A History of TVSA: 1911-2022

Research into the University of Alaska’s archives has shown a fascinating history of the oldest sportsmen’s group in Alaska. The Fairbanks Daily Times reported on October 3, 1911 that the “first event in the shoot of the newly organized Tanana Rifle Club was held on the range prepared by club members near Birch Hill.”  Today, many Alaskans know that the Tanana Valley Sportsmen’s Association manages an indoor shooting range and conducts gun shows twice a year to help support the UAF Nanooks Rifle Team and maintain the new TVSA facility.

In 1916 a group of sportsmen formed the Tanana Valley Sportsmen’s Association and the group was instrumental in transplanting 28 bison from Montana to Delta Junction.  In the 1930’s, Americans began to recognize that wildlife habitats were becoming threatened by development; wildlife conservation groups began forming across the country.  The Fairbanks Daily News-Miner reported April 4, 1936:  “Fired with enthusiasm about hopes of giving the immediate section of Interior Alaska a wider variety and greater supply of game fish, birds and animals, 22 devotees of the rod and gun assembled in Fairbanks City Hall last evening and organized under the name of the Tanana Valley Sportsmen’s Association.” TVSA adopted wildlife conservation as one part of its mission.  By the end of 1936 there were approximately 175 members in TVSA.  The club was incorporated on March 10, 1937.

In 1937, TVSA purchased Lot 8, Block 127 in (now) downtown Fairbanks for $56.00 with the plan of building a headquarters cabin on the lot.  The historical records become a little unclear at this point but eventually, in 1953, TVSA was granted a U.S. patent of almost 24 acres of land along the Chena River off Airport Road “about three miles outside of town.”  The log clubhouse was constructed by volunteers in the 1940’s and the basement shooting range was built in 1955.  An interesting feature of the building was that it was constructed out of whatever was available at the time, such as telephone poles for the log sides and beams. A frame addition was built, again by volunteers, in 1964, and the club was about 95% complete in installing a new air ventilation system for the range in 2006-2007.

Over the decades TVSA adopted resolutions that impacted territorial and state policies.  In 1936, TVSA opposed the sale of wild game meat in restaurants and later the club worked to reintroduce muskox to the Arctic Wildlife Range.  In 1957, TVSA made the first public proposal for establishment of the Arctic Wildlife Range(as compared to a “wilderness area”) and gave testimony in U.S. Senate hearings regarding the same.  In the 1950’s, TVSA published detailed booklets covering most aspects of fishing and hunting in Interior Alaska.

TVSA became a parent organization for many sportsmen’s groups in Alaska and fought “consistently for the intelligent conservation of wildlife.”  In 1958, the group advocated a Yukon Delta Refuge to protect waterfowl habitat.  An important report was generated by TVSA in April 1959 called:  “Analysis of the Predator Problems in Alaska,” discussing, primarily, wolves.  At that time, there was a bounty system in place that was deemed by TVSA to be ineffective.  The TVSA report opposed all bounties on “terrestrial predators.”

Lists from the 1940’s showed 417 male members and 10 “Culinary,” or “lady” members.  The Fairbanks Daily News-Minerreported in 1952: “Wives and women members contributed tedious labor in brushing out a trail from the airport road.  They helped build the large friendly fireplace that dominates one end of the big clubroom in addition to making coffee and snacks for the men workers.”  In 1958, Mrs. W.S. (Brooksie) Brooks became the first woman trustee in the history of the club.

There have been many social aspects to the organization:  the annual “biggest fish” contest; forest fire prevention poster and wildlife conservation essay contests for elementary and high school grades; purchasing Chinese pheasant eggs to hatch at Rickert’s Farm; an annual midnight sun shooting match; an annual “Snow Shoe Baseball Game” at Griffith ball park during the Fairbanks Winter Carnival; annual game meat barbeques; “radio” challenges with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Dawson for shooting matches; and on, and on.

The 1970’s showed TVSA as deeply involved in the D‑2 Lands issue. In the 1980’s interest in TVSA’s mission and goals surged.  In addition to wildlife conservation, a second major goal of the TVSA has been to educate Interior Alaska’s youth and adults in the safe use of firearms.  Over the years the club has played a vital role in Interior Alaska by supporting Alaska’s largest junior shooting club, The Midnight Sun Sharpshooters, as well as local Fairbanks high school rifle teams, middle school rifle clubs and various adult programs including the Golden Heart Shootist Society’s Cowboy Action Shooters, Fairbanks Alaska Shooter, and more.  Several young people who began shooting in TVSA programs went on to earn positions on the National Champion University of Alaska Nanooks Rifle Team, and have competed in national, international and Olympic venues.  Valuable collegiate scholarships have been awarded to many of Interior Alaskan youth for their shooting skills.

On March 31, 2007, the old clubhouse caught fire and burned to the ground along with its nearly complete new air handling system.  TVSA sold most of its property fronting the Chena River to help finance construction of a new building.  In addition, State grants, NRA grants and many private and commercial donations have been invaluable.

The Tanana Valley Sportsmen’s Foundation, Inc. (TVSF), is the federally approved 501(c)(3) sister organization of the non-profit TVSA and was formed in 2008 to accept donations for the rebuilding and operations of a new clubhouse and shooting range.  Also, in 2008, new By-Laws and Articles of Incorporation were written and adopted by TVSA that reflect current membership goals and operations.

By spring 2009, the shell of the new building was completed.  The spirit of volunteerism has carried on through the decades as can be seen by the sometimes slow, but steady and dedicated, construction progress of the new TVSA facility.  Almost six years to the day the old clubhouse burned down, on March 16, 2013, TVSA held its first smallbore match in one of the two new range bays with its state-of-the art air handling system.  Youth shooters from local schools and TVSA’s own Midnight Sun Sharpshooters have been using the facility since then for air gun and smallbore shooting practice and matches.

In the summer of 2012 TVSA celebrated its 75th anniversary of incorporation with a picnic and flotilla down the Chena River, along with a “fun air-gun shoot” by several political candidates. TVSA produced a well-received video for the anniversary that included recollections of the club by some of its oldest members.  And volunteers continue to put finishing touches on the facility.

2015 saw the initiation of the Borealis Big Bulls Derby. TVSA applied for and obtained a gaming permit in order to operate the derby. Club members and volunteers solicited donations for prizes. Measuring stations were set up with community partners in Tok, Delta, North Pole, Healy, and Fairbanks. Entrants brought their racks to the measuring stations and volunteers measured and recorded the largest racks. Winners were named in three categories: General, Women’s, and Youth. In partnership with the UAF Nanooks Rifle Team, the first year of the derby was a success.

In 2020, when the COVID 19 pandemic shut down many facets of society, TVSA carried on, adapting, and providing space for Interior Alaska’s sportsmen to gather (virtually when necessary). Gun Shows have shifted from being held at the University’s gym to being held at TVSA’s clubhouse and range. Though forced to downsize, the club’s dedication to its fundraising goals remains unphased and the shows continue to go on.

In 2021 a third range bay was added to the facility. Club members converted the existing classroom into an air rifle bay with the addition of electronic targets. TVSA received a grant from the NRA Foundation and some generous donations that helped purchase a collapsible wall that enables that room to function as a nearly soundproof classroom and also an enclosed air rifle bay. This has increased range usage and now 3 times or groups of shooters can be using the range bays simultaneously.

In 2022 the decision was made to extend the length of the south range bay to accommodate law enforcement agencies and their needs for range space to qualify their officers. Again, the NRA Foundation provided a grant toward partial funding and various agencies donated the remaining funds to complete the project. As a result, law enforcement agencies and security companies now have an adequate indoor range in which to train and practice.

Pamela A. Lewis, Secretary
Updated in April 2013

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