

Think the Colt 1873 Single Action Army won the West? Think again!

# When Bulldogs Ruled

BY GEORGE J. LAYMAN

**C**olt, Remington, Smith & Wesson and Merwin & Hulbert didn't manufacture them, but during the late nineteenth century they were among the Old West's most well-known pocket revolvers. Though the second definition of "bulldog" in Webster's is "...a small, short-barrel pistol of large caliber..." the genuine British Bulldog may further be defined as "any of the nineteenth century-produced, double-action, stubby short-barreled revolvers chambered for medium to large calibers."

At the end of the Civil War, many ex-soldiers, civilians, and city folk took their chances on a new life in the yet unsettled and lawless areas of the American West. Those who dared the long trek prepared themselves with everything from general supplies to reliable firearms for hunting and self-defense. These future Westerners were a sophisticated lot when it came to choosing their rifles, pistols and shotguns, and did so according to their financial means. By the 1870s, many Western townships forbade carrying firearms openly, thus many had to conceal their arms to circumvent the restriction. By 1875, both the Midwest and the California coast



This close-up of a Belgian-made British Bulldog (maker unknown) shows the quality of the simple engraving pattern common to these imported revolvers.

were beehives of activity, chock-full of gold-seekers, gamblers, homesteaders, and other opportunists. The market was

ripe for a small size, large-caliber revolver that was concealable but powerful enough for a serious gunfight or other armed dispute. Most of all, the revolver had to be affordable in price.

Though Remington brought out a number of pocket revolvers to include a double action by 1870, as well as Smith & Wesson's Baby Russian, a competitor from abroad surprised U.S. manufacturers with the introduction of what was to be a very well-received wheelgun. Just before 1874, a small double-action, big-bore revolver with a short 2-1/2" barrel made its abrupt debut in the

With the loading gate down, the cylinder is readied for loading. Most cylinders on British Bulldogs were of an unlocked type: unless the trigger was pulled back or the hammer cocked, the cylinder would spin freely.



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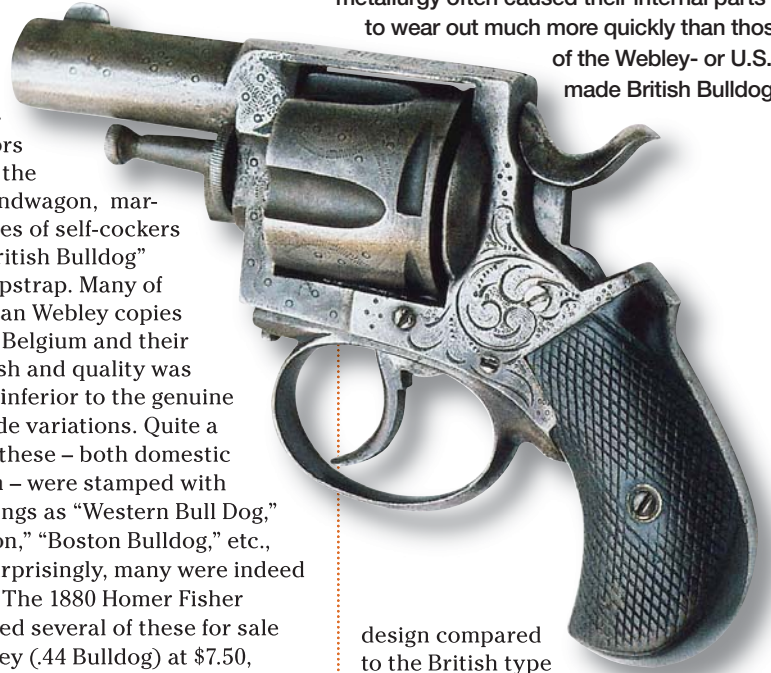
West. It was a unique big-bore revolver of excellent quality and was made by the English gun manufacturer P. Webley & Son. It was called the British Bulldog.

## THE WEBLEY INFLUENCE

Upon its introduction in the early 1870s, Webley's new British Bulldog had become an immediate sensation in Victorian England since the carrying of firearms in Great Britain was accomplished quite discreetly. Thus the pocket-size, highly concealable Bulldog fit right into the period of Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper. Webley firearms were well known in the United States for their high degree of workmanship. Even George Armstrong Custer owned a pair of Webleys (the Royal Irish Constabulary Model) prior to his death in June of 1876 at the Little Big Horn. Soon after its invasion of the United States arms market, the self-cocking Webley British Bulldog was being sold through American gun dealers such as Nathaniel Curry of San Francisco and E.C. Meacham of St. Louis. With population surges in areas west of the Mississippi growing by the day, many were glad to see a compact, inexpensive, double-action revolver with plenty of wallop to boot. The new Webley catchphrase "British Bulldog" would evolve into one of the most famous revolver trademarks from the 1870s up to the turn of the century. The term

Bulldog became a legend in its own time. By 1876, several European and American imitators jumped on the Bulldog bandwagon, marketing copies of self-cockers marked "British Bulldog" over the topstrap. Many of the European Webley copies came from Belgium and their overall finish and quality was noticeably inferior to the genuine British-made variations. Quite a number of these – both domestic and foreign – were stamped with such markings as "Western Bull Dog," "British Lion," "Boston Bulldog," etc., and, not surprisingly, many were indeed well made. The 1880 Homer Fisher catalog listed several of these for sale in .44 Webley (.44 Bulldog) at \$7.50, each which was far below the \$18.00 price tag of a Colt or Smith & Wesson. Both the Webley British Bull Dog and its imitations were also being offered in .32 rimfire or centerfire as well as .41 rimfire and .38 and .44 centerfire. Webley even listed a "Holster Size Frontier Model" Bulldog in .38 and .44 centerfire with a 4" barrel and a lanyard on the grip.

The quality of Belgian-made British Bulldogs was often quite good, but a lower grade of metallurgy often caused their internal parts to wear out much more quickly than those of the Webley- or U.S.-made British Bulldog.



design compared to the British type since it had a saw handle-style grip, plus a larger frame somewhere between a medium- and full-size revolver. It also had a 2-1/2" full round barrel as opposed to the oblong type most common to the British-style versions. Not easy to find nowadays, these revolvers were manufactured by Iver Johnson Co. of Worcester, Massachusetts, for the Meacham company, to be sold under the American Bulldog trade name. It should be mentioned that the Iver Johnson Co. independently marketed their own series of Bulldog revolvers, some of which were marked Boston Bulldog, British Bulldog, and oddly enough, American Bulldog as well.

Though the Meacham American Bulldog is not marked Iver Johnson, the giveaway is one of the company's trademarks – an American eagle – on the stocks. Removing the grips however, does show a serial number on the frame in two places. With its reddish gutta percha grips, these 44-caliber five-shooters are extremely well-made; much better than most other Bulldogs. It is here where a degree of confusion exists between the British and American Bulldog revolvers. It appears the basic cosmetic difference is that the British-style Bulldog retains the classic parrot's beak or bird's-head grip, and the American Bulldogs were supplied with a "saw handle" flat-base grip. Some early ads made reference that their American

This Belgian British Bulldog has most of its nickel worn away, but the proofmark "R" and the Bulldog logo are partially visible on the frame behind the barrel.



would soon become a household word among pistoleros of the day, and gain almost equal footing with the Colt Peacemaker, the Smith & Wesson Russian models and other famous handguns.

It is quite obvious that the British

## AMERICAN BULLDOGS

The E.C. Meacham company had at least four different Bulldogs in their 1884 catalog, among which were an "American Bulldog" somewhat unique in

## WHEN BULLDOGS RULED

Bulldogs were made exclusively in .38 caliber, with the British Bulldog with bird's-head grips being made only in .44 caliber. Additionally, the Meacham catalog also listed an "American" British Bulldog complete with bird's-head grips and in both calibers, too.

Another very interesting British Bulldog is the illustration on the same page beneath the aforementioned "American" Bulldog in the 1884 catalog. This particular revolver is advertised as a "new design" English British Bulldog and has a remarkable resemblance to the later Webley series of military break-open revolvers. Together with its flat-base saw handle grips (listed as a "Smith & Wesson handle"), the text states that when chambered for the .38 S&W, they are marked "American Bulldog." A footnote goes on to say that the revolver "... is made to compete with Colt's and resembles them in model and fine workmanship. ..." Equipped with an octagonal 2-1/2" barrel, the arm is something of a hybrid between a Webley of the future and a Colt double-action Lightning with a flat butt! At least a dozen or more Belgian-made Bulldog copies with bird's-head grips have been seen by the author in .38 caliber only, with

American or British Bulldog markings.

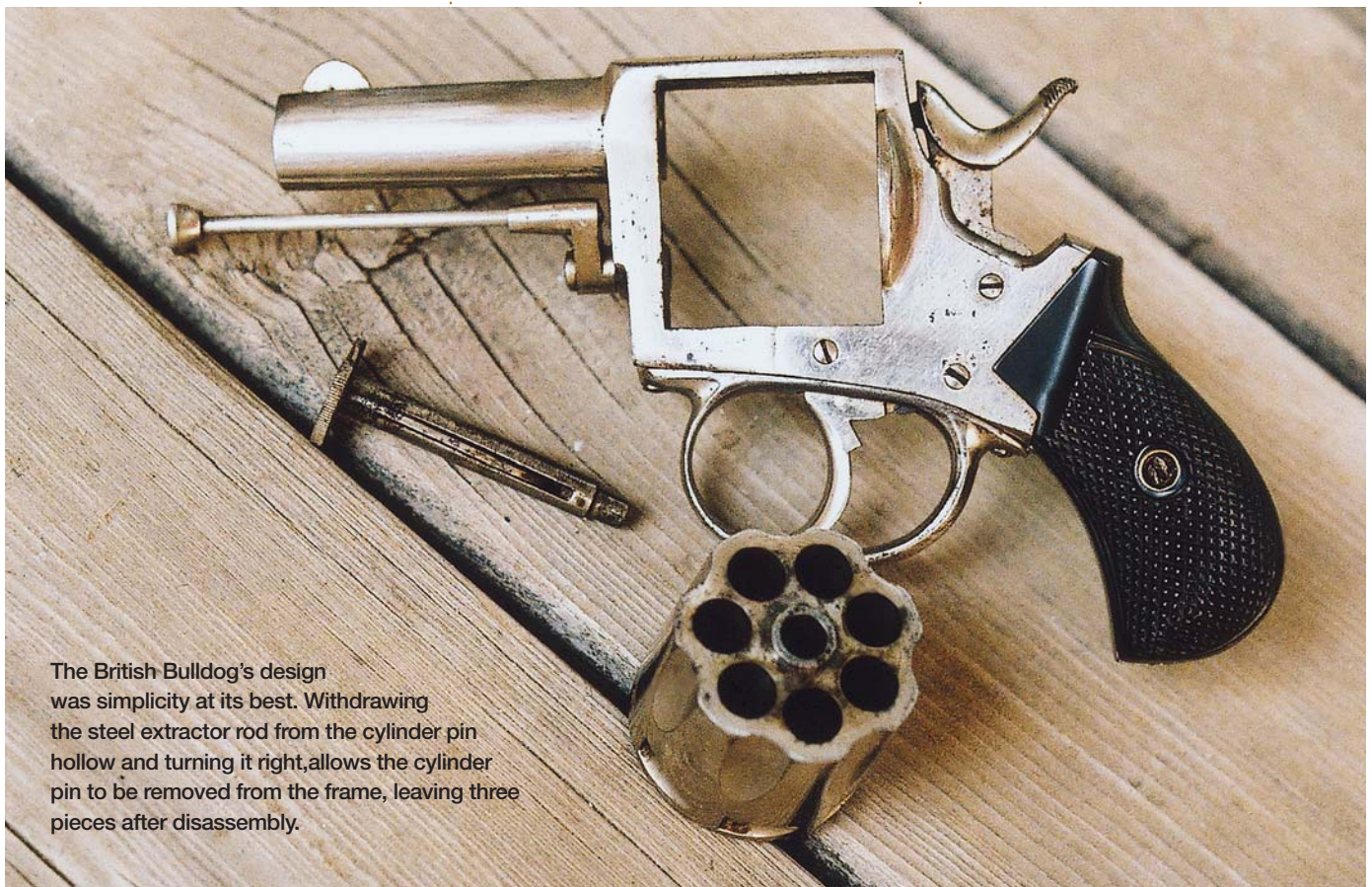
Unquestionably, the U.S.-made copies are generally better from a quality standpoint than their Belgian counterparts. The Meacham Arms American Bulldog sold for \$3.31 in 1881 and was quite the bargain when compared to a full-size Colt. It could also be had with extras such as pearl or ivory stocks, and engraved frames. It is curiously amusing to note that in the Meacham advertisement, for 31 cents less, one could have the same revolver marked "British Bulldog"!

The design of the American Bulldog from Meacham Arms differed from the majority of British Bulldogs in that it uses a spring-charged vertical flat latch to retain the cylinder pin. The typical British Bulldog used a pull-out, rotating extractor pin which, when pulled upward and turned right, allowed removal of the hollow cylinder pin as well. A short, oblong-shaped 2-1/2" barrel was standard on most Bulldogs regardless of origin. However, some are listed with 2-1/4" and 2-3/4" tubes in certain advertisements. Depending on caliber, they could be five-, six-, or seven-shooters! Noteworthy is that the Webley Bulldogs had unfluted cylinders,

whereas most U.S. and European copies had the fluted type. Unfluted cylinders, however, have been observed on several Liege-made Belgian copies.

Colt didn't introduce a self-cocker until 1877 (the Model 1877 "Lightning" and "Thunderer" models), and it seemed the Bulldog owned the market for the double-action class of big-bore pocket revolvers. In truth, the Bulldogs' fast-firing characteristics had a hand in spreading the popularity of the double-action revolver as a whole. Mechanically, the British and American Bulldogs were quite sturdy and simple; however, the finish and smooth mechanics of these Bulldogs were still not up to par with those of a Smith & Wesson or a Colt. A light strain on the wallet was their obvious strongpoint. Though the later Colt Lightning/Thunderer series of double actions would be the stiffest competition, the Colt's lockwork proved complicated and prone to breakage under hard use. They nevertheless became immensely popular.

The British Bulldog, however, was not without its own mechanical problems. Too-vigorous operation of the double-action trigger would eventually cause the lockwork to begin mis-indexing, as



The British Bulldog's design was simplicity at its best. Withdrawing the steel extractor rod from the cylinder pin hollow and turning it right, allows the cylinder pin to be removed from the frame, leaving three pieces after disassembly.

the hand would skip a cylinder notch. Many of the British Bulldogs encountered today seem to display this malfunction, and finding one that functions correctly in double action is not easy. Most seem to work better as single actions!

One of the minuses

of some Bulldogs was their "freewheeling" cylinder that would spin if the hammer wasn't cocked or the trigger pulled back. Costwise, the most expensive Bulldog was the Webley Frontier Model, which sold (in 1880) for \$17.50 when the cheapest Webley was \$9.50. In 1884, the E.C. Meacham catalog still had the lowest price of \$3.00 for a Bulldog, "an unbeatable price," as they noted. With the Colt double action at \$13 to \$17.50 each, it was without doubt the Bulldog which could easily fit the leanest budget of the average individual.

Some ads for the Bulldog boasted it could fire seven shots in five seconds. Promoters of the well-made Forehand & Wadsworth British Bulldog stated this quite confidently. Sold in .32, .38 and .44 caliber, the .32 S&W version had a seven-round cylinder. The Forehand & Wadsworth Bulldog, introduced in 1880, began cutting into sales of the Webley product. Nathaniel Curry noted the Forehand & Wadsworth Bulldog was "... decidedly the best and cheapest of the low-grade American self-cocking revolvers. ..."

In the beginning, few consumers were aware that the Bulldog had a competitive edge on the products of the large U.S. gunmakers. The British Bulldog soon took a back seat, however, because these bigger companies had been in existence for many years and enjoyed well-established reputations. Bulldogs were in far more widespread use than most will realize, but many may ask, if so many were in circulation, why are there so

A comparison of the hammer styles of both the author's American Bulldog and the Forehand & Wadsworth British type (right). The two U.S.-manufactured revolvers were America's best "Bulldog" and produced in the same city. Note the flatter, larger contours of the American version compared to the rounded lines of the British style, which has a shorter spur. Mechanically, the American version has a smoother action; the Forehand & Wadsworth has a rebounding hammer feature.

few pictures of them in the holsters of Westerners? The answer is quite likely that Bulldogs were out of sight, hidden in the pockets of their users.

In due time, people began wondering why no Bulldog-style revolvers were being made by any of the major American manufacturers. A testimony to this was a letter in 1876 written by a Californian to Smith & Wesson, in which he asked,

"Why don't you put something on the market to compete with Webley's Bulldog? The pistols have an immense popularity on this coast and people don't hesitate to pay \$25 to \$30.00 for them either. ..."

Sales techniques of the day kept the Bulldog market steadily popular with some advertisements stating, "the pistols are the most substantial of their class, the price we quote

them makes them substantial bargains." In late 1895, Montgomery Ward Company advertised; "big bargains, American Bulldog [author's note: possibly unsold, smaller-caliber versions of the earlier Meacham product sold back to Iver Johnson, who re-sold them to Montgomery Ward] revolver, sold in .32 and .38 caliber. ..."

The ad further stated "these guns are not toys, but good, big guns." Top prices now were \$1.89 each. Montgomery Ward also advertised a "Frontier Bulldog 6-shot, in 44 WCF for \$3.85" but judging from the illustration of this revolver, it appears to be an inferior-quality Belgian-made mass-produced copy of a Webley Frontier Model.

## THE BULLDOG OUT WEST

Other notable gun dealers who regularly offered Bulldogs of all types included Liddle & Kaeding and Shreve & Wolfman, both located in San Francisco. One of Liddle & Kaeding's advertisements in the publication *Pacific Life* in

The Forehand & Wadsworth British Bulldogs are serial-numbered on the grip of the frame and on the rear of the cylinder. It is estimated no more 90,000 F & W Bulldogs were manufactured; however, the serial numbers drastically overlap with other F&W revolvers, as seen on this specimen in the 85,000 range.



These Pistols are the most authentic of their kind. The price at which we now quote them makes them a genuine bargain.



**D**

Rubber Stock, Nickel Plated.  
SAW HANDLE.  
Cut represents exactly the 38-cal.

## AMERICAN "BRITISH BULL-DOG"

Central Fire, Double-Action, Five-Shot.  
Length of Barrel, 38 Cal., 2 1-2 in.;  
44 Cal., 2 3-4 in. Weight, 38 Cal.,  
16 ounces; 44 Cal., 19 ounces.

No. 101, Cent. Fire, 38 Cal., Round Barrel, S. & W. Cartridge..... **\$3 00**  
No. 102, Cent. Fire, 44 Cal., Round Barrel, with Gate, Webley Cartridge... **3 00**



These Pistols were made to compete with Colt's and resemble them in model and fine workmanship.  
The price at which we now quote them makes them a genuine bargain.



**C**

Rubber Stock, Nickel Plated  
SAW HANDLE.  
Cut represents exactly the 38 cal.

## NEW DESIGN (ENGLISH) "BRITISH BULL-DOG."

Central Fire, Double Action, Five-Shot.  
Length of Barrel, 2 1-2 inches.  
Weight, 20 ounces.

**THE 38 CAL. ARE STAMPED "AMERICAN BULL-DOG."**

No. 380, Cent. Fire, 38 Cal., Octagon Barrel, S. & W. Cartridge..... **\$6 87**  
No. 440, Cent. Fire, 44 Cal., Round Barrel, Webley Cartridge..... **7 50**



A pair of unique British Bulldogs (manufacturers unknown) is this duo seen in the 1884 Meacham catalog. The upper "American" British Bulldog has some interesting features as it is equipped with an almost identical cylinder pin and takedown latch as found on the Iver Johnson American Bulldog. Sold as an "American"-style British Bulldog, it is nevertheless supplied with a parrot beak grip. Compounding the confusion is that it mentions it has a "Smith & Wesson" handle! The lower catalog cut displays a very scarce and unusual type of British Bulldog that resembles both a pre-WWI Webley and a Colt double-action Lightning. The mention of it also having a "Smith & Wesson" handle seems suited to the illustration, and overall it is a very advanced-looking British Bulldog apparently introduced to compete with Colt's double-action.

1876 listed numerous Colt, Smith & Wesson and Wesson & Harrington revolvers, but most emphatically stressed the Bulldog's merits, noting: "...available also is the much celebrated double-action self-cocking Bulldog pistol." The heyday of the Bulldog continued.

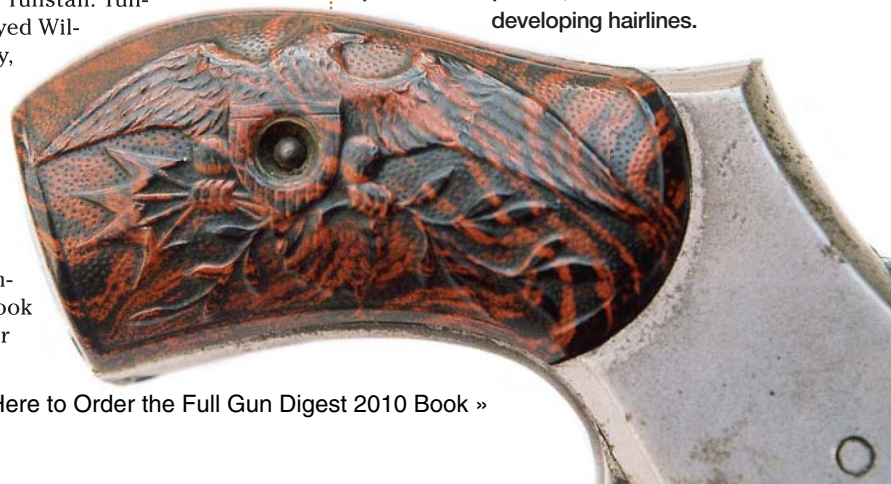
In the historical arena, many notables of the old West had their own affinities for the Bulldog. One known user of the Bulldog during its halcyon days was John Henry Tunstall. Tunstall employed William Bonney, aka Billy the Kid, when he first came to New Mexico. Billy was close to Tunstall, who took the teenager

under his wing. Tunstall's diary noted, "I never went anywhere without my Bulldog." After Tunstall's murder by the Murphy-Dolan faction, Billy became hostile to those elements and played a violent role in the Lincoln County War. At the time of his death, it is rumored that Billy was in possession of a .41 Colt Thunderer with the backstrap engraved "Billy." This has never been authenticated, but it was known he had a self-cocker on his person when he was shot at the Maxwell ranch. There is a distinct possibility that Billy could have had a double-action Bulldog on his person - perhaps even Tunstall's own revolver, obtained after his mentor had been killed. Nothing substantiates this, however.

A place where the British Bulldog was always reported in detail was in Bodie, California. It seems the newspapers of this town had an affinity for reporting incidents involving Bulldog revolvers. The paper carried various accounts in the late 1870s and early 1880s, some of which included that a mining employee on October 2, 1879, put a Bulldog to his head and took his own life. Another article mentioned that a miner staying at "Spanish Dora's brothel" was robbed of \$15.00 and his British Bull Dog. One very interesting Bodie news story was the January, 1881 vigilante lynching of an adulterous man who used a Forehand & Wadsworth 38-caliber Bulldog to kill the husband of a woman he was seeing!

One notable fan of the British Bulldog was outlaw Bob Dalton. In 1892 when the Dalton gang raided Coffeyville, Kansas, during the botched bank jobs in that town, nearly the entire band was killed or seriously wounded. The Condon Bank bookkeeper, Tom Babb, found a 38-caliber British Bulldog in the vest pocket

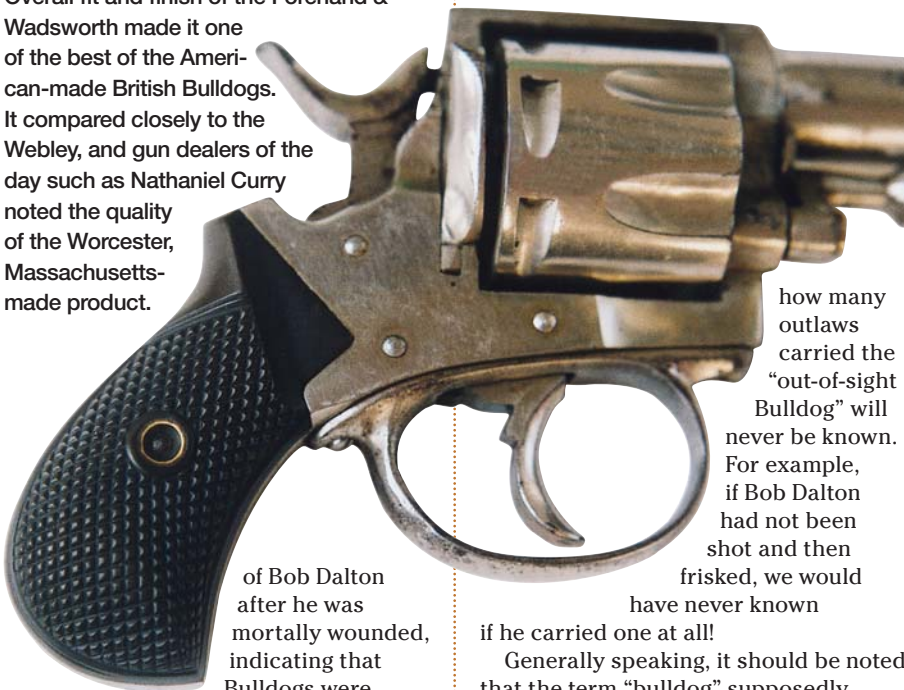
Identifying the actual manufacturer of the Meacham Arms Co. American Bull Dog was easy if one knew that the American eagle logo was a trademark of the Iver Johnson Company! The grips on this specimen are perfect, without cracks or developing hairlines.





Another example of a variation in the British Bulldog logo is the .32 S&W Forehand & Wadsworth (top). The words "Bull-Dog" are apart and hyphenated, as well. Shown below is the placement of the manufacturer's markings on the upper flat of the revolver's oblong barrel.

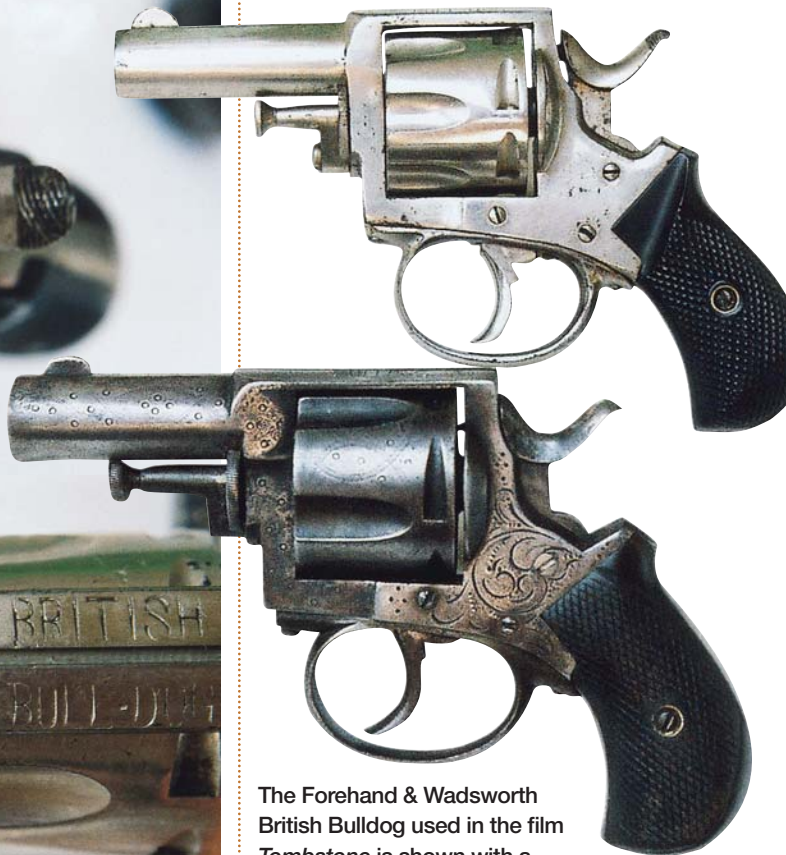
Overall fit and finish of the Forehand & Wadsworth made it one of the best of the American-made British Bulldogs. It compared closely to the Webley, and gun dealers of the day such as Nathaniel Curry noted the quality of the Worcester, Massachusetts-made product.



indeed popular pocket guns with both outlaw and law-abiding citizen alike. The revolver he carried on that day is now in the Dalton Museum in Coffeyville. Just

how many outlaws carried the "out-of-sight Bulldog" will never be known. For example, if Bob Dalton had not been shot and then frisked, we would have never known if he carried one at all!

Generally speaking, it should be noted that the term "bulldog" supposedly refers specifically to a small pocket revolver of large caliber – but the general design was so popular that smaller calibers of 32 and 38 were also marketed



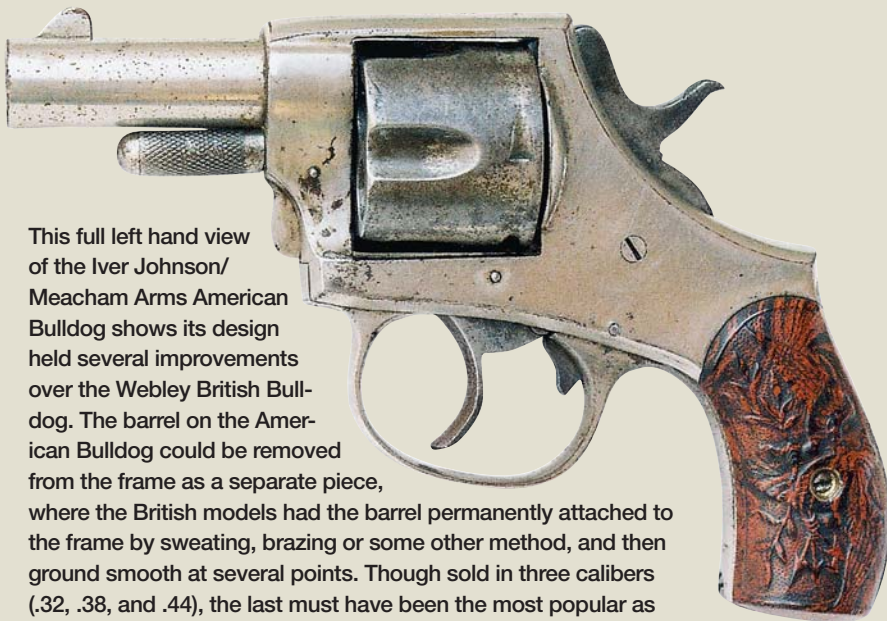
The Forehand & Wadsworth British Bulldog used in the film *Tombstone* is shown with a unique 44-caliber engraved Belgian British Bulldog with a worn gold-brushed finish that is disappearing with time.

as Bulldogs. [Editor's note: During this same period, Connecticut Arms & Manufacturing Co. of Naubuc, Connecticut, also manufactured a single-shot .44 derringer called the Hammond Bulldog. –DMS] The British and American Bulldogs were as popular in the East as in the West, but received more attention in the Wild West. Even Charles Strauss, the mayor of Tucson, Arizona, carried a beautifully engraved British Bulldog with fancy stocks in the early 1880s. This particular specimen is on display at the Arizona Historical Society.

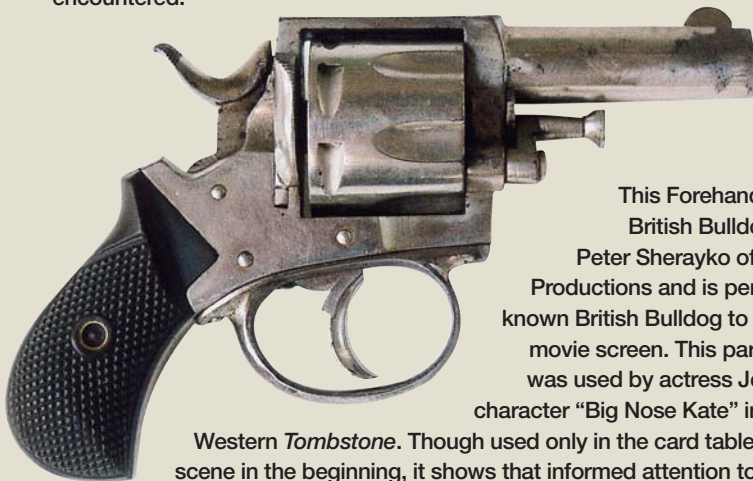
### THE BULLDOG AS A COLLECTIBLE

Modern-day Old West fans have taken a liking to the Bulldog. Some of today's shooters have resurrected them and a number of obsolete brass manufacturers have recently informed the author that there has been a noticeable demand for .44 Webley/Bulldog cases in the last five years. At the present time, double

# WHEN BULLDOGS RULED



This full left hand view of the Iver Johnson/Meacham Arms American Bulldog shows its design held several improvements over the Webley British Bulldog. The barrel on the American Bulldog could be removed from the frame as a separate piece, where the British models had the barrel permanently attached to the frame by sweating, brazing or some other method, and then ground smooth at several points. Though sold in three calibers (.32, .38, and .44), the last must have been the most popular as few examples of the American Bulldog in the smaller calibers are encountered.



This Forehand & Wadsworth British Bulldog is owned by Peter Sherayko of Caravan West Productions and is perhaps the best-known British Bulldog to be seen on the movie screen. This particular revolver was used by actress Joanna Pacula's character "Big Nose Kate" in the epic 1993

*Western Tombstone*. Though used only in the card table dispute in one scene in the beginning, it shows that informed attention to detail ensures that historically correct firearms, such as the British Bulldog, get their due.

actions are not allowed in Single Action Shooting Society competition, but may make for an interesting novelty – or “side” –match. It would be nice to see the “self-cockers” allowed to have their own category in the future. It is important to mention here that the Bulldog revolver made a comeback in the 1970s when Charter Arms Company in Connecticut added a “Bulldog” revolver to its line. Keeping with tradition, they chambered it for a .44-caliber cartridge, namely the powerful .44 Special. The five-shot wheelgun had a 3-1/2" barrel, rounded butt, and was an improvement on an old design. The Charter Arms Bulldog, however, got bad press when it was used in several murders by David Berkowitz, later convicted in the Son of Sam cases in New York City.

The British Bulldog is quickly becoming the new generation of classical ordnance of the Old West to find acceptance in collector circles. One of the niceties of Bulldog collecting is that



they are, for the most, all of pre-1898 manufacture, which classifies them as true antiques. There are, however, some that may have been built after 1898, but these would probably be made as double-actions in the “suicide special” category that are easy to spot as many have dated patent markings. Production of the classical British Bulldogs began to wane in the mid-1890s, but by that time there were plenty in circulation.

It is the Webley-made British Bulldog most collectors see as the genuine forerunner of all Bulldogs. Costwise, Webley variations have lately risen as high as \$400, depending on condition and grade. At gun shows or auctions, Bulldogs of all different varieties, makes, and calibers still seem abundant, but the Bulldog collector should be reminded that next to the Webley, the American-made Bulldogs will normally command a higher price than a Belgian-made product. The varieties of the Belgian-made Bulldogs are, however, endless and the guns vary radically in overall quality.

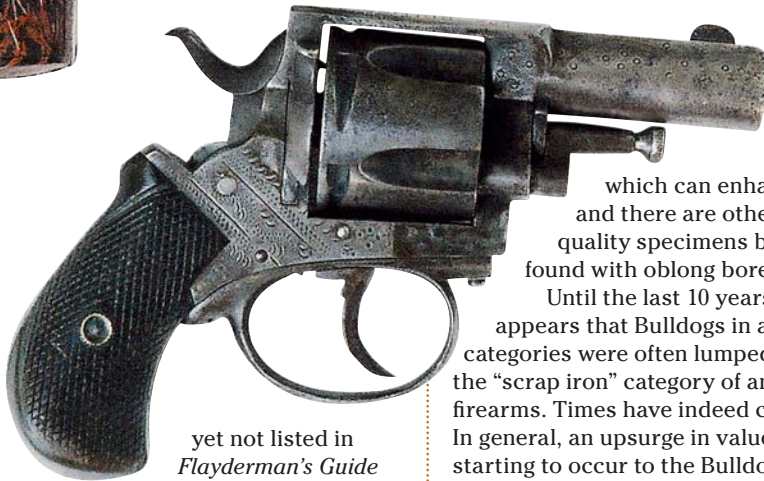
For a comparison of value, a Forehand & Wadsworth Bulldog is noticeably more expensive (aside from a Webley) than any foreign copy, since fewer than an estimated 90,000 were produced. Though the author's specimen is in the 85,000 range, serial numbers of the F&W revolver serial numbers overlapped so radically that one cannot reliably date them. The F&W British Bulldog is

The dot engraving flanking the logo on this Belgian copy is of a very plain pattern. Note the marking on the upper example has the words “Bulldog” together. The lower Belgian copy has “Bull Dog” as separate words stamped to be read from the right whereas the upper specimen must be read from the left. It seems foreign manufacturers have marked the trademark logo in varying methods and styles.

Side by side, the rear frames of the American Bulldog (left) and the British Bulldog (right) clearly show the smooth, fluid lines of the former contrasted to the squarish look of the latter.



A comparison of the Iver Johnson/Meacham Arms Co. 44-caliber American Bulldog vs. a 44-caliber Belgian British Bulldog. Note the size of the former—built with a larger frame than the Belgian copy, comfortable in large hands.



yet not listed in *Flayderman's Guide to Antique American Firearms and their Values* since so few exist. It should be mentioned that Forehand & Wadsworth also produced another double action with bird's-head grips that was marked on the frame "American Bulldog." Its production numbers are unknown and the author has seen no early advertisements for it. Some of the Belgian copies have medium- to lower-grade engraving,

which can enhance value, and there are other lower-quality specimens being found with oblong bores!

Until the last 10 years, it appears that Bulldogs in all categories were often lumped into the "scrap iron" category of antique firearms. Times have indeed changed! In general, an upsurge in value is starting to occur to the Bulldog, much like that which transpired in the 1950s and '60s when Smith & Wessons and Merwin & Hulberts were inexpensive on the gun show circuit—but have now become premium antique firearms.

Currently, the Bulldog is still quite affordable, and there should be enough for everybody, at least for the present. Prices have been on the rise over the last decade, indicating growing interest in the once-neglected area of Bulldog



Note the petite, well-contoured lines of the Forehand & Wadsworth British Bulldog (top), contrasted to a typical Belgian Bulldog. The F&W is far less "boxy" than its European counterpart.

collecting. Having been a student of these little fistfuls of power for well over 30 years, I've found that out of the 300-plus Bulldogs I have owned or examined, there are more than 30 variations from my own examinations alone. With the huge numbers of manufacturers, designs, calibers, special features, etc., one can create his own collecting theme on a single specimen within this family of firearms. Even the various styles of the legendary logo, "British Bulldog" on these ultra-compact belly guns, is an area of study itself!

As a final tribute, it should be remembered that the basic design of the Webley British Bulldog influenced the future of the large-frame, break-top Webley military revolver that served admirably in three major wars. The nostalgia of the Bulldog is not far from my mind each time I travel to Worcester, Massachusetts and pass by the city's old mills and factories. It's bittersweet to recall that this area of New England was once the capital of domestic Bulldog revolver manufacture in the United States.

What were the most popular law enforcement handguns of the twentieth century? The answer might surprise you.

# THE COLT OFFICIAL POLICE AND S&W Military & Police

BY PAUL SCARLATA  
PHOTOS BY JAMES WALTER

I want all of you readers under the age of 30 to sit down before we go any further. I want you seated because I don't want anyone getting dizzy and falling down when I tell you that:

There was a time when American

1944.  
Canadian  
infantry  
officers in the  
Netherlands.  
They are  
wearing  
holstered  
No. 2 S&W  
revolvers.  
(Courtesy of  
Clive Law)

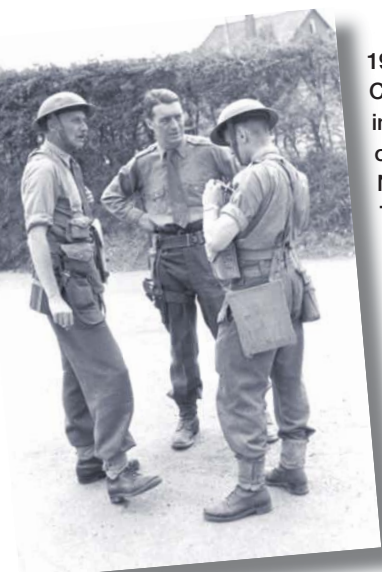
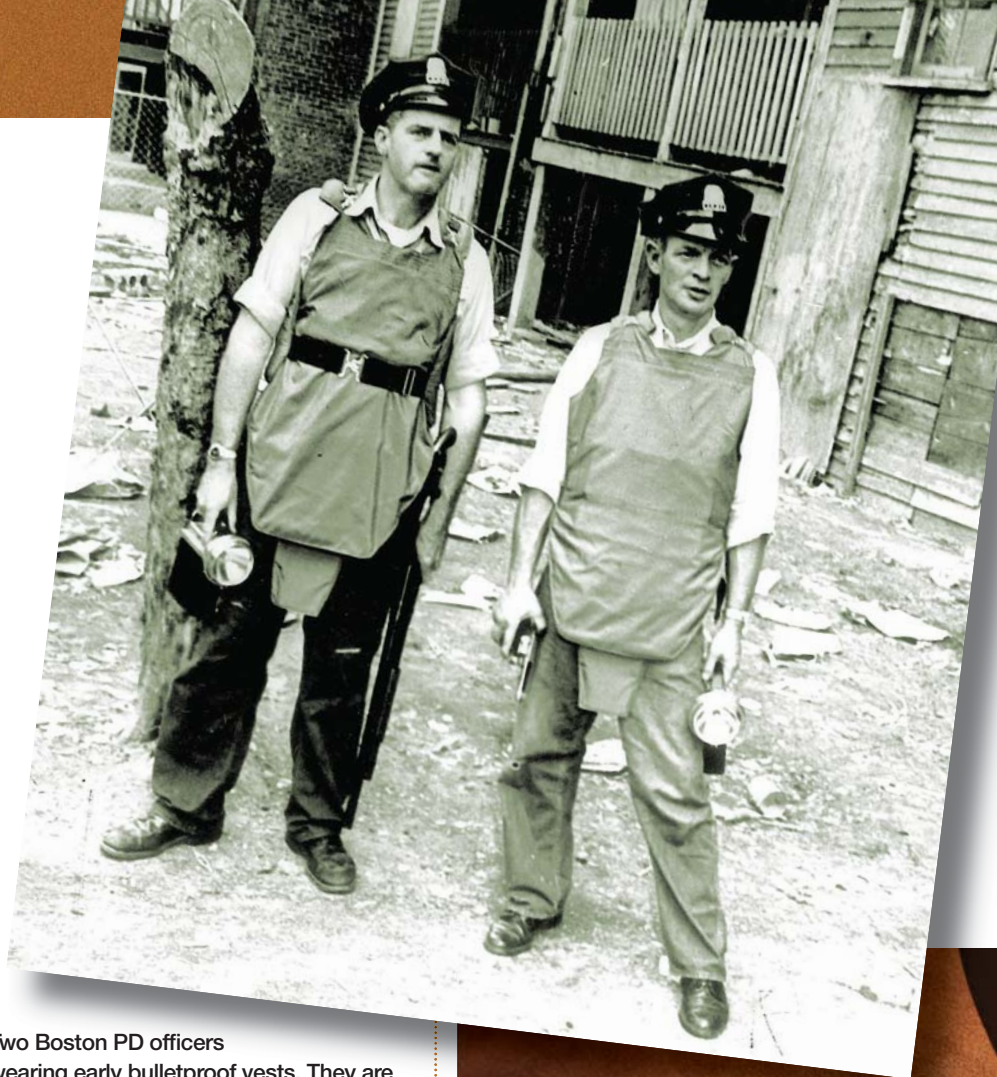
Two Boston PD officers wearing early bulletproof vests. They are armed with Colt O.P. revolvers. (Courtesy Boston PD Records Center & Archives)

police officers DID NOT carry semi-auto pistols!

Yes, children, it's true. From the 1870s until the last decade and a half of the twentieth century, the weapon in the holster of the vast majority of American cops was a revolver. I know some of you are having trouble visualizing this concept, but that's not the end of the story. Not only did the guardians of law and order carry revolvers, but the weapon in question was usually a "plain Jane" blue steel revolver with a barrel of four to six inches, fitted with wooden grips and fixed sights.

I can hear the gasps of disbelief emanating from the readership. "No stainless steel? No adjustable sights? No recoil absorbing, synthetic grips? How could they possibly function with such primitive equipment?" Well, the answer to that question consists of two words: Damn well!

Those of us who are "experienced" shooters remember when the choice of centerfire handguns available to the public was limited. In fact, until 1954



# THE COLT OFFICIAL POLICE AND S&W MILITARY & POLICE

there was only one (!) American-made, centerfire pistol capable of firing a serious cartridge: the .45-caliber Colt M1911. But even this well-respected icon received little notice from the average civilian shooter or police officer. To us Americans, when the word “handgun” was mentioned, the image that immediately came to mind was the revolver.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, most American police forces did not issue handguns. Officers were usually supplied with a truncheon and a set of handcuffs, and those desiring to carry firearms were required to buy their own. Standards, when they existed at all, were usually limited to what were acceptable calibers and size. Period photos show these nineteenth-century constables wearing long coats and tall hats but nary a holster in sight. This was because most urban agencies required that the handgun be carried out of sight, which was why small, .32-caliber, top-break designs predominated.

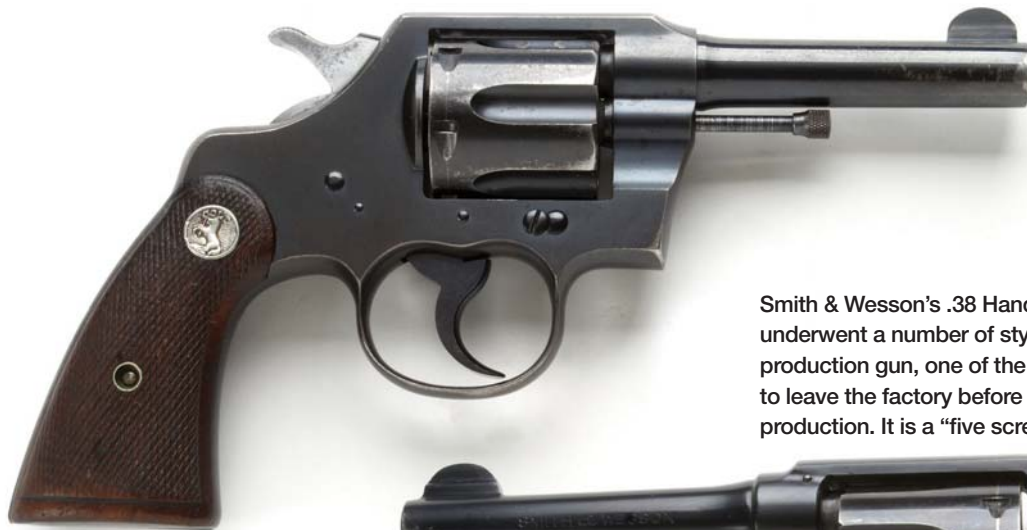
The situation began to change in the 1890s as urban police departments

became better trained, organized and armed. One of the first was the NYPD, whose new commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt, equipped all officers with a

The equipment of a member of the Boston Police Department, circa 1960. (Courtesy Boston PD Records Center & Archives)



# THE COLT OFFICIAL POLICE AND S&W MILITARY & POLICE



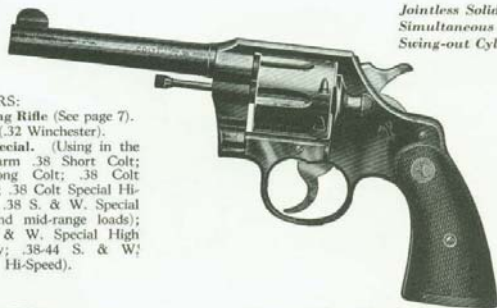
Colt Official Police Revolver. Note the exposed ejector rod, characteristic Colt style grips with medallion and round blade front sight. Except for the latter, the O.P. remained basically unchanged during its long production life.

Smith & Wesson's .38 Hand Ejector Military & Police revolver underwent a number of styling changes. This is a 1940 production gun, one of the last commercial grade revolvers to leave the factory before they switched over to wartime production. It is a "five screw" frame gun with the "skinny" barrel and a lanyard ring.



## Colt Official Police Revolver

SIX SHOTS, DOUBLE ACTION



Jointless Solid Frame  
Simultaneous Ejection  
Swing-out Cylinder

### CALIBERS:

.22 Long Rifle (See page 7).  
.32-20 (.32 Winchester).  
.38 Special. (Using in the same arm .38 Short Colt; .38 Long Colt; .38 Colt Special; .38 Colt Special Hi-Speed; .38 S. & W. Special (full and mid-range loads); .38 S. & W. Special High Velocity; .38-44 S. & W. Special Hi-Speed).



The Famous Colt Matted Frame Top

The "Official Police" Revolver as well as all Colt Service Revolvers is furnished with the patented Colt matted frame top, eliminating all possibility of light reflection and glare and aiding in sighting. Both of the raised ribs running lengthwise along the top of the frame are deeply cut in a crosswise direction, giving a matted effect which has become unusually popular among shooters. This feature is found only in Colt Revolvers.

### General Specifications

LENGTHS OF BARREL: 2, 4, 5 or 6 inches (.22 Cal. 6 in. only). (.32-20 Cal. 4, 5, 6 in. only).

LENGTH OVER ALL: With 6 inch barrel, 11 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches.

STOCKS: Checked Walnut.

TRIGGER: Checked.

SIGHTS: Fixed, Non-reflecting, giving "Partridge" effect in sighting.

FINISH: Full Blued (or Full Nickel Plated), top of frame matted to eliminate reflection and glare. (.22 cal. Blued only).

WEIGHT: With 6-inch barrel, (.38 caliber) 34 ounces.

Simplicity of design and care in manufacture, resulting in extreme durability, reliability and accuracy make the Official Police Revolver a most acceptable model for all around service. The ample grip with its checked wood stocks is so designed as to snugly fit the hand, regardless of size, while the action is surprisingly smooth and easy for so powerful an arm. The extreme safety in handling provided by its COLT POSITIVE LOCK especially adapts it for service wherever a safe, dependable Arm of medium size and weight to handle the powerful caliber .38 Colt Special cartridge is desirable.

### Special Features



Adopted by such Police Departments as New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, Portland, Ore., St. Louis, Los Angeles and many smaller cities, as well as the State Police of Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Con-

necticut, New Jersey, etc., etc. Much of the unequalled durability of the Official Police Revolver is due to its sturdy one-piece frame, as well as the exacting care employed in finishing and fitting every part.

standard handgun, the Colt .32 New Police revolver – and insisted they receive marksmanship training. This also signified an important technological change as the New Police was a swing-out cylinder revolver. Even then the NYPD was a trendsetting agency and many departments followed suit and adopted the new Colt.

That same year S&W introduced their first swing-out cylinder revolver, the .32 Hand Ejector Model of 1896, which was taken into service by the Philadelphia PD, among others. The race was now on, as these two titans of the American handgun industry began a non-stop, no holds barred competition to see who could capture the lion's

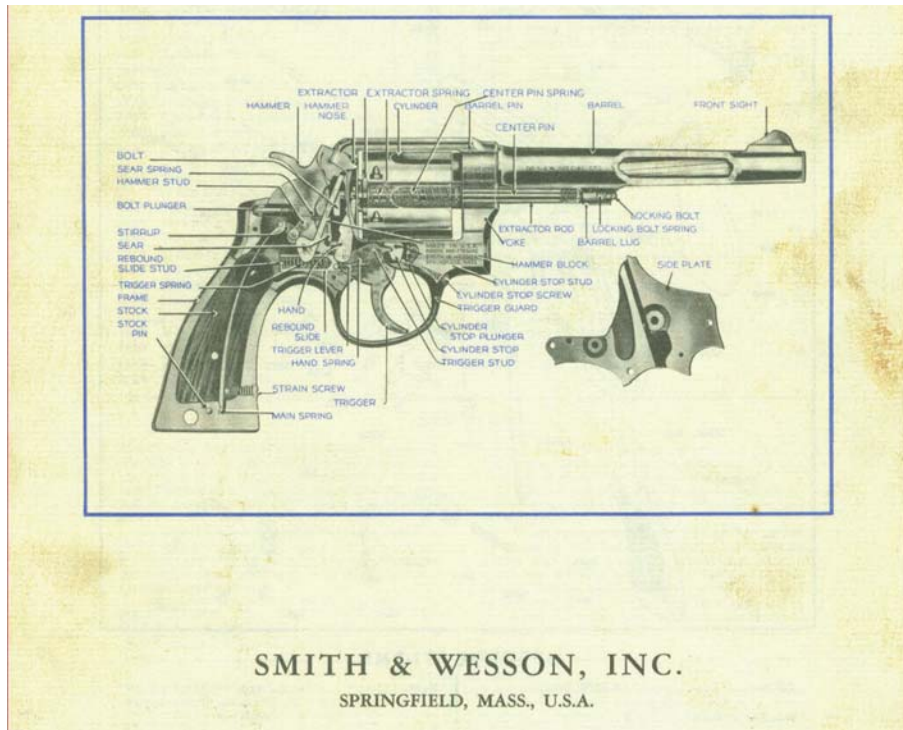
share of the U.S. police market.

The year 1899 saw S&W's introduction of the .38 Hand Ejector Military & Police revolver. This medium frame (K-frame), swing-out cylinder revolver was their attempt to garner a military contract. And while the government purchased several thousand, Colt's .38-caliber New Model Army & Navy revolvers remained the standard military sidearm.

The next big step occurred during the first decade of the new century. As is the case today, American police tended to ape the army when it came to sidearms, and the military's acceptance of the .38 Colt revolver convinced many that an upgrading of equipment was called for. While the .32 revolver's popularity with police would continue for a few more decades, the writing was on the wall for all to see: the .38 revolver would be THE next American police handgun of choice. The timing was opportune as the army was getting ready to ditch the .38 wheelgun in favor of one of the new fangled semi-auto pistols. With military sales drying up, Colt began to court police departments and their rivals from Springfield were not far behind!

A page from a 1940 Colt catalog extolling the virtues of their Official Police Revolver. Note that they refer to its cartridge as the ".38 Colt Special."

Cutaway view of a 1960s vintage M&P revolver. (Courtesy of Michael Jon Littman)



to interest police agencies with a modified New Model Army & Navy revolver: the New Army. They also introduced the smaller .38 Police Positive, which weighed a convenient 22 oz. The Police Positive would prove very popular and it, along with a short-barreled version, the Detective Special, would remain in production until the 1980s. But many agencies wanted a more robust sidearm and to answer this demand, in 1927 the Colt Official Police (O.P.) was released on the market.

### THE COLT OFFICIAL POLICE

The O.P. used the same size of frame (I-frame) as the New Army but the frame and trigger guard were reshaped to make it more comfortable and attractive. Unlike some of the earlier Colts, cylinder rotation direction was clockwise and cylinder locking was strengthened by a single peripheral recess for each chamber engaged by a bolt at the rear of the cylinder. Lastly, a pivoting firing pin replaced the fixed protuberance used on its predecessors.

Lockup was via a pin contained in the recoil plate that entered a recess in the center of a rotating ratchet at the rear of the cylinder, locking it securely in place. To unload the O.P., a latch on the left of

### THE S&W M&P

The S&W .38 Hand Ejector – let’s just call it the M&P – utilized a swing-out cylinder that was locked into the frame by means of a spring loaded center pin passing through the ejector rod and projecting out of the rear of the cylinder. When the cylinder is closed, the end of the center pin snaps into a recess in the recoil plate, locking the cylinder in place. To open, a thumb latch on the left side of the frame is pushed forward, forcing the center pin out of the locking recess and allowing the cylinder to be swung out to the left. Pushing back on the ejector rod forces out a star-shaped extractor, ejecting all the spent cartridge cases simultaneously.

In 1902 the locking system was strengthened by the addition of a underlug on the barrel with a spring-loaded pin that locked into the front end of ejector rod. This system has proven so practical that it has been used on all subsequent S&W revolvers down to the present day.

But perhaps more historically significant was the new cartridge introduced with the M&P. Known as the .38 S&W Special it consisted of a straight-walled, rimmed case 1.14" in length loaded with a 158-gr. lead round-nosed bullet with a

rated velocity of approximately 850 fps. This was a definite improvement over the army’s .38 Long Colt and within a five years would completely dominate the medium-caliber revolver market to the point where even Colt was chambering revolvers for it.

1908 saw Colt attempt



To load or unload both the M&P and O.P., the cylinders were swung out to the left side. Both were traditional “six shooters.”

the frame was pulled to the rear (exactly the opposite of the M&P), allowing the cylinder to be swung out on a crane to the left. As with the S&W, pushing on the ejector rod activated a star-shaped extractor, extracting the spent cartridge cases simultaneously. Both the O.P. and M&P swing out cylinders permitted fast, fumble-free reloading, although it would be many more decades before the perfection of the revolver speedloader really speeded things up.

The O.P. weighed approximately 11 oz. more than the Police Positive and so, depending on what size revolver the customer wanted, Colt had the water-front covered. In regard to weight, the M&P split the difference between the two Colts.



Both revolvers function identically – except to unlatch the S&W's cylinder, the thumb latch on the left side of the frame is pushed forward....



...while that of the Colt is pulled to the rear.



Then their cylinders were swung out to the left and their ejector rods pushed to the rear to extract the spent cases from the cylinder.

This entrepreneurial battle royale began with Colt – who traditionally received “better press” – having a distinct advantage. Within a few years, the O.P. was the standard issue sidearm of (among others) the NYPD, LAPD, Chicago, San Francisco, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Portland police departments. The highway patrols of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and Connecticut (to say nothing of the FBI) soon followed, and sales of the O.P. on the police and civilian markets boomed.

While the O.P. usually out-sold the M&P, the S&W was without a doubt the #2 product on the North American police market. Among the more notable agencies adopting it were the police departments of San Antonio, New Orleans, Atlanta, Omaha, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Larger agencies included the Michigan and Virginia State Police and the Provincial Police of British Columbia, Quebec and Ontario. Over the years, many agencies approved the use of both revolvers and it was possible to find Colts and Smiths in service concurrently.

Unlike the O.P., the M&P underwent a number of changes and improvements during its production life, the most notable being:

**1902:** the addition of a underlug on the barrel with a spring loaded pin that locked into the front of the ejector rod.

**1904:** an optional square butt grip frame and larger grips.

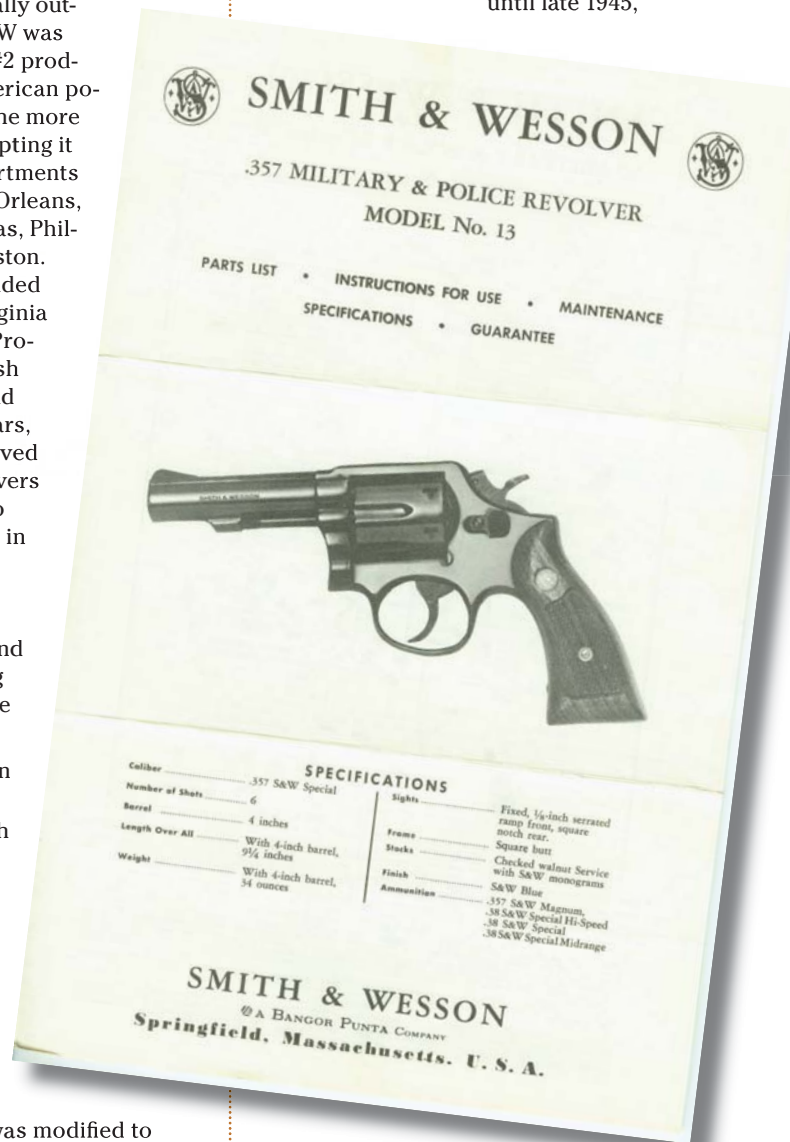
**1907:** the trigger mechanism was modified to provide a lighter DA trigger pull.

**1915:** the hammer rebound safety was replaced with a spring activated hammer block which was further improved in 1926.

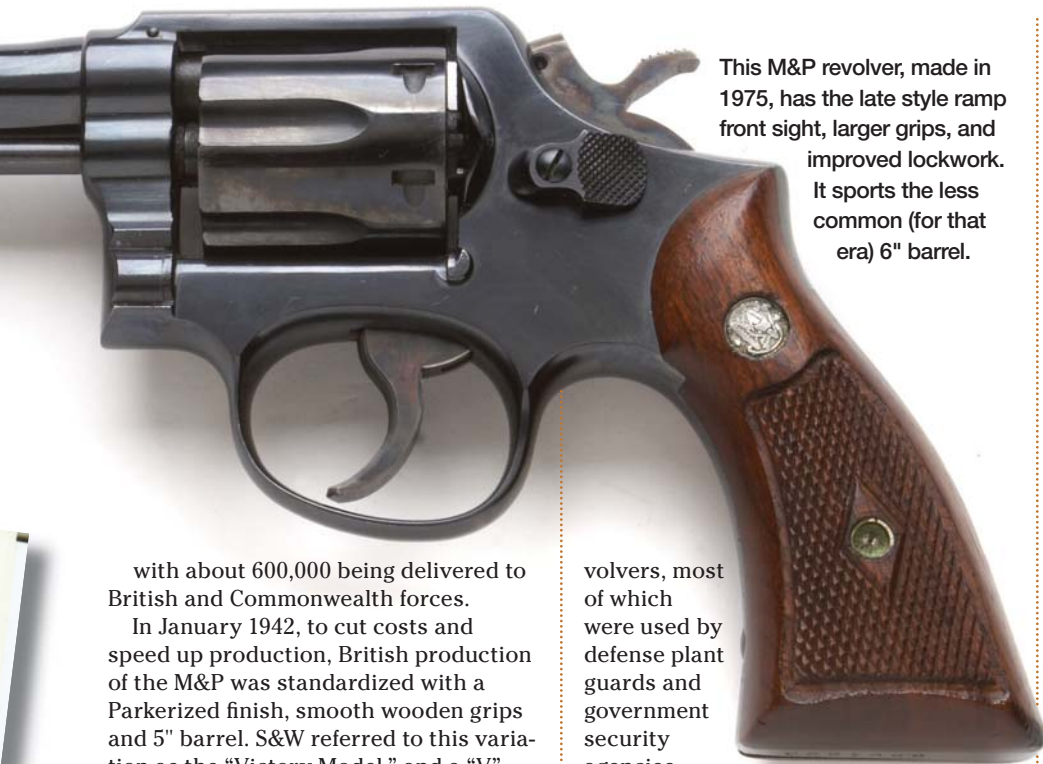
**1944:** a mechanically activated, positive hammer block safety.



In 1940 Great Britain placed large orders for S&W revolvers to supplement their standard Enfield and Webley revolvers. S&W chambered the M&P for the standard British .380" Mark I cartridge, which was nothing more than the old .38 S&W loaded with a 200-gr. lead bullet (later a 178-gr. FMJ bullet). Deliveries continued until late 1945,



Instruction manual for a S&W .357 Magnum Model 13 revolver. This model, with a 3" barrel, was adopted by the FBI. (Courtesy of Michael Jon Littman)



This M&P revolver, made in 1975, has the late style ramp front sight, larger grips, and improved lockwork. It sports the less common (for that era) 6" barrel.

with about 600,000 being delivered to British and Commonwealth forces.

In January 1942, to cut costs and speed up production, British production of the M&P was standardized with a Parkerized finish, smooth wooden grips and 5" barrel. S&W referred to this variation as the "Victory Model," and a "V" prefix was added to the serial number.

With the United States' entry into the war, the U.S. Government placed orders for Victory Model revolvers, which differed from the British pattern in that they were chambered for the .38 Special cartridge and were fitted with 2" and 4" barrels. Over 300,000 U.S. Victory Models were issued to the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, Merchant Marine and security guards at government installations. Numbers of them eventually saw combat, mainly in the Pacific theater.

While Colt concentrated on producing other weapons for the war effort, beginning in 1942 a version of the O.P., known as the Colt Commando, was produced with a Parkerized finish, smooth trigger and hammer, plastic grips and 2" or 4" barrel. The government bought approximately 48,000 Commando re-

volvers, most of which were used by defense plant guards and government security agencies.

### S&W TAKES THE LEAD

After the war, both companies resumed production of commercial-grade guns for the police and civilian market. As it had been before 1941, the O.P. proved a bigger seller – but the situation was about to change. During the war years, Colt had concentrated on building 1911 pistols and other weaponry, letting their revolver line languish. S&W, on the other hand, had upgraded their manufacturing processes and had a large pool of trained workers. With the war's end, Colt was stuck with outdated equipment and a shortage of skilled labor.

Additionally, Colt revolvers required more hand-fitting and detail work, which significantly increased their price compared to the competition. Lastly, while

S&W embarked on a long-term R&D program to improve their revolvers, Colt's management seemed content to live off their reputation and did little to improve equipment, efficiency, their labor force and, most significantly, the product. This recipe for disaster led to S&W's capturing an ever-increasing share of the police and military market.

1948 saw the venerable M&P's designation changed to the Model 10. Seven years later, S&W introduced a K-frame revolver chambered for the .357 Magnum cartridge: the Model 19 Combat Magnum. Police agencies seeking more powerful weapons bought them as fast as they could be produced. Colt attempted to play catchup by re-chambering the O.P. for the .357 cartridge and adding a heavy barrel, adjustable sights and larger grips. Known as the Colt 357 Magnum, sales were disappointing. The popularity of S&W K-frame revolvers, however, continued to grow as such prestigious agencies as the New York State Police, FBI and Royal Canadian Mounted Police adopted them. S&W also sold large numbers of them to police and military forces in Europe, Latin America and Asia.

The handwriting was now on the wall. Colt went through a series of new owners, none of whom seemed interested in innovation; the product line remained stagnant; and quality control took a hit while a series of labor disputes adversely affected production and the company's reputation.

As is evident from a 1976 survey taken by the New York State Criminal Justice Services, by that time, the police market was S&W's private preserve. The sidearms used by the 45 state police agencies responding to the survey broke down as follows:

S&W revolvers: 30
Colt revolvers: 4
Both: 4
Other: 1 (S&W 9mm pistol)
Revolver brand not indicated: 6

In an attempt to stay solvent, Colt began dropping models and 1969 found the O.P. missing from the catalog. The name was briefly revived with the Mark III Official Police revolver, but sales were so disappointing that production ceased after only three years. Many shooters and collectors found it disturbing that Colt's product line, reputation and popularity had sunk to such low levels.

The S&W Model 10 continued to be



The Colt Commando was a wartime version of the O.P. with a Parkerized finish and plastic grips. (Photo courtesy of Charles Pate)

the firm's bread and butter product, although with the advent of the troublesome – and more violent – 1970s, .357 K-frame revolvers soon became their most popular law enforcement product. Beginning in the late 1980s, the 9mm (and later .40-caliber) semi-auto pistol became the police sidearm of choice, and today it is rare to see an American police officer with a holstered revolver at his side.

Here is the target Vince produced with the M&P. No complaints there! (below) While the Colt's grouping was not quite as good as the Smith's, the difference was minimal.



## Specifications

Colt Official Police	
Caliber	.38 "Colt Special" (Colt's proprietary .38 Special)
Overall length	9.25"
Barrel length	4"
Weight	33.5 oz.
Capacity	6
Sights	Front, rounded blade; rear, square groove in topstrap
Grips	Checkered walnut

S&W .38 Hand Ejector Military & Police	
Caliber	.38 S&W Special
Overall length	9.2"
Barrel length	4"
Weight	29 oz.
Capacity	6
Sights	Front, rounded blade; rear, U-shaped groove in topstrap
Grips	Checkered walnut or hard rubber

Opinions regarding this change of equipment are varied, with both sides making many good points in favor of their preferred weapon but such discussions – which always threaten to become heated – is beyond the scope of this article.

### WHICH IS THE BETTER-SHOOTING REVOLVER?

You knew we were going to get around to burning gunpowder sooner or later, didn't you? Accordingly I obtained samples of each revolver: my brother



Offhand shooting was performed at a "regulation" seven yards. Note the fumes from the lubricated, lead bullets.



All test firing was performed with Black Hills ammunition.

Vincent provided a very nice M&P made around 1940 while my fellow collector of oddities, John Rasalov, was able to supply an O.P. Despite its being of 1930 vintage, the latter was in very good condition and as mechanically sound as the day it left the factory.

First, several observations as to each revolver's strong and weak points: I found the S&W to be the better balanced of the two, making it a more naturally pointing revolver. Double-action trigger pulls are a subjective matter and while some prefer the way the Colt's stroke has a noticeable stage just before it breaks, I prefer the lighter, stage-free pull of the M&P.

The O.P. was graced with a superior set of sights: a wide, square notch at the rear and the blade of ample proportions up front. While having the same style of sights, the Smith's were smaller and harder to align quickly. In addition, the tip of M&P's hammer spur actually obscured the rear notch until the hammer was slightly cocked. For the life of me I cannot fathom this, and wish someone could explain the reason for it.

When it comes to grips it was a tie. Both were horrible! I do not understand why it took the firearms industry several centuries to figure out that the odds of hitting the target would be greatly improved by a set of hand-filling, ergonomically-correct grips?

In keeping with the proper historical spirit I decided to limit me test firing to the type of ammunition that was most widely used during the era during in which this pair of revolvers had seen service. Black Hills Ammunition kindly

supplied a quantity of .38 Special cartridges loaded with the traditional 158-gr. LRN bullets.

While I served as cameraman, my brother Vincent fired a series of six-shot groups with each revolver from a rest at a distance of 15 yards. As can be seen in the photos, both shot to point of aim and produced some very nice six-shot groups. I then set up a pair of USPSA targets at seven yards, and Vince ran two dozen rounds through each revolver, firing them both one-handed and supported.

What can we deduce from this expenditure of ammunition? Inasmuch as my brother Vince did all the shooting, I will quote him:

"I can make several observations," he says. First of all, both revolvers proved capable of excellent accuracy, whether fired from a rest or offhand. And while the Colt's sights were of a more practical design, I shot slightly better with the S&W. Whether or not this was due to the fact that I have much more experience with S&W revolvers, I can't really say. The grips on both revolvers were poorly designed and I believe something as simple as the addition of a grip adapter would improve handling to a significant degree. The Tyler-T Grip Adapter was first marketed in the 1930s and I can understand why! As regards recoil control, with its greater weight, I found I could shoot the O.P. faster but, considering the rather sedate ammunition we used, the difference was not all that great."

Vince summed it all up by saying, "I have long been a fan of the fixed-sight, double-action revolver and the perfor-

mance of this pair only serves to buttress my long-held belief that they are one of the most practical type of handguns ever invented. I contend that for over a century they were proved capable of performing any law enforcement task they were called upon to perform and – despite the present popularity of the semi-auto pistol – still are!"

I then pressed him to choose a "winner." After a few moments of hesitation he said, "The M&P. But then I'm prejudiced."

*NOTE: I would like to thank Vincent Scarlata, John Rasalov, Charles Pate, Michael Jon Littman, Donna Wells, Jeff Hoffman and Clive Law for supplying materials used to prepare this report. And I'm indebted to Black Hills Ammunition (PO Box 3090, Rapid City, SD 57709. Tel. 800-568-6625) for their kind cooperation in furnishing ammunition.*

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# The 44 Special

BEGINS ITS  
SECOND  
CENTURY

BY JOHN TAFFIN



## THE ROAD TO THE .44 SPECIAL

**I**n 1857, two entrepreneurs, Horace Smith and Daniel Wesson, produced the first successful cartridge-firing revolver, the Smith & Wesson #1. This little seven-shot, tip-up revolver was chambered for what would become the most popular cartridge of all time, the .22 rimfire. They would go on to build both .22 and .32 rimfires in the Models 1, 1-1/2, and 2, and they had plans to bring out a big-bore version, but those plans were pushed to the back burner with the coming of the Civil War in 1861.

Meanwhile, over at the Colt factory, Sam Colt had decided cartridge cases would never catch on and shooters would always want to load their own using powder, ball, and cap. When

Colt received a very lucrative contract to build 1860 Army Model .44s for the Northern Army not, only was the company's immediate future assured but there definitely was no further thought of building cartridge-firing revolvers. Smith & Wesson kept producing their

In the early 1980s S&W resurrected the .44 Special Model 24 for a limited run. This matched pair of 4" sixguns wear carved ivory stocks by Bob Leskovec and are carried in floral carved Tom Threepersons holsters from El Paso Saddlery.

little pocket guns, which were quite popular as hideout weapons during the 1860s, but they did not forget their plans to build a .44-caliber version.

Sam Colt died in 1862, but his ideas persisted and percussion revolvers remained as the number one focus of the Colt Company. Then it happened! I can let my imagination run loose and see the executives of Colt sitting around the boardroom in late 1869 when the messenger arrives. He talks to the president, Richard Jarvis, who immediately scowls. He shares the information with the rest of the group. That other gun company, that Smith & Wesson group, had just announced a large-frame, break-top, six-shot, cartridge-firing .44 sixgun!

The new Smith & Wesson was known as the American and was chambered in both .44 Centerfire and .44 Henry Rimfire. Then when the U.S. Army ordered 1,000 .44 S&W Americans, Colt really knew they had some catching up to do.

Meanwhile, someone else was taking a serious look at the first .44 from Smith & Wesson: the Russians. They eventually negotiated a large contract for 150,000 guns with the Springfield firm to supply single-action sixguns for the Czar's army. However, they insisted on a change in the ammunition that would affect all future cartridge-cased ammu-

Taffin shooting the USFA .44 Special Single Action.

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# THE .44 SPECIAL BEGINS ITS SECOND CENTURY

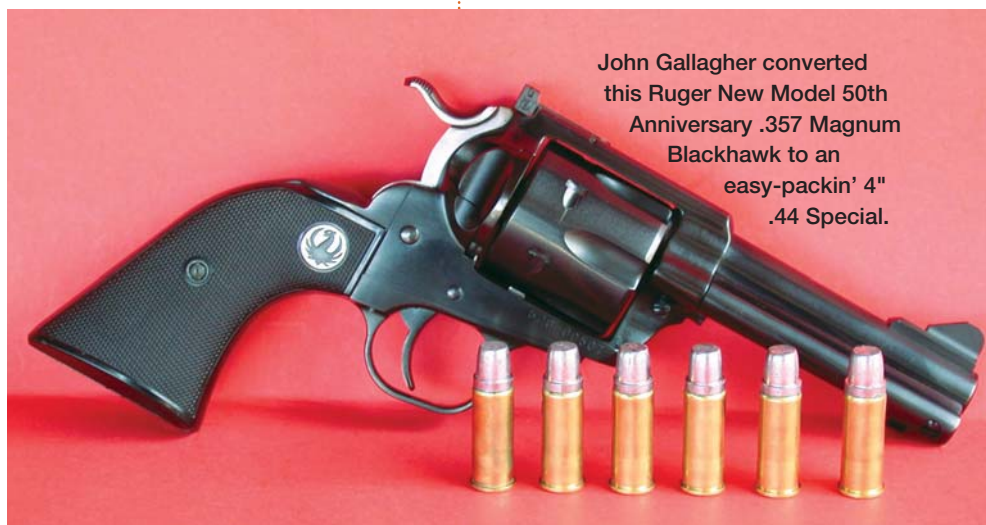


Smith & Wesson 4" .44 Specials: 1950 Target with shortened barrel, Model 624, Model 24-3, and original 4" 1950 Target.

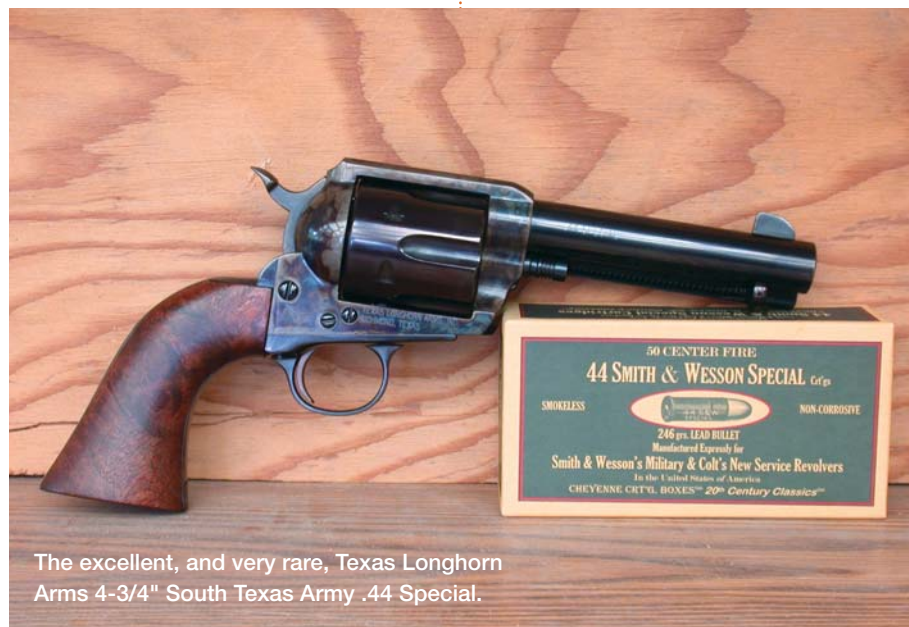
was changed with a hump at the top to prevent the grip's shifting in the hand when the gun was fired, and a spur was placed on the bottom of the trigger guard. (The argument still remains as to just what that spur was for: to parry a sword thrust? To keep the sixgun from falling when carried in a sash? To serve as a steadying rest for the middle finger when firing the revolver? All these theories have been advanced.) This sixgun became known as the Model #3 Russian. With the removal of the spur and a slightly redesigned grip frame, the Model #3 Russian evolved into the New Model #3 in 1878 chambered in, of course, .44 Russian. The New Model #3 is without a doubt the epitome of Smith & Wesson single action production, and could easily be argued as the finest single-action sixgun to come from the nineteenth century. It was beautifully

inition. The original .44 S&W American was made just like the .22 Rimfire and used an outside lubricated heel bullet; that is, the diameter of the main body of the bullet was the same as the diameter of the outside of the brass case, but the lower part of the bullet was slightly smaller in diameter to fit inside the cartridge case. The Russians made a great improvement in ammunition when they asked for a bullet of uniform diameter with lube grooves inside the case itself. The result was the .44 Russian and the beginning of modern ammunition.

Those first Russian contract guns were nothing more than American models chambered in .44 Russian. Eventually the rounded back strap



John Gallagher converted this Ruger New Model 50th Anniversary .357 Magnum Blackhawk to an easy-packin' 4" .44 Special.



The excellent, and very rare, Texas Longhorn Arms 4-3/4" South Texas Army .44 Special.

built with tight tolerances that actually worked against it in a black powder age with the fouling resulting from shooting.

In 1881, Smith & Wesson looked at that beautiful New Model #3 and redesigned it with a double-action mechanism, and so the first Double Action Model arrived in .44 Russian. These are not the finest-looking double-action sixguns ever made, far from it, but they were dependable and would represent the best big-bore double-action sixguns from Smith & Wesson for more than 25 years. In fact, the Double Action .44 would stay in production right up to the eve of World War I.

By the late 1890s, Colt was producing swing-out cylindered double-action revolvers, and Smith & Wesson soon followed suit. In 1899, Smith & Wesson produced their first K-frame, the Military & Police, which would go on to be one

# THE .44 SPECIAL BEGINS ITS SECOND CENTURY

of the most popular revolvers of the twentieth century. It was chambered in .38 Special, but the engineers at Smith & Wesson were looking at something a bit bigger. In 1907, the Military & Police was enlarged to what we now know as the N-frame, fitted with an enclosed ejector rod housing, and had a third locking mechanism added. By this time, the M&P locked at the back of the cylinder and the front of the ejector rod; this new sixgun received a third lock with the crane locking into the back of the ejector rod housing.

The new sixgun had many names, including the .44 Hand Ejector 1st Model, New Century, Model of 1908, .44 Military, but it is best known among collectors and shooters alike as the Triple Lock. Such a beautifully built sixgun deserved a new cartridge, and that cartridge was the .44 Special. To arrive at the .44 Special, the .44 Russian was simply lengthened from .97" to 1.16". But having gone to the edge of perfection, Smith &



The most popular bullet for the .44 Special is the Keith design; this version is from RCBS.

Wesson then drew back. The longer cartridge in a stronger sixgun was loaded to duplicate the .44 Russian! The Russian carried a bullet of approximately 250 grains at a muzzle velocity of about 750 fps. They should have at least duplicated the .45 Colt round and bumped the .44 Special up to 850-900 fps – and 1,000 fps would have been even better. It would remain the task of experimenters in the 1920s through the 1940s to discover the real potential of the .44 Special.

## SMITH & WESSON .44 SPECIALS

The Triple Lock, perhaps the finest double-action revolver ever produced, had a very short life span, lasting only until 1915 with just over 15,000 being manufactured. They sold for \$21 at



a time when one dollar was a lot of money, but because of an attempt to save \$2 on its price, the Triple Lock died. True! It was replaced by the .44 Hand Ejector 2nd Model, which lacked the third lock, a shortcut that allowed it to retail for \$2 less than the Triple Lock. To add insult to injury, the Triple Lock's shrouded ejector rod housing was also dropped. The result was simply a larger Military & Police.

More 2nd Models were built than 1st Models, about 2,000 more, but it would take 35 years to accomplish. Both the Triple Lock and the 2nd Model are rarely, very rarely, found in other chamberings such as .45 Colt, .44-40, and .38-40; however they were first and foremost .44 Specials. As soon as the Triple Lock was replaced by the 2nd Model, sixgun connoisseurs began calling for a return to the Triple Lock. As so often happens with gun companies, the pleas for the return to what a double-action sixgun should be fell on deaf ears, at least until 1926.

What individual shooters could not do, Wolf and Klar, a gun dealer in Fort Worth, Texas, could do. An order was placed with Smith & Wesson for several thousand revolvers chambered in .44 Special with the enclosed ejector rod

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Generation 7-1/2" .44 Special Colt SAAs with leather by Circle Bar T.

housing. Except for the missing third lock, these revolvers were every bit as good as the 1st Models and were eagerly accepted by shooters and especially by Southwestern lawmen. The 4", fixed sighted, double-action .44 Special Smith & Wesson was just about the perfect defensive sixgun in the 1920s, and there is some doubt that it has ever been



An excellent choice for a hunting bullet in the .44 Special is the Speer original jacketed bullet with a lead core in a full copper cup.



became the Model 21 and the Target version was dubbed the Model 24.

The Model 21 demands prices in four figures today. In the early 1970s I purchased a 5" Model 21 for \$65 and since it was not considered rare or a collector's item at that time, I converted

it to a Target Model with a 1950 Target barrel cut back to 5" and a S&W adjustable rear sight installed. One of the top gunsmiths in the country did the work and it is a beautiful sixgun, but imagine what it would be worth today if I had left in its original condition!

pushed to second place. This 3rd Model, also known as the Model 1926, would be produced until the start of World War II, when all production of civilian arms ceased, and then resurrected in 1946 for only a short time until the next model appeared. As great as the Model 1926 was, it did not replace the 2nd Model as both were produced simultaneously until the eve of World War II.

The Model 1926 is even more rare than the Triple Lock, with only about 6,500 being produced in the two runs from 1926 to 1941 and 1946 to 1949. Just as with the 1st and 2nd Models, this 3rd Model was offered in both fixed-sight and target-sight versions. By 1949, the Model 1926 was about to be changed to become the 4th Model Hand Ejector of 1950. The Model 1950 was offered in two versions: the rare fixed-sight Military Model with only about 1,200 being produced, and the magnificent 1950 Target Model. Both were offered in barrel lengths of 4", 5", and 6-1/2" with the 4" 1950 Target being rare and the 5" Target extremely so. Just under 5,100 4th Model Target .44 Specials were made from 1950 to 1966. In 1957, when all Smith & Wessons lost their personality and became mere model numbers, the 4th Model Military



Second Generation Colt SAA  
.44 Specials with Galco leather



A pair of ivory-stocked 4" Model 24-3 S&W .44 Specials in El Paso Saddlery Tom Threepersons holsters along with an original 1950 Target .44 Special.

## THE .44 SPECIAL BEGINS ITS SECOND CENTURY



Eight years later I actually came upon a 6-1/2" Model 1950 Target. I had placed a Winchester 1886 on layaway at the Gunhaus and when George called me to tell me about the Smith & Wesson, I backed off the Winchester and took the 1950 Target instead.

Then I did it again! I wanted the 6-1/2" 1950 Target, but I also wanted a 4" version even more and had the barrel shortened to four inches. Strike Two! Fortunately, thanks to regular readers of *Guns* and *American Handgunner*, I have been contacted about .44 Special Smith & Wesson sixguns for sale and in recent years have purchased three 4" .44 Specials, a 1926 Model made the same year I was, a 1950 Military, and a 1950 Target, as well as a 6-1/2" Model 1950 Target. There will be no Strike Three and the sixguns will be enjoyed exactly as the beautiful works of art they really are.

Not only was the 1950 Target a magnificent sixgun in its own right, it became the basic platform for the .44 Magnum. In 1954 Smith & Wesson began experimenting with a new Magnum in a 4" 1950 Target with special heat-treating and the cylinder re-chambered to the longer .44. When the .44 Magnum became reality, it was a 1950 Target with a longer cylinder, bull barrel, high polish Bright Blue finish, and adjustable sights consisting of a white outline rear sight and a front ramp sight with a red insert. The 1950 Target with its special heat-treating could handle the .44 Magnum, but shooters could not, and an extra half-pound was added to the weight by going to the longer cylinder and bull barrel.

The coming of the .44 Magnum pushed the .44 Special aside very quickly. Some shooters, such as sheriff of Deaf Smith County Texas, Skeeter Skelton, sold his 4" 1950 Target .44 Special and replaced it with a 4" .44 Magnum, only to find it was a lot harder to pack all day and the ammunition was much too powerful for law enforcement use. Of course, a handloader could tailor-make .44 Magnum ammunition at the .44 Special level, but if one is going to shoot .44 Special ammunition, why carry the heavier sixgun? Skeeter admitted he was sorry he ever sold his .44 Special.

In 1966 Smith & Wesson dropped the 1950 Target/Model 24 from production. Of course, as always happens, when something disappears a demand appears. It would be Skeeter Skelton who would help keep the fire burning for .44 Specials by publishing an article in the early 1970s about converting the Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum Highway



(top) This pair of .44 Specials built on S&W and Ruger .357 Magnums were finished in matte blue by Hamilton Bowen for heavy-duty field use. (middle) In the mid-1980s Smith & Wesson offered a limited number of stainless steel .44 Special Model 624s. (above) The Freedom Arms Model 97 is the finest production .44 Special single-action ever produced.



This first-year production .44 Special Triple Lock is carried in a George Lawrence #34 Elmer Keith holster.

Patrolman to .44 Special. In those days Smith & Wesson .44 Special barrels were still available so it was simply a matter of re-chambering the .357 cylinder to .44 Special and fitting a new barrel.

It would take a while, but finally in 1983 Smith & Wesson brought back the .44 Special as the Model 24-3. To ensure selling all of these guns they promised to make only so many. They were offered in both 4" and 6-1/2" versions with a production run of one year and 7,500 being produced. They

Two S&W .44 Specials that command high collector prices now are the five-shot 696 and the Mountain Lite.



sold quickly; in fact the demand for these resurrected .44 Specials was greater than the number produced. Now what? Smith & Wesson had backed themselves into a corner by promising only to produce a certain number, and yet the market was out there for more .44 Specials. This dilemma was solved by offering the stainless-steel version, the Model 624, with the same barrel lengths from 1985 to 1987. Both the blued 24-3 and stainless-steel 624 .44 Specials were also specially ordered and offered as 3" round-butted versions by Smith and Wesson distributors.

The Smith & Wesson .44 Special died in 1966, was resurrected in 1983, and died again in 1987. However, the .44 Special is too good to stay buried for very long. In 1996, the Smith & Wesson .44 Special returned as the Model 696, a stainless steel, five-shot L-frame with a 3" barrel and round butt grip frame. It was followed by the Model 396Ti, the same basic revolver with an alloy frame and titanium cylinder. And then after nearly 20 years we got back to basics with a full-sized, six-shot, N-frame .44 Special: the Model 21-3, a 4" round-butted, fixed-sight, blue steel revolver with an enclosed ejector rod. It first appeared as the Thunder Ranch Special and now is a standard catalog item.

Smith & Wesson also produces two 4" .44 Magnums, the Model 29 Mountain Gun with the tapered barrel of the 1950 Model and the 26-oz. scandium/titanium 329PD. If the truth



## RUGER'S FIRST FACTORY .44 SPECIAL!

The .44 Special sixgun many of us have been waiting for since 1955 is finally here!

It was in that wonderful year that Ruger introduced their first centerfire revolver, the .357 Magnum Blackhawk (known to sixgunners today as the Flat-Top). It was the same size as the Colt Single Action Army but in addition to its virtually unbreakable coil spring action, it also had a flat-topped frame fitted with a Micro adjustable rear sight. Elmer Keith reported the next step would be a .44 Special. However, before that happened the .44 Magnum arrived. Ruger tried to chamber the .357 Blackhawk in .44 Magnum, but with further proof-testing the cylinder and frame proved to be too small and one of their prototypes blew. The frame and cylinder of the Blackhawk were subsequently enlarged to properly house the .44 Magnum and the .44 Special became a dead issue.

Thanks to Lipsey's ordering 2,000 .44 Specials built on the original sized frame, Ruger is now doing what they intended to do more than 50 years ago. The .44 Special Flat-Top New Model Blackhawk is available in an all-blued steel sixgun with the choice of 4-5/8" or 5-1/2" barrel length. I have been shooting one of each and they have proven to be superb sixguns. Suggested retail price is \$579 from your local dealer. Don't miss this one!

# THE .44 SPECIAL BEGINS ITS SECOND CENTURY

be known, both of these Magnums are better suited to .44 Special use. Just this past year S&W introduced, or I should say re-introduced, the Model 1950 Target as the Model 24-6 Classic with the same 6-1/2" barrel length as the original. The .44 Special is definitely alive and well at Smith & Wesson.

## COLT .44 SPECIALS

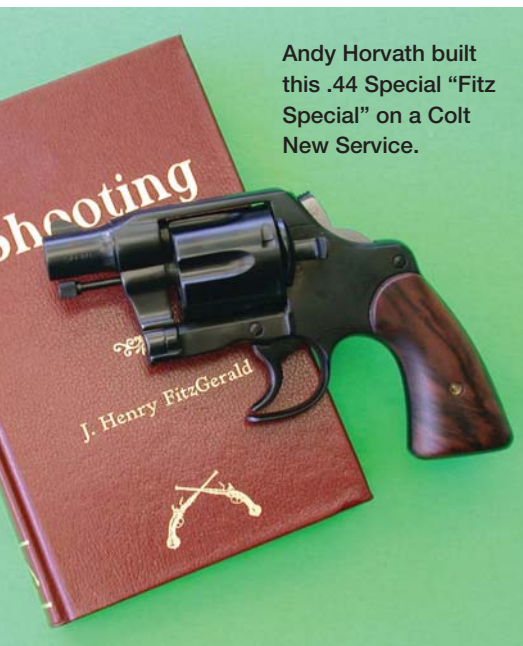
In 1913 Colt began chambering the Single Action Army in .44 Special. From then until 1941, only 506 Single Action Army Models would be so chambered, and only one Flat-Top Target, which belonged to Elmer Keith. In the beginning these sixguns were marked on the left side, "RUSSIAN AND S&W SPECIAL 44". One of the most beautiful examples of an engraved .44 Special so inscribed was the 7-1/2" personal sixgun of Ed McGivern shipped to him by Colt in 1919; it is pictured in *A Study Of The Colt Single Action Army Revolver* by Graham, Kopec, and Moore. In 1929, barrel markings were changed to "COLT SINGLE ACTION ARMY .44 SPECIAL".

I had one of these 7-1/2" .44 Special Colts marked the same as the McGivern Colt as related in my book *Big Bore Sixguns* (Krause Publications 1997).

As I relate in that book:

*My new wife solidly entrenched herself in my heart forever our first Christmas together as she presented me with a brand new 6-1/2" .44 Special Smith & Wesson Model 1950 Target. I had begun a lifelong love affair with the .44 Special. Not only did my wife present me with*

Andy Horvath built this .44 Special "Fitz Special" on a Colt New Service.



Two very easy-carrying .44 Specials by Andy Horvath and Bob Baer.

*my first .44 Special, she also combined with a very special .44 Special to make it possible for me to meet another vocal proponent of the .44 Special. It has always been my regular habit to read section 640 GUNS every day in the morning paper's want ads expecting to find maybe one special sixgun per year. In the early 1970's the ad read Colt Single Action .44 and old belt and holster.*

*The address was a trailer park just outside of town and I hustled over to find a 1st Generation 7-1/2" Colt Single Action with cartridge belt and holster. The owner explained the .44 had belonged to his uncle and he wore it regularly as a sheriff in Colorado, and the pitting on the top strap were from his blood when he was shot and was more concerned about having himself patched up than cleaning the Colt. As I handled the Colt I could scarcely contain myself. Except for the minor pitting on the top strap, the old Colt .44 Single Action was in excellent shape mechanically and the case coloring had turned a beautifully aged gray. The left side of the barrel was marked "RUSSIAN AND S&W SPECIAL 44". A very rare single action!*

*How much? I asked as I contemplated my budget. \$450. I was sorely tempted but with paying for three kids to attend private school, I felt it was out of the question. I reluctantly thanked the man for his time and left. My excitement stayed high all the way home and it was impossible to contain my disappointment as I told my wife all about the Colt .44 Special. She was more than a little surprised I was able to resist buying that beautiful sixgun.*

*Later that day she headed out to do some shopping and I asked her to stop at the local boot repair shop. I had been so stirred up by the .44 Colt I had forgotten*

*to pick up my finished boots. When she returned home she handed me the boots with a slight smile on her face. As I took the boots I realized they felt a few pounds heavier than normal. In the left boot was the Colt! She had gone out on her own and purchased the .44 Special! You hold on tightly to a wife such as this one!*

*After doing a little research on the Colt and finding out how really rare it was, we decided it belonged to a collector not a shooter as I was. So we traded it for the \$450 we paid for it plus two shooting Colt sixguns, a 2nd Generation Colt Single Action Army 5-1/2" .44 Special and a 7-1/2" New Frontier chambered in .45 Colt. But that isn't the end of the story as this Colt .44 Special and Russian was my ticket to meeting someone very special.*

*Later that year I attended the NRA Show in Salt Lake City and carried pictures of the old Colt, especially a close-up of the barrel inscription, all for a purpose. I was looking for one particular individual. When I found him dressed in a dark suit, wearing colored shooting glasses and a white Stetson, I simply handed him the picture of the barrel close up. He grabbed me by the arm and said: "Son, let's go find a place to talk." The man was Skeeter Skelton and I had found the way to his heart. Skeeter was second only to Elmer Keith in praising the virtues of the .44 Special during his writing career. Keith retired his .44 Specials after the .44 Magnum arrived; Skelton tried the .44 Magnum, found the Special better for most purposes, and went back to his first love.*

The 1st Generation Colt Single Action Army was dropped from production in 1941, never to be seen again. After the war, Colt made it very clear they

had no intention of ever resuming production. Television changed all that! A whole new generation of shooters and would be shooters discovered the Colt Single Action Army through all the B Western movies that filled the screens in the early days of television and then were followed by the made-for-TV westerns. Shooters wanted Colt Single Actions and in 1956 the 2nd Generation Single Actions appeared.

The .44 Special arrived in the Single Action Army one year later in 1957 with both 5-1/2" and 7-1/2" barrel lengths. For some unknown reason the 2nd Generation .44 Specials were never offered with 4-3/4" barrels. While not as rare as the 1st Generation .44 Specials, just over 2,300 were offered before they were removed from production in 1966. A companion sixgun to the Single Action Army was the New Frontier, a modernized version of the old Flat-Top Target Model of the 1890s. These are very rare with only 255 total being made with 5-1/2" and 7-1/2" barrels from 1963 to 1967. They are also some of the finest single actions ever produced by Colt.

By 1974, the Colt machinery was wearing out and the decision was made to drop the Colt Single Action Army once again. This time instead of 15 years it only took two years to resurrect the Single Action, as the 3rd Generation began



USFA offers the barrel marking as found on the original Colt Single Action .44 Special.

production in 1976. This time around the .44 Special would be produced from 1978 to 1984 in all three barrel lengths: 4-3/4", 5-1/2", and 7-1/2" and a total production of about 15,000 with about 375 Buntline Specials with 12" barrels. Colt just recently announced the return of the .44 Special Single Action Army to their catalog. The .44 Special was also offered as the New Frontier from 1980 through 1984 when all New Frontier production ceased. Something over 3,500 3rd Generation .44 Special New

Frontiers were produced and only with 5-1/2" and 7-1/2" barrels. Most shooters hold 2nd Generation .44 Specials in much higher esteem than their counterparts among 3rd Generation examples and the prices demanded reflect this.

Colt not only produced the first big-bore double-action revolvers a few years before Smith & Wesson – the Model 1878 in .45 Colt – but they would also be the first to produce what we consider a modern double-action revolver, i.e., one with a swing-out cylinder. These Army and Navy Models on the .41 frame would evolve into the larger New Service in 1898. Immensely popular, the New Service overtook the Single Action Army in total production numbers due to the fact that more than 150,000 New Services chambered in .45ACP with 5-1/2" barrels and known as the Model 1917 were ordered for the use of the troops in World War I.

The .44 Special, as with the Single Action Army, first appeared in the Colt New Service in 1913. Before it was dropped, the .44 Special New Service was offered as a standard model with barrel lengths of 4-1/2", 5 1/2", and 7-1/2" with either blue or nickel finish, or the beautifully shooting New Service Target Revolver with a choice of either a 6" or 7-1/2" barrel. Stocks were checkered walnut and the trigger was checkered, as were the front and back straps; the finish was a deep blue; sights were adjustable, with a choice of a Patridge or bead front sight.

Colt's ultimate .44 Special New Service was the deluxe target revolver, the Shooting Master. This 6"-barreled revolver featured a hand-finished action, sights and a top strap that were finished to eliminate glare. It represented the highest-quality revolver that Colt could build until the Python arrived in 1955. Along with the Colt Single Action Army, the New Service was dropped in 1941.

New Services chambered in .44 Special are very hard to find, at least at my price level. A few years ago a reader came to the rescue with a late-model New Service in .44 Special, which he offered to send to me for inspection. It had several problems: it was out of time, its lanyard ring was missing, and someone had installed a Smith & Wesson adjustable rear sight while leaving the front sight intact. This, of course, resulted in a sixgun that shot way high. But it had possibilities and it came for very reasonable price. The 4-1/2" New Service .44 Special was sent off to Milt Morrison of QPR (Qualite Pistol & Revolver), one of the few gunsmiths



Excellent powders for reloading for the .44 Special are Unique, #2400, and H4227.

qualified to work on the old New Service. He totally tuned and tightened it, fitted a ramp front sight and re-blued it. A lanyard ring was found and installed, and stag grips were located and fitted to the frame. The final result is one of the finest New Service .44 Specials around.

In the time between the two World Wars, John Henry FitzGerald ("Fitz") was Colt's representative, traveling to all the shooting matches, working on shooters' Colts and generally sharing shooting information. He is best known for his Fitz Special built on the Colt New Service: "Perhaps some would like to ask why I cut up a good revolver and here is the answer: The trigger guard is cut away to allow more finger room and for use when gloves are worn.... The hammer spur is cut away to allow drawing from the pocket or from under the coat without catching or snagging in the cloth and eliminates the use of thumb over hammer when drawing....The butt is rounded to allow the revolver to easily slide into firing position in the hand.... The top of the cut-away hammer may be lightly checked to assist in cocking for a long-range shot." It was common knowledge among his contemporaries that Fitz always carried a pair of .45 Colt Fitz Specials in his two front pockets. He definitely knew how to use them.

I've wanted to have a Fitz Special ever since I was the kid learning to shoot big-bore sixguns in the 1950s, and just recently decided to have one made up on a Colt New Service. I found what I thought would be the perfect candidate for a Fitz Special, a 5-1/2" Late Model New Service in .45 Colt. Although having considerable pitting on the right side



From top left counterclockwise: First came the .44 Special Triple Lock of 1908, then the Model 1926, which was used as the platform for the .38-44 Heavy Duty of 1930 which in turn became the building block for the .357 Magnum of 1935.

of the barrel and part of the cylinder, it was mechanically perfect and the interiors of both barrel and cylinder were like new. Instead of sending it off to be converted, I shot it first and found it shot much too well to touch as it placed five shots, fired double-action standing at 50 feet, in less than 1-1/2". By now I have learned not to fix what ain't broke, so it remains untouched.

Thanks to a reader I came up with a Late Model New Service chambered in .44 Special. It needed some help and made a perfect candidate for a Fitz Special, so off it went to one of the premier gunsmiths in the country, Andy Horvath. Horvath said of this New Service: "It's got a few miles on it and somebody got a little carried away with the buffing wheel. I bushed the cylinder to get out most of the endplay, and installed a ball lock on the crane to help with the lock-up. Instead of cutting the old barrel I just made a new one using up a piece of Douglas barrel blank too short for anything else. The grip frame has been shortened and rounded and fitted with fancy walnut grip panels, and the top of the hammer serrated for shooting single action by starting the hammer back with the trigger and then grabbing the hammer with your thumb." The end result is a .44 Special Fitz Special that is one of the finest in existence. built by one of

the finest gunsmiths ever. My everyday working load for .44 Special sixguns, the 250-gr. Keith bullet over 7.5 gr of Unique in the short barrel of the "Fitz" registers 830 fps, or just about the perfect equivalent of Fitz's .45 Colt loads.

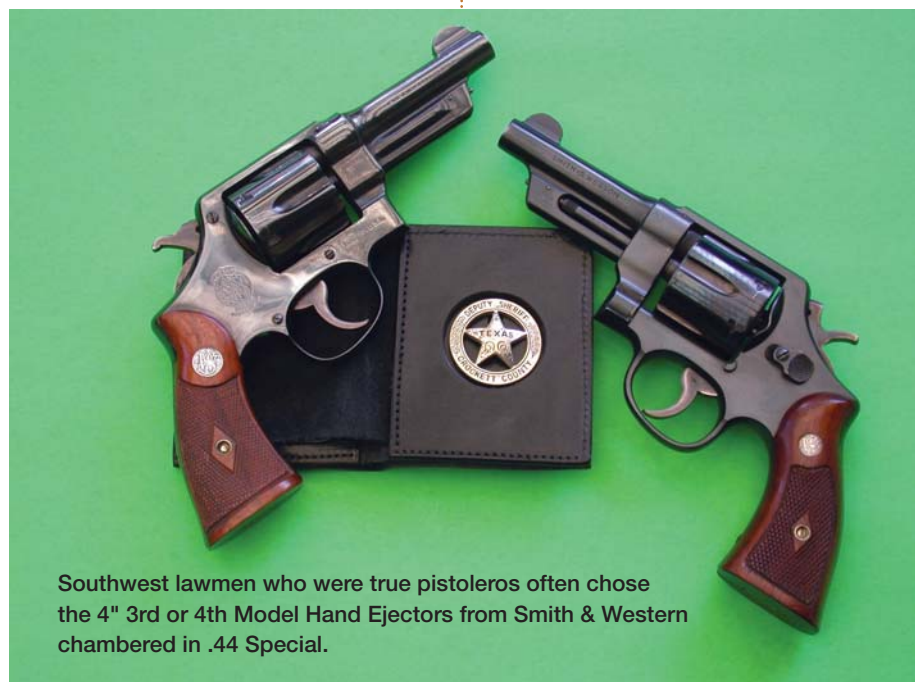
## OTHER .44 SPECIAL SINGLE ACTIONS

The .44 Special has never been the everyman's cartridge but rather the favorite of true connoisseurs of big-bore single-action and double-action sixguns. As a result, production numbers are usually very low for any company

producing single-action sixguns exclusively. In 1954, Great Western began producing a single action, the Frontier Six-Shooter, in Los Angeles. Bill Wilson, president and one of three founders, had contacted Colt in 1953 and was assured they had no plans to resurrect the Colt Single Action Army. The Great Western looked so much like a Colt Single Action Army they actually used real Colts in the early advertising. In fact, some of the Great Western parts came from Colt. When Colt resumed production of the Single Action Army in 1956, Great Western's demise was only a matter of time. They lasted until 1964.

No one really knows how many Great Westerns were produced in eight years, or if they do they aren't telling. The standard caliber was .45 Colt, but the GW was also offered in .22, .38 Special, .357 Magnum, .357 Atomic, .44 Magnum, and .44 Special. The last two are especially rare and, until recently, I had only seen one of each in my lifetime and purchased both of them. In the past few years, again thanks to readers, I have come up with two 5-1/2" Great Western .44 Specials, one unfired and nickel-plated with factory pearls, and the other standard blue and case colored with plastic stag grips. The nickel plated version required considerable 'smithing to put it into shooting condition but all have now proven to be excellent sixguns.

Bill Grover started Texas Longhorn Arms in 1981 building a single-action sixgun different than anything ever previously offered. It was his belief Sam



Southwest lawmen who were true pistoleros often chose the 4" 3rd or 4th Model Hand Ejectors from Smith & Western chambered in .44 Special.

## THE FREEDOM ARMS MODEL 97

One exception to the rule of a full-sized, six-shot, .44 Special is the Freedom Arms Model 97. This little sixgun, smaller than the Colt SAA, has a cylinder that is 1.575" in diameter; however it is an extremely strong five-shot little sixgun built to very tight tolerances and with the bolt cut on the cylinder in between chambers so there is no weak point there. My most-used standard load for the .44 Special for more than 40 years has been the 250 gr. Keith hard cast bullet over 7.5 grains of Unique. With this load, a 250-grain Keith bullet clocks out at just over 1,000 fps from the 5-1/2" barrel of the Model 97 .44 Special; and the same RCBS Keith bullet over 17.0 grains of H4227 gives 1,002 fps. These are easy shootin' and very accurate loads from this .44 Special.

For heavy-duty use in the Freedom Arms .44 Special, Speer's 225-gr. jacketed hollow point over 16.0 grains of #2400 gives 1,240 fps and the exceptional accuracy of four shots into 5/8". This bullet is not the normally-encountered jacketed hollowpoint but rather the copper cup with a lead core. The standard Keith load using RCBS's version clocks out at 1,270 fps from the short-barreled Model 97. Switching over to Ray Thompson's design, Lyman's #431244GC, 17.5 grains of #2400 also travels well over 1,200 fps and shoots equally well. The Model 97 has a relatively short cylinder; however, all these loads with the Keith bullet chamber with room to spare. *[Editor's note: These loads have proven safe in the author's Freedom Arms Model 97. Other, older .44 Specials may not tolerate them; thus we do not recommend their use.]*

Most double action connoisseurs hold the original .44 Special in the highest esteem even to the point of labeling the old Triple Lock as the finest revolver ever built. It has had no equal let alone been surpassed by any other factory produced .44 Special; until now. The .44 Special Model 97 from Freedom Arms is the number one challenger to the title.

## RUGER .44 SPECIAL BLACKHAWKS

In 1953 Bill Ruger modernized the single action and introduced the Single-Six .22 with the first major change (coil springs instead of flat springs) since the Paterson arrived in 1836. Two years later the Single-Six was increased to the same size as the Colt Single Action Army; its frame was flat-topped, adjustable sights were added, and we had the



The latest .44 Special offered by Smith & Wesson is the Model 24-6. Yep, it shoots!

Colt was left-handed and his designs show this. I am right-handed and I load and unload a Single Action Army by switching the sixgun to my left hand, working the ejector rod with my right hand and also using my right hand to reload and then switching the sixgun back to my right hand for either holstering or shooting. Grover's idea was to reverse everything. That is, both the ejector rod housing and the loading gate are on the left side of the sixgun and the cylinder rotates counterclockwise. This allows the right-handed shooter to hold the gun in his right-hand while both loading and unloading operations are performed with the left hand. The sixgun never leaves the shooting hand.

Grover's first right-handed single actions included the West Texas Flat-Top Target with a 7-1/2" barrel, the South Texas Army with fixed sights and a 4-3/4" barrel, and the Improved Number Five with a 5-1/2" barrel. Texas Longhorn Arms' version of Keith's Famous #5SAA managed to maintain the flavor of the original while being stronger and replacing Keith's favorite cartridge of the 1920s-1950s with his choice from 1955 on, the .44 Magnum. Even with its larger frame and cylinder, the TLA Improved Number Five still maintains Colt-style balance rather than seeming overly large. Both the West Texas Flat-Top Target and the South Texas Army were offered in .44 Special, and like the Great Westerns, are very rarely seen. Texas Longhorn Arms, unfortunately, closed their doors in the mid-1990s and their beautiful

.44 Special sixguns are no more.

I first ran into USFA (United States Firearms Co.) at a SHOT Show in the early 1990s. Arrangements were made to do a test and evaluation of their single actions, and one of those sixguns ordered was a blued and case colored 7-1/2" version with the barrel marked "RUSSIAN AND S&W SPECIAL 44". At the time USFA was importing Uberti parts and assembling and finishing them in this country. That .44 was beautifully finished and fitted up tightly with very little cylinder movement either fore, aft, or side-to-side. The goal of USFA was to eventually provide an All-American made sixgun and they have now arrived at that point. Their Single Action Army is a beautifully made, totally American .44 Special.

USFA offers the Single Action Army and the Flat-Top Target both made the old way as Single Actions were before World War II. Since my original Colt Single Action Army with its 7-1/2" barrel marked with both .44 Special and .44 Russian was sold, I decided to replace it with the USFA version. In fact, at the 2004 SHOT Show I ordered two USFA .44 Specials, one to replace the old Colt, with identical markings, and a full blue Flat-Top Target also with a 7-1/2" barrel. These are beautiful (I know I'm overusing the word but they really are!) .44 Special sixguns and are made as well or better as any the old revolvers we now call classic. They are finely finished, tight with no cylinder play either front to back or side to side, and they shoot as good as they look.

.357 Magnum Blackhawk. Ruger had the full intention of bringing this same sixgun out in .44 Special, and if we lived in a perfect world that is exactly what would have happened; however we don't, and it didn't. The coming of the .44 Magnum in 1956 changed all that and instead the Blackhawk frame and cylinder were enlarged to become the .44 Magnum Blackhawk. Ruger never did produce a .44 Special Blackhawk.

What Ruger did not do, custom sixgunsmiths can do. Earlier mention was made of Skeeter Skelton's article converting the .357 Magnum Highway Patrolman from Smith & Wesson into a .44 Special. In that same article he also covered the conversion of the Three Screw .357 Magnum Ruger Blackhawk to .44 Special. The Three Screw .357 Blackhawks are divided into two categories: the Flat-Top, which was produced from 1955 to 1962, and the Old Model, from 1963 to 1972. Both of these .357 Blackhawks were built on the same size of frame as the Colt Single Action Army. When the New Model arrived in 1973, the .357 Magnum-size frame was dropped and instead the .357 Magnum Blackhawk was built on the same size frame as the .44 Super Blackhawk. Converting a New Model to .44 Special results in a .44 Magnum-size sixgun.

To convert a .357 Magnum Blackhawk to .44 Special, it is only necessary to re-chamber the cylinder and fit a different barrel. That's the basic idea, but different sixgunsmiths take over from here and exercise their artistic side. Gunsmiths I know of who can convert the Three Screw .357s to very special .44 Specials include Bob Baer, Hamilton Bowen, David Clements, Ben Forkin, John Gallagher, Alan Harton, Andy Horvath, Gary Reeder, and Jim Stroh, and I have considerable hands-on experience with examples built by these different gunsmiths/metal artists. Some of these men re-bored the existing barrel to .44 Special; others fitted custom barrels; and others used .44 Magnum barrels from other Ruger Blackhawks. Barrel lengths offered include but are not limited to the standard 4-5/8", 5-1/2", and 7-1/2", as well as 3-1/2" and 4" Sheriff's Model styles. Colt 3rd Generation .44 Special or .44-40 New Frontier barrels can even be fitted to Three Screw Blackhawk frames.

Grip frames can be polished bright or re-anodized; Flat-Top grip frames can be installed on Old Model frames to give more of a Colt feel, or stainless steel Old Army grip frames can be fitted to either

Great .44 Special sixguns from the middle part of the twentieth century: Great Western SA, 2nd Generation Colt SAA, and a pair of 3rd Generation Colts.



Three Screw Model. Even Colt two-piece grip frames can be attached to allow the use of one-piece grips, or 'smiths can use the new Colt-style, two-piece grip frame offered by Power Custom and sold through Brownells. Some Ruger .357s came with an extra 9mm cylinder which allows two .44 cylinders to be used, one Special and the other in .44-40. No matter what route is chosen, nor which of these gentlemen does the work, the result is an easy-handlin', easy-packin', easy-shootin' .44 Special.

With the coming of the Ruger 50th Anniversary .357 Magnum Flat-Top in 2005, we suddenly had a new platform for building Colt SAA-size .44 Specials on a Ruger. Both Ben Forkin and John Gallagher have converted 50th Anniversary .357 New Model Blackhawks to .44 Special for me with the former using a 7-1/2" New Frontier barrel and the latter opting for a custom 4" barrel. I have to say it again: they are beautiful sixguns!

## HUNTING WITH THE .44 SPECIAL

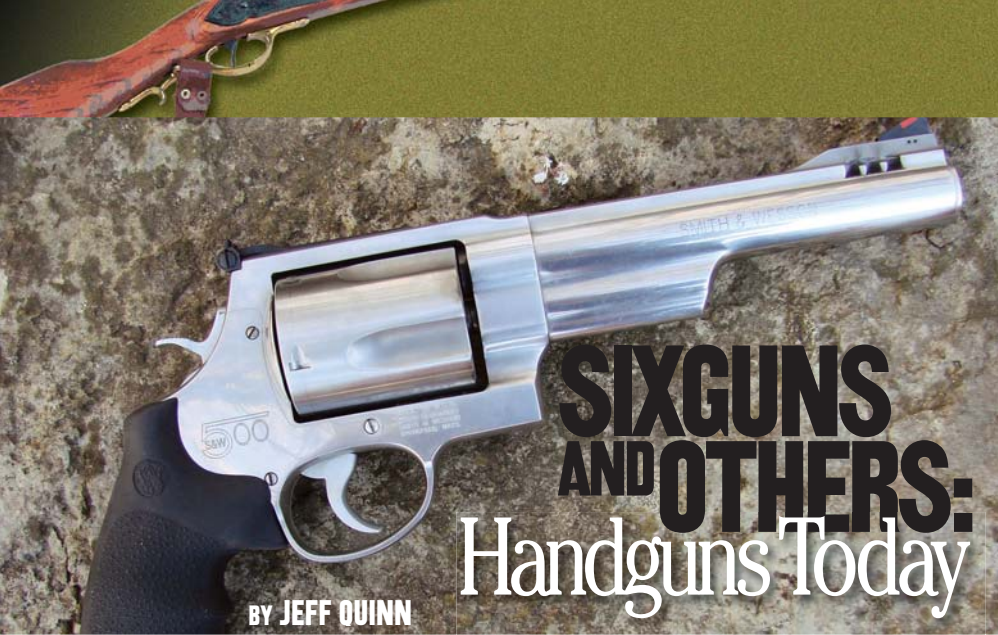
In these days of heavy-loaded .44 Magnums and .45 Colts – let alone the .454 Casull, .475 Linebaugh, and .500 S&W – is the .44 Special still viable for hunting? I had taken deer-sized game in the 125- to 250-lb. pound class, but what about bigger game? The most popular big game animal, second only to deer, is the poor man's grizzly: wild hogs, feral pigs, Russian boars. For a feral hog hunt I chose the .44 Special loaded with a hollowpoint cast bullet (Lyman's #429421 Keith) at 1,200 fps muzzle velocity from the 7-1/2" .44 Special Texas Longhorn Arms West Texas Flat-Top Target.

On the first pig, the bullet went in

right behind the upper part of the front leg and, as we found out later, came out on the other side right through the center of the upper part of the leg on the off-side. The bullet gave total penetration in a 500-lb. animal! That was to be the end of it, as far as I was concerned.

I intended to take one pig and be on my way. But there were two pigs there, and the dead pig's big buddy would have none of that. By now he was up on his feet and using his snout to move that 500-pounder. He was not about to leave. So! At the shot he turned around, started to run, and I put a second shot in him and down he went. The smaller, 500-lb. pig had 4" tusks, while this 650-pounder had tusks curling around for a full 6". We would later find out the .44 Special hollowpoint had gone through the heart of the second boar, the second shot was only two inches away from the first shot, and the bullet was perfectly mushroomed and lodged under the hide on the far side. In both cases the .44 Special bullets did everything a sixgun, load, and bullet combination are supposed to do.

In 1966, the .44 Special was pronounced old, antiquated, out of date, ready for the bonepile. Skeeter Skelton started the resurrection of sixguns firing this first big-bore cartridge of the twentieth century and I have tried to carry the torch since his passing in 1988. I'm sure Skeeter is smiling as he sees all the .357 Three Screw Blackhawks being turned into .44 Specials, as well as the new .44 Special sixguns from USFA and Freedom Arms and the revival of S&W's N-frame .44 Special. The .44 Special is ready for its second century of service.



# SIXGUNS AND OTHERS: Handguns Today

BY JEFF QUINN



Those of you who are long-time readers of the *Gun Digest* will recognize this section as having been written by my good friend John Taffin in years past. Mr. Taffin is alive, well, and still writing, but with his books, magazines, and other commitments, he has passed the writing of this section of *Gun Digest* on to me, and I am honored that both he and the editor of this legendary gun annual have bestowed upon me the privilege to try to adequately fill those big boots. I, as much as any of you, will miss Mr. Taffin's writing of this section of the *Digest*, as many, including myself, consider him to be the best gunwriter of our time. Anyway, here we are, and it is at an historic time in our nation. Civilian gun sales in the U.S. are at an all-time high since anyone started keeping records on such things.

As I type this, there are five different bills submitted in Congress aimed at curtailing the ownership of firearms, and totally eliminating some types of firearms from production. It is indeed interesting times for gun owners. Still, 2009 has some exciting firearms reaching production, and in this brief review, I will try to touch on some of the most interesting sixguns on the market today, along with a couple of other interesting handguns, including one newly-designed single shot and a lever action handgun that has historical roots and nostalgic memories for fans of old Western TV shows. Let's get started!

## AWA (American Western Arms)

AWA, as always, has some high quality 1873 Colt replicas, from their basic Classic series (which is a fine example of what a single action sixgun should be) to their Ultimate, which has a coil main-spring and can be upgraded with better

stocks and finishes in addition to engraving. AWA also offers an octagon-barrel model, which is something that really sets it apart from the other Single Action Army replicas on the market, with a distinctive, classic look. Of particular interest is the Lightningbolt, a short, pump-action *handgun* version of the old medium-frame Colt Lightning Magazine Rifle. Offered in three different models (blued, case-hardened, and the White Lightning hard chrome finish) the Lightningbolt pistol is in production right now and should prove to be popular with shooters who want something a bit different but with an Old West flavor. It holds five rounds in a tubular magazine under its 12" barrel and is chambered for the .45 Colt cartridge. AWA also has a neat holster rig custom built to carry this one-of-a-kind handgun.

## Beretta

Beretta entered the world of revolvers, and particularly Single Action Army Colt replicas, a couple of years ago with their purchase of Uberti. Uberti has been a well-known maker of fine quality

Smith & Wesson makes several variations of their Model 500 Magnum. This one wears a 6.5" ported barrel.

replica firearms for decades, and with that acquisition, Beretta introduced their Stampede line of high quality, well-finished replica sixguns. Beretta offers the Stampede with blued, nickel, or deluxe blued finishes.

The blued models have case-colored frames and a standard blue-black finish, while the deluxe has a bright charcoal blue finish to the grip frame, trigger guard, and barrel. The stocks are either walnut or black plastic, while the Bisley models have black plastic stocks only. In addition to the standard barrel lengths, the Stampede Marshall has a shorter 3.5" barrel, a birds-head grip frame and walnut stocks. Also, the Stampede and Stampede Marshall are offered with an Old West finish that resembles an original aged and worn Colt. The Stampede series is offered in a choice of .357 Magnum or .45 Colt chamberings.

## Bond Arms

Bond Arms is a Texas outfit that manufactures what is probably the finest example of the Remington pattern derringers ever built. It is certainly the strongest. The Bond is a stack-barrel derringer that swings open at the hinge pin for loading and unloading, just as the original Remington Double Derringer .41 rimfire did. The barrels are fired one at a time, and interchangeable barrels are available to allow for changing the caliber quickly and easily. The most popular seems to be their .45 Colt/.410 shotshell version, but other caliber choices include the .22 Long Rifle, .32 H&R, 9x19mm, .38 Special/.357 Magnum, .357 Maximum, .40 S&W, 10mm, .44 Special, .44 WCF, .45 GAP, .45 ACP, and .45 Colt. There should be enough



Editor Quinn shooting the Freedom Arms .500 Wyoming Express.

choices there for everyone, but being a fan of the .22 Magnum cartridge, I would like to see that versatile little chambering offered as well.

The Bond Arms derringer is not in the same class as the cheap zinc-frame derringers that we have seen offered during the last half of the past century. The Bond is made from quality materials, and built to last. While offering only two shots before reloading is required, these handguns are very compact and very flat, making it easy and comfortable to carry in a back pocket or in a lightweight hip holster while working around the homestead, or out for a walk in snake country. The .410 shotshell does a real number on poisonous snakes and can also serve very well as gun to repel carjackers. At arms-length, a faceful of .410 shot will change the mind of any carjacker, and the payload is easy to deliver from the barrels of the Bond derringer.

## Charter Arms

Charter Arms has been producing reliable, affordable revolvers for decades now. I have owned Charters chambered for the .22 Magnum, .32 H&R, .38 Special, .357 Magnum, .44 Special, and that most-useful of cartridges, the .22 Long Rifle. Charters have always seemed to me no-frills, solid little handguns, and they have never let me down.

Back in my younger days while working undercover for a State Attorney General's Office, I was associating with some of the coarser types of our society. They are by nature a suspicious lot, and the slightest hint that something was out of place could result in a distasteful outcome, to me at least. In those days, I relied upon a Charter .38 tucked into the top of my boot. I had slicked the action, removed the front sight, and bobbed the hammer spur. It was there to resolve up-close and personal social conflicts, and was very comforting to have along. I still have that little five-shot revolver, and it is as useful and reliable as ever. It has never let me down.

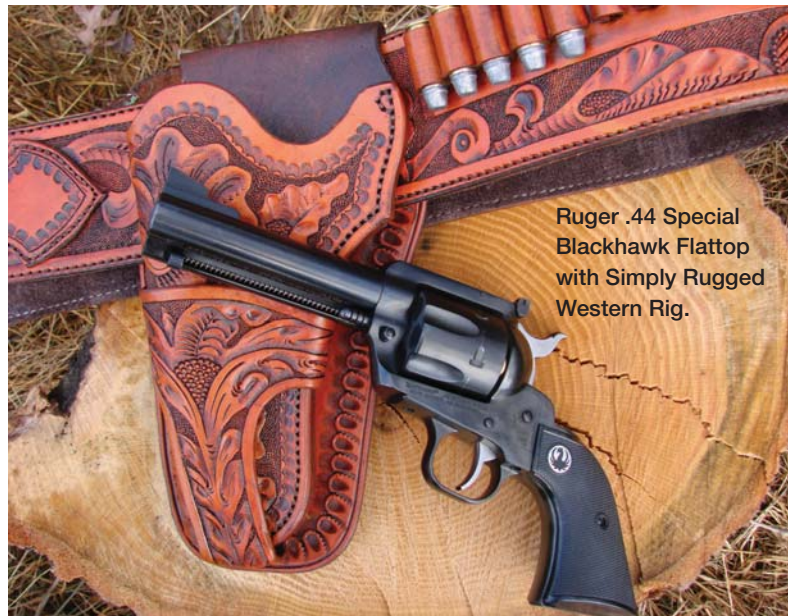
Charter Arms makes a variety of small and medium-sized revolvers. One of their latest is chambered for the relatively new .327 Federal cartridge. The .327 Federal is what the .32 H&R Magnum should have been. The .327 Federal launches a .312" diameter bullet at true magnum velocities, and Charter was one of the first to chamber for the cartridge after its initial introduction. Of course, Charter still makes their .44 Bulldog, which is the flagship of the Charter line, having developed a cult-like following over the past few decades. As I type this, Charter is also working on a new revolver that will handle rimless cartridges such as the 9mm Luger and .40 S&W cartridges. I have not yet handled one, but it looks to be promising, and should be in production by the time that you read this.

## Cimarron

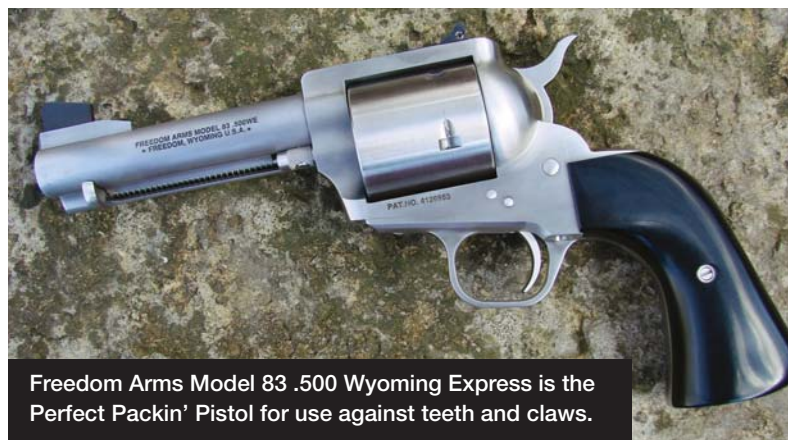
Cimarron Firearms of Fredericksburg, Texas, has long been a supplier of quality replicas of classic firearms, and they continue that tradition today. Cimarron offers several varieties of 1873 Colt Single Action Army replicas, but they also supply shooters with replicas of some of the lesser-known sixguns of the Old West. Cimarron offers some unique and interesting replicas of the old conversion revolvers that bridged the gap from percussion cap-and-ball guns to modern cartridge revolvers.

I especially like the Smith & Wesson replicas offered by Cimarron, such as the Schofield and Russian models. Many shooters today are not aware of the fact that had it not been for the Russian purchase of a large quantity of S&W sixguns, the company might have folded in the nineteenth century, and the modern double-action revolver that we know today might have

Freedom Arms  
25th Anniversary Revolver.



Ruger .44 Special  
Blackhawk Flattop  
with Simply Rugged  
Western Rig.



Freedom Arms Model 83 .500 Wyoming Express is the  
Perfect Packin' Pistol for use against teeth and claws.



This recent Single Action  
Army is as good as any ever  
produced by Colt.

## SIXGUNS & OTHERS: HANDGUNS TODAY

never been. Anyway, Cimarron markets replicas of the S&W Number 3 Russian, which is both historical and fun to shoot. These Cimarron Smith & Wesson replicas are offered in .38 Special, .44 WCF, .44 Russian, and .45 Colt chamberings. Of course, Cimarron still has many varieties of their Model P SAA replicas, offered in a wide choice of calibers, barrel lengths, and finishes. Their Thunderer revolvers are not really a copy of any old gun, but are a dandy example of what a Single Action Army can be with a modified bird's head grip. Very handy and easy to shoot, the Thunderer – and its little brother, the Lightning – offer the grip frame of the double action Colt Thunderer with the reliability of the Single Action Army.

The latest sixgun on the market from Cimarron is their .22 Long Rifle Plinkerton. [*"Plinkerton"? Yes, Plinkerton. – DMS*] This is a no-frills revolver patterned after the Colt SAA, but it's made of a non-ferrous alloy with steel chamber liners and a steel inner barrel. The two that I have fired performed pretty well. There is also a version with an extra cylinder for the .22 Magnum cartridge. Best of all, this revolver is selling for under 200 bucks in most places. It is a really good buy, and a dandy sixgun to start a youngster out shooting.

### Colt

Colt is one of the most recognized names in the world of firearms, steeped in tradition and history. There has probably never been a Western movie made that did not have a Colt or copy thereof on the set somewhere. Colt is what we picture when we think Western sixgun. Most of the shapes, the feel, and the lines of today's single action revolvers can be traced back to the Colt Single Action Army and to the Colt revolvers which preceded it. Today, Colt is still producing the Single Action Army revolver. While quality has varied over the past few decades, the examples of the

SAA that I have examined and fired over the past three years show that the Colts now leaving the factory are as good as any that have been produced. The Single Action Army is offered in either blue/casehardened or nickel finishes, in several caliber choices.

### EAA (European American Armory)

EAA Corp in Rockledge, Florida, has a couple of revolver lines. Their Bounty Hunter is a Colt SAA replica, which is offered in .22 LR/Magnum, .38/.357 Magnum, .44 Magnum, and .45 Colt in a choice of blued, nickel, or blued/case-hardened finishes. The Bounty Hunter uses a transfer bar safety system, but retains the traditional feel to the action and loads/unloads in the half-cock hammer position. The .22 LR/Magnum version has an alloy frame, but the centerfire guns are made of steel. The .22 is also offered in a choice of six or eight-shot models.

EAA's double-action revolver is called the Windicator. This small-framed revolver is offered as a steel-framed .357 Magnum or as an alloy-framed .38 Special. It has synthetic rubber grips, a matte blued finish, and a choice of either a 2" or 4" barrel. They are good, basic, reliable revolvers at an affordable price.

### Freedom Arms

Freedom Arms is an All-American success story. Mr. Wayne Baker started the company back about 25 years ago, having already been successful in the construction and mining businesses. Starting with a philosophy dedicated to building the finest revolvers every made, they achieved that goal and continue to hold to that standard today.

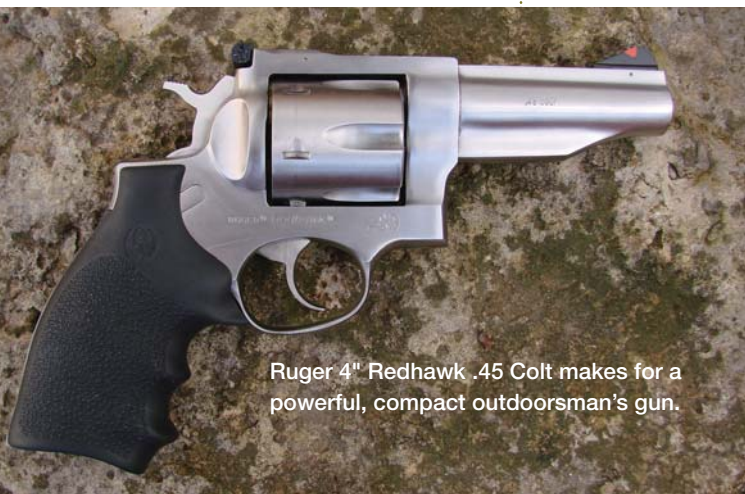
I am often asked why I like firearms so much, and the answer is a complex one. However, a large part of my love of guns is my appreciation for well-crafted machines. Firearms are still some of the

best-built machines in the world. Many still exhibit a great deal of craftsmanship in their design and execution. While many things that we use everyday are made to be disposable, from appliances to electronics, guns are still built to last, and many are built to a higher standard than most everything else that we use.

That having been said, there is no finer example of skilled craftsmanship in the world than a Freedom Arms revolver. Built at first to harness the power of the .454 Casull cartridge, FA revolvers now are offered chambered for the .17 HMR, .22 LR/Magnum, .32 H&R, .327 Federal, .32 WCF, .357 Magnum, .41 Magnum, .44 Magnum, 45 Colt, .454 Casull, and .500 Wyoming Express cartridges. They are also introducing their own .224-32 FA cartridge, firing a .22-caliber bullet from a necked-down .327 Federal case. Two different frame sizes are currently offered: the original Model 83 and the more compact Model 97.

I have fired many different Freedom Arms revolvers, and have found each one to be an amazing piece of workmanship. Holding a Freedom Arms revolver is like holding a work of art, but a working work of art! I have never fired one that wasn't accurate. Freedom takes care in the way that they align the chambers with the barrel, and it pays off in accuracy. Capable of taking the largest game on earth – and they have done so many times – Freedom Arms revolvers are built for those who appreciate fine workmanship and want to buy the very best.

News flash: Freedom Arms has been working for a couple of years on a new single-shot pistol. I have had the pleasure of shooting the prototype gun at ranges out to 600 yards, and find it to be worthy of the Freedom Arms name. It has interchangeable barrels and extractors to easily switch calibers, and the one that I spent the most trigger-time with was chambered for the 6.5mm JDJ cartridge. I found it to be very accurate, and easy to shoot well.



Ruger 4" Redhawk .45 Colt makes for a powerful, compact outdoorsman's gun.



Smith & Wesson  
632 Pro Comp  
chambered for the  
.327 Federal  
Magnum.

## Legacy Sports

Legacy Sports has been the distributor for the Puma rifles for several years now, and for 2009, the manufacture of these has been moved from Brazil to Italy. Along with this move, Legacy has a new Puma handgun called the Bounty Hunter, modeled after the "Mare's Laig," a cut-down '92 Winchester carried by Steve McQueen in the old *Wanted, Dead or Alive* TV series. McQueen's character, Josh Randall, a bounty hunter by trade, carried .45-70 cartridges in his belt for effect, but the '92 Winchester was of course built to handle much shorter cartridges. The Bounty Hunter from Legacy is chambered for either the .44 Magnum, .44 WCF, or .45 Colt cartridges, has a 12" barrel and a six-shot magazine. It wears a large loop lever and an abbreviated buttstock, and it just drips with nostalgia.

Legacy Sports also has a new line of 1873 Colt replicas, made in Italy and called the Puma Westerner. They are traditionally styled and offered with a blued/case-hardened finish, nickel plated, or in stainless steel. Grips are one-piece walnut or imitation ivory, with a smooth or checkered option with the walnut.

## Magnum Research

Magnum Research is still making the BFR ("Biggest, Finest Revolver," or so it's said) revolver. Made almost entirely of stainless steel, the BFR is a large single action revolver made in two different frame lengths. The shorter frame size still handles some very powerful revolver cartridges such as the .50 Action Express, .454 Casull, and the .475 Linebaugh/.480 Ruger, in addition to the little .22 Hornet. The long frame handles some truly powerful revolver cartridges like the .460 and .500 S&W Magnums, and also rifle cartridges like the .30-30 Winchester, .450 Marlin, and .45/70 Government. The BFRs are well made, built in the USA, and in my limited experience with them, they shoot very well.

## North American Arms

NAA has been producing fine little miniature revolvers for many years now, and most shooters are familiar with them. Built mainly with short barrels and chambered for either the .22 Short, .22 Long Rifle or .22 Magnum cartridges, these are handy little five-shot pocket guns that serve as snake repellent in areas where poisonous snakes are a problem, but are mainly carried for protection when nothing larger can be easily or comfortably concealed. While it is hard to hit a target at long range with these short-barreled revolvers, up close and personal, they can be very effective.

The newest offering from NAA is a .22 Magnum five-shot revolver dubbed "The Earl." This one has a 4" barrel, and the retainer for the cylinder pin gives it the look of an old percussion Remington style sixgun. It can be had with just the magnum cylinder, or with a .22 Long Rifle conversion cylinder as well. Weighing in at just over 8.5 oz., this looks like a dandy little trail gun, and I am anxious to get my hands on one for a full review. They should be available by the time you are read this.

## Rossi

Rossi is better known for their handy and affordable rifles and shotguns, but they still produce a limited line of double action revolvers as well. Chambered in either .38 Special or .357 Magnum, you have a choice of blued steel or stainless, and either a 2", 4" or 6" barrel. The two-inch guns have fixed sights, but the longer barreled guns have adjustable sights. They are well-built and affordable revolvers, with a nice exterior finish. Rossi revolvers are a lot of gun for the money.

## Ruger

Sturm, Ruger, & Company has been in the revolver business since 1953 and was largely responsible for the comeback of the single-action sixgun.

When Western TV shows and movies were creating a demand for the old-style sixguns, Ruger filled the need by creating the Single-Six, a rimfire revolver that is still in production today. The ones built 56 years ago are still in use today, and will shoot right along side the newer versions. The little sixguns just do not wear out. I own several Single-Sixes myself, and would not choose to be without at least one.

Ruger sixguns have proven themselves in the field for many years, whether chambered for the rimfires or the larger, more powerful centerfire magnums. This year, Ruger celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of their flagship single-action sixgun, the Super Blackhawk. The Super was introduced to the world the same year that I was: 1959. While my design is showing its age, the Super Blackhawk is as relevant and useful today as it was way back then. The Anniversary Super Blackhawk is certainly worthy to wear the name, with a rich, deep blue finish that is reminiscent of the early Supers. The Anniversary Super comes in a special white cardboard box, with a pistol rug to protect the beautiful finish and gold trim.

Also new this year from Ruger is a gun that is dear to the hearts of single-action sixgunners, and Ruger fans in particular. Back in 1956, Ruger had the very successful .357 Blackhawk in production, and had a .44 Special version of that gun in the works. As fate would have it, Bill Ruger found out about the .44 Magnum cartridge that was in development by Remington and Smith & Wesson. Bill Ruger immediately scrapped the .44 Special project and began working on the .44 Magnum Blackhawk instead, actually beating Smith & Wesson in getting the .44 Magnum into production by a few weeks. Anyway, while .44 Special fans could always shoot the shorter cartridge in their .44 Magnum Blackhawks, the .44 Magnums were built on a slightly larger frame than the pre-1973 .357 Magnum

Taurus Model 941 .22 Magnum.



Cimarron's New Plinkerton .22 Long Rifle sixgun.



Ruger celebrates the 50th anniversary of their Super Blackhawk .44 Magnum with this limited edition sixgun.



Blackhawks, and shooters still longed for the production of a Ruger Blackhawk .44 Special built upon the old .357-sized frame.

Custom gunsmiths have made out pretty well over the past few decades converting small-frame .357 Flattops and Three-Screws into .44 Special Blackhawks. Skeeter Skelton lobbied Ruger for many years to build a .44 Special on the early small Blackhawk frame, to no avail. After his passing, John Taffin has been carrying the flag for those of us who still wanted a .44 Special Blackhawk that was built on the older, handier original-sized Blackhawk frame. Finally, Ruger is producing such a sixgun, and it was worth the wait. The New Model .44 Special Blackhawk is built on a frame the size of the original Blackhawk, and it even has a Flattop frame with Micro rear sight. Mine is very, very accurate, has tight tolerances, and shoots well. It wears the XR-3 grip frame, which is a very close copy of the profile of the the grip of the old Colt Single Action Army and 1851 Navy revolvers. The grips are well-textured black plastic, and the sixgun itself is a delight to handle. The .44 Flattop balances well, handles quickly, and points like the finger of God. It is only available from dealers who buy through Lipsey's, a wholesaler in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Ruger is also bringing back their Bisley Vaquero sixgun, now built upon the slightly smaller New Vaquero frame, as the Bisley New Vaquero.

Of course, Ruger has also built a name for itself producing rugged, reliable, and accurate double-action revolvers, and they are still in production. The Redhawk and Super Redhawk sixguns are well-suited to outdoorsmen and hunters, with many of them available with scope rings included to mount

optics. For many years, Ruger produced the Redhawk with a choice of 7.5" or 5.5" barrel, but they now offer the Redhawk with a 4" barrel, which makes it much better suited as an everyday packing gun. It still wears good adjustable sights, and serves well as a primary hunting arm, but the shorter barrel makes it much easier to carry around while doing other chores or just bumming around the woods.

Another very handy but powerful Ruger double action is their Super Redhawk Alaskan, which is a version of their Super Redhawk with an abbreviated barrel, cut off right at the front of the cylinder frame extension. These sixguns are very handy to carry on the belt, and are available chambered for the .44 Magnum or .454 Casull/.45 Colt. In the past, the Alaskan was also offered chambered for the .480 Ruger cartridge, and hopefully, it will be again despite the fact that it appears to have been discontinued. A very few were produced last year chambered in .480 Ruger with a five-shot cylinder. I have one of these, and it is a very handy and powerful revolver.

The talk of the SHOT show this past January at the 2009 SHOT Show in Orlando, Florida, was Ruger's entry into the pocket revolver market with their new LCR. The LCR is like nothing else, with a unique polymer grip frame/trigger guard unit that houses all of the fire control parts, such as the trigger and hammer. It is a double-action only design with a concealed hammer, five shot steel cylinder, and an aluminum cylinder frame. I had the pleasure of firing the LCR at the New Hampshire Ruger factory back in December of 2008, and the little revolver is a lightweight,

easy-to-shoot firearm. The trigger pull is wonderful, at least on that test gun, and was plenty accurate for social work as well. Chambered for the .38 Special, and Plus P rated, I believe that it will be very popular, and anxiously await the arrival of a production gun for a full review. As you read this, they should already be available on gun dealer's shelves.

## Smith & Wesson

The name Smith & Wesson to me has always meant revolvers. That is just the first thing that pops into my mind: revolvers. Smith & Wesson makes some excellent auto pistols, and has done so for decades. They also makes rifles and shotguns, but to me, and many others, S&W means revolvers. That is quite understandable, for Smith & Wesson has been making revolvers for almost 160 years. Some of my all-time favorite sixguns, like the Models 34, 43, 51, 63, and 651 rimfire kit guns bear the S&W logo. Same with the K-frame twenty-twos. I love .22-caliber sixguns, and Smith & Wesson always has a few in the lineup.

As the older models fade from production, new ones are added, like the reintroduction for 2009 of the Model 18. The Model 18 is a K-frame .22 Long Rifle sixgun that is well-balanced and easy to carry, but still has enough heft in its blued-steel frame to make it easy to shoot well. As a kid, I often read the words of one of my favorite gun writers, Bob Milek, and his adventures with his Model 18 Smith. After being dropped from the catalog a few years ago, I am glad to see that it is back in production.

On the other end of the power scale, Smith & Wesson has an ever-expanding lineup of variations of their huge X-Frame chambered for the .460 XVR and the .500 S&W Magnums. The big X-Frame guns are widely popular. The .460 XVR is a very versatile handgun cartridge, and the revolvers that are chambered for it can also fire the .454 Casull, .45

Taurus makes dozens of compact revolvers, including this Model 85.



Colt, and .45 S&W cartridges. The .500 S&W Magnum has been on the market for a few years now, and is a popular choice for not only big game hunters, but for those who just want to own and shoot the most powerful double-action production revolver that they can find. The Big 500 throws a heavy chunk of lead at magnum velocities, and some of the shorter-barreled 500s carry on the hip pretty well.

Between these two extremes, S&W offers a wide variety of chamberings and frame sizes. One of the newest is the Model 632 Carry Comp Pro that is chambered for the hot little .327 Federal cartridge. With a 3" ported barrel and adjustable sights, the 632 is both a good little defensive revolver, as well as a handy little six-shot trail gun. It can shoot the .32 S&W, .32 S&W Long, .32 H&R Magnum, and .327 Federal cartridges, making it a versatile little package. The .327 Federal throws bullets as light as 60 grains and as heavy as at least 135 grains, all at magnum velocities. My favorite factory load is the 100-gr. American Eagle, which throws that jacketed softpoint bullet out at almost 1400 fps from the Smith's 3" barrel.

There is still a huge selection of S&W .357 and .44 Magnum revolvers from which to choose, along with the .41 Magnum and .45 Colt in a couple of models. In the extremely popular J-frame size, S&W rules the market with the top sellers in the five-shot pocket revolver class of .38 Special and .357 Magnum firearms. There is a huge variety of both lightweight and all-steel revolvers in that section of their catalog, and they also offer one snub-nosed .22 Magnum as well. While Smith & Wesson is now a full-line manufacturer of many classes of firearms, they are still very much involved in supplying fine quality revolvers to the world.

**Taurus**

Taurus has so many revolvers on the market that I cannot keep up with them. In the world of revolvers, there is nothing hotter on the market now than the Taurus Judge. This .45 Colt/.410 shotshell revolver has proved to be very popular, and production still has not caught up with demand after about two years on the market already.

The Judge is, to me, primarily a .410 shotshell revolver with the .45 Colt being secondary. Properly loaded with .410 birdshot or buckshot, it would be ideal to repel attackers at close range, and it is a natural for those who walk



Charter Arms  
Target Bulldog .44 Special.



Thompson-Center  
G2 Contender single shot pistol.



USFA 12-22 "Twelve Shot Sixgun" holds  
a handful of .22 Long Rifle cartridges.



USFA Omni Target  
Flattop Target sixgun.



Freedom Arms  
New single-shot pistol.



AWA Lightningbolt slide action handgun.

Ruger is now making a Bisley version of their New Model Vaquero.



in the woods or desert where poisonous snakes are a problem. Right now, Taurus has about a dozen different variations of the Judge, in a variety of finishes, all-steel

or lightweight, two barrel lengths, and with either a 2.5" or 3" chamber. Just introduced is an even more compact version of the Judge, based upon the small Model 85 frame size, called the Public Defender. It should prove to be wildly popular as well.

While still on the Taurus website, their Colt SAA replica called the Gaucho seems to be out of production. That is a shame. Mine is a very accurate, good-looking and easy-handling sixgun. Hopefully, it is just not in the production cycle for now, and will come back soon.

Of course, Taurus still makes many double-action revolvers, from compact pocket models to those capable of taking large game, and their Models 94 and 941 are some great little rimfire trail guns. In the defensive gun market, small pocket revolvers are very popular, and Taurus is well represented in that field. They offer both lightweight and all-steel versions of their basic Model 85. Right now, Taurus USA catalogs almost four dozen different small-frame revolvers built for concealed carry. They also manufacture a large variety of double-action revolvers that are suitable for hunting small and large game, as well as for target competition and casual plinking.

## Thompson-Center

Thompson-Center has been the leader in single shot handguns for decades now. In the past few years, T-C has entered the muzzleloading and

centerfire rifle markets in a big way, but they certainly have not neglected their single-shot handgun

line. Introducing their Encore pistol several years ago as a big brother to their popular Contender pistol, the Encore line has expanded with many caliber offerings, making the Encore a very powerful and versatile pistol. Offered in 17 different calibers, with a choice of walnut or synthetic rubber stock material and blued steel or stainless, the Encore is a simple yet thoroughly modern hunting pistol capable of cleanly harvesting small game and vermin, then switching barrels and taking the largest game on earth.

While building the Encore line of single shot pistols, T-C did not ignore their original Contender pistol. Upgrading the design to the new G2 Contender, they offer this pistol in 13 different chamberings. While smaller than the Encore, the G2 can still handle the big .45-70 Government cartridge. The Contender is, and always has been, a handy, versatile break-open single shot, and is still the leader in this type of hunting handguns.

## Uberti

Aldo Uberti began in 1959 the company that would become a leader in the world of replica firearms, starting with cap-and-ball replicas, then moving on to other replica firearms from the history of the American West. Today, Uberti is a premier producer of replica firearms, many of which we would not be able to enjoy and shoot, were it not for replicas. Original examples of some of our beloved sixguns are either too rare or expensive for most of us to enjoy.

Uberti recreates these fine sixguns using modern steel and technology, producing firearms that are in many ways superior to the originals. While almost everyone in the replica business replicates the Colt Single Action Army, Uberti doesn't stop there. One of my favorite sixguns is the 1875 Remington. Uberti makes very good replicas of both the 1875 and 1890 Remington revolvers.

Other makers have attempted in

recent years to build quality replicas of the Remingtons, but I have yet to see a production gun. Uberti seems to have no problem in producing these in quantity, and they are well-made and accurate sixguns.

The 1875 Remington Outlaw and Frontier are available in blued/color case-hardened or nickel finishes, and the 1890 Police is available in blued/color case-hardened only. The 1875 is chambered for the .45 Colt cartridge, and the 1890 Police also adds the option of the .357 Magnum chambering. The Cattleman is the bread and butter of the Uberti sixgun line, and it is a 1873 Colt Single Action Army replica of very good quality. Offered in a variety of finishes from matte blue to nickel to the highly polished and charcoal blued Frisco with imitation mother of pearl grips. The Cattleman is available with 4-3/4", 5.5", and 7.5" barrels, in addition to the shorter-barreled Cattleman Bird's Head, which can be had with a 3.5", 4" or 4-3/4" barrel. Chamberings include the .357 Magnum, .44 WCF, and .45 Colt.

Uberti's Stallion is a slightly smaller SAA replica chambered in .22 Long Rifle or .38 Special. It's offered with either fixed or adjustable sights, with the .22 Long Rifle version having the option of a brass grip frame and trigger guard. The Bisley replica is offered in blued/ case-hardened only, in either .357 Magnum or .45 Colt. The top of the line Cattleman is called the "El Patron." It is a special revolver in a choice of stainless steel or blued/case-colored finish, complete with Wolff springs and tuned for a better, smoother action. The El Patron wears one-piece checkered walnut grips and is available in .357 Magnum or .45 Colt chamberings.

Uberti offers an impressive line of quality cap-and-ball replica sixguns, but I still prefer their cartridge guns, and one of my favorite Uberti sixguns is their top-break Smith & Wesson replica. Offered in blued or nicked steel, these are excellent quality replicas of the Number 3 Schofield and Russian sixguns. The Schofield wears your choice of a 5" or 7" barrel and is chambered in .45 Colt, .38 Special, or .44 WCF. The Russian is offered in .44 Russian or .45 Colt, and there is even a hand-engraved version of the 7" Schofield offered as well.



North American Arms "The Earl," shown here with "loading lever" opened.

**USFA (United States Fire Arms)**

USFA is celebrating 15 years of producing some of the best-built Colt SAA replicas ever produced. Their quality is comparable to any Colt ever built, and in addition to the SAA replica, they also offer some unique firearms of their own, such as the Omni-Potent Six-Shooter, which is kind of a single-action version of the old double-action Colt Model 1878. This fine sixgun is like no other, and is offered as either a fixed-sight or a Flattop Target version. The Omni-Potent Six-Shooter has a unique grip that is reminiscent of the old double-action Colt Thunderer, but in a single-action sixgun. They are beautifully finished and wear checkered walnut stocks. Like most of the USFA lineup, the caliber choices are .32 WCF, .38 Special, .38 WCF, .44 Special, .44 WCF, and .45 Colt. They also offer a short-barreled version of the Omni-Potent, called (appropriately enough) the Snubnose. The Snubnose is available with a choice of a 2", 3" or 4" barrel. This is the definitive single-action belly gun. It has a lanyard ring on the butt and wears two-piece walnut stocks.

Another unique revolver from USFA is the new 12/22. This is a .22 Long Rifle "twelve gun" that offers a lot of firepower for a revolver. Offered in high polish blued or nicked finishes with a choice of 4-3/4", 5.5", or 7.5" inch barrel, it wears white plastic stocks and looks like a genuine Single Action Army sixgun, but cranks out 12 shots before reloading, just like the sixguns in an old Western movie. The latest from USFA is their Shooting Master Magnum series sixguns. These look like nothing else to ever come out of Hartford. First offered in .357 magnum, with .41 and .44 Magnums slated for later, the Shooting Master has an adjustable rear sight and fiber optic front. The most unusual feature of these new sixguns is the finish of the frame. Offered in a choice of black, gray, brown, tan, or two shades of green, this ain't your traditional single action revolver! The Shooting Master is built as a hunting gun, and it should serve in

that role very well. The non-glare finish will certainly not endear itself to single-action purists, but it should prove to be very practical in the field.

This about wraps up my attempt to cover the revolver scene for 2009, and is by no means a comprehensive list of everything available to revolver fans. While it looks like the semi-auto pistols are here to stay, there is still a large selection of fine firearms available to us who love the simplicity, accuracy, and convenience of the grand old sixgun, along with the precision and rifle-like accuracy of a good single shot pistol. In this section, I have just hit the high spots, and am sure that in the months ahead, that more new firearms will be introduced that will pique the interest of sixgun shooters. The design of a firearm that holds a half dozen cartridges in a revolving cylinder has been declared

obsolete by many for about the last 100 years, but the sixgun is far from dead, and is still by far the best design found to date to easily handle the best and most powerful of the world's handgun cartridges.



The USFA Snubnose is the ultimate single-action belly gun.



The Uberti New Model Russian is a faithful replica of the Smith & Wesson Russian revolver.



Uberti Cattleman SAA replica with charcoal blue finish.



Uberti Stallion Rimfire Target sixgun.

Compact .357 Magnum double action sixgun from Rossi.