldn't blend so much as to tempt another shooter. They started a fire. They warmed coffee. They mixed instant oatmeal with hot water. They stood around talking quietly. They formed into small groups and, before it was light, moved across the road and into the trees. The hunters would begin returning in the middle of the afternoon. They told each other what had happened in this day going by. By their testimony, hunting comes down to knowing how to find your way in the woods and on being lucky enough to find something. And then it is a matter of skill with a gun.

There were guns all around: rifles. People were comfortable with them, but handled them carefully nonetheless. One man said he though hunting rifles are used as guns are supposed to be used, but that perhaps there should be restrictions on handguns in the city. Another was skeptical that any rules would bother those who actually deserved to be restricted. Perhaps the finest hunter in the camp was Jeff Feet (sp), the husband of the cook, Judy. He had the only rifle I saw that did not have a fancy scope. It was the only gun that looked old, but Feet was said to be an

excellent shot with it. When he went off on horseback in the morning, he carried it in a leather scabbard that fit under the right stirrup strap of his saddle.

Jeff Feet (Hunter): My gun is called a .308 Savage, and Savage made these lever-action guns (I'm not sure if it was a .308 caliber), but they made these lever-action guns back around the turn of the century. I don't know ballistics, and I don't really care about ballistics. It's a gun that I use to get meat. I don't hunt trophy. I don't hunt antlers. I kill that animal myself; I have a prayer for that animal. That animal actually becomes a part of me, gives me strength make it through my life. And in my belief, there's no such thing as a death. Things go on and on and on.

Chadwick: This was said on the last night I spent in the camp. The next day the hunters were out again for another long walk in the mountains. They found nothing. Indeed, when a week had passed and the hunt was over, some of them had not fired even one shot. But Jeff Feet had also said that such days did not discourage him, and that most often he managed to achieve what it was he was really seeking in the hunt.

Jeff Feet: When I go out in the hills, of course I enjoy elk hunting, but it happens to be in an area that's very, very sacred to me. It's a place where I regain my spirit. It's very, very high in the peaks, and everybody has their own belief and their own church and their own religion. Mine happens to be at the base of those peaks in a very, very special area to me. And I don't need to find an elk, I mean if one comes along fine. And I don't need to shoot a deer either. When I see those peaks, and I'm underneath those, it just revives me, makes me feel like life's all worth it again.

Hanson: An "Elk Camp in Idaho" was produced by Caroline Jenson, written by Alex Chadwick, recorded and mixed by Michael Schweppe.

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