



ELMER KEITH TAILORS THE SINGLE ACTION!

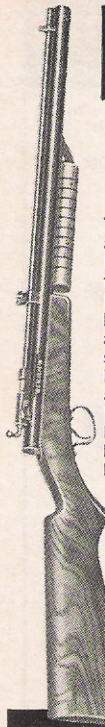
With a few basic modifications the old single action is capable of speed and accuracy that will compete with just about any modern revolver, according to Mr. Sixgun

Colt single actions have come down through the years, from the 1847 Walker to the latest flat top target version, with practically no change in the design of their mechanism. The main spring was riveted to the front strap on the Walker and early Dragoons and screwed to the trigger or front strap on all later versions of the Colt. Only the Root side hammer showed any change in basic design of Colt's single action. Of the early single actions, the Remington .36 and .44 Civil War percussion revolvers, were much stronger, having a top strap over the cylinder, however removal of the cylinder was much slower and for this reason the Colts were the most popular in Civil War days. Many cavalrymen and others as well, carried extra cylinders, loaded and capped. Both the caps and the front ends of cylinders were covered with melted tallow so they could withstand a hard rain and remain waterproof. In action, the cavalryman had only to knock the wedge out of position, remove the fired cylinder, replace it with a loaded cylinder and he was

back in business. Many carried two to six extra cylinders as well as a pair of guns, .36 Navy, .44 Army or the big Dragoons. Later, Colt, Richards and others converted these percussion Colts to handle metallic cartridges, both rimfire and centerfire. The S&W single actions of the Civil War were usually in .32 and .38 rimfire calibers. They did not have the power of the percussions and were never as widely used.

The hammer, hand, hand spring, bolt and bolt spring are of the same basic design on the old Walkers and Dragoons as on our most modern Colt single actions. They are prone to breakage. I cut my teeth on an old, hopelessly ruined .36 Navy Colt, but my first good sixgun was a .36 Navy for which I swapped all my flints, arrowheads, a good Barlow jack knife, and other sundries. It accounted for a lot of small game after I had a good rear sight dovetailed into the rear end of the barrel and a small blade front sight also dovetailed near the muzzle. That old gun would cut clover leaves at 20 yards from a seated back rest, two hand





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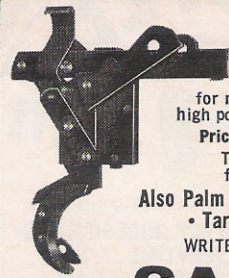
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position with gun held between my knees. I foolishly swapped it for an Army Special .38 Colt.

The actions of the old Colts can be worked over until the various parts are not so easily broken. The stud on the inside bottom of the hammer should be filed or ground off flat until it will just handle the arm of the bolt, thus cutting down about half the amount the bolt arm must cam to allow it to lock over the stud. The bolt spring itself should be filed lengthwise and polished and tapered and the square cut between the arms of the bolt spring should be rounded with a rat tail file, then polished. Then the arms of the bolt can also be tapered and polished. The hand should be carefully fitted as to length, so it will turn the cylinder to place and lock fully when cocked. Protrusion of the bolt itself through the bottom of the frame should also receive attention and further polishing so it will engage in the cylinder indents surely and with little friction between stops. Trigger pull is best adjusted by the use of a center punch or prick punch. A small crater can be thrown up on each side of the hammer in the full cock notch, limiting the depth of the sear bite. The sear, of course, being the top end of the trigger. This can be done by a good smith so that you have a perfect 3 to 3½ pound single action trigger pull. The rims of the burrs thrown out by the punch do not change their case hardening, so such a trigger pull will not wear or change as it will if the full cock notch is filed back. The bolt must be adjusted so the hammer will ride over both half cock and safety notches with no chance of catching on them and breaking off the sear portion of the trigger. The gun can be made even more reliable if both safety and half cock notches are ground off the ball of the hammer. True, you must then hold the hammer back to half cock with one hand to revolve the cylinder on loading or kicking out the empty cases, but there is no chance of anyone letting the hammer down into these notches accidentally from full cock and breaking off the sear tip which is very fragile. Lengthwise polishing of the sear portion of the trigger to eliminate any scratches also helps. A single action properly tuned up and all parts hand polished, is a very reliable gun. It can be carried safely however, with only five chambers loaded and the hammer down on an empty chamber.

There is nothing faster than a good single action, for the first shot, drawn from a holster. When it comes to re-loading, however, it's another story and a swing cylinder can be reloaded much quicker than any single action, unless

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you have Thell Reed on the job. He is the fastest man at dumping fired cases and replacing them with loaded rounds in a single action that I have ever seen.

Back in the eighties, the Colt Company made some beautiful flat top single actions, a few in S. A. Army and a lot more in the Bisley model and fitted them with a bead front sight and a movable target rear sight. These are highly prized today by collectors. I have one in 7 1/2" S. A. Army in .44 Special caliber and it is a very fine old Colt and wonderfully accurate. As regards accuracy, a good single action properly worked over is as accurate as any gun made. Best control of a single action is secured with the little finger curled under the butt of the gun for fast repeat shots. Soon after World War II, Colt scrapped their machinery and dropped production of the S. A. Colt, claiming it was a dead fish.

On all my Colt single actions, I had all front sight fitted by means of a barrel band encircling the barrel. The barrel was turned down to receive this sleeve front sight base and it was tinned and soldered and also cross pinned so it could never shoot or jar loose. For improving a single action Colt, this is the best method of fitting a new and proper shaped front sight. The best rear sight for the standard single action Colt is the S&W target.

At one time, I designed a front sight for the single action Colt with three gold bars down the front face of the square topped blade for long range shooting. You used the top bar for point blank range and a bit of long range shooting would soon enable any shooter to learn how much each succeeding bar down the face of that front sight would give him in longer range.

Personally, I have no use for any six-gun barrel over 7 1/2 inches long even for a hunting gun. Doug Wesson gave me one of the first .357s with an 8 3/8 inch barrel. I soon found that except for two hand rest positions, I shot better with shorter barrels, so I sent it back to the factory and had him cut it off to 6 1/2 inches and fit it with my three bar long range front sight. Frank Pachmayr also fitted the gun with a new trigger and short action. Later, I tested several .45 Colt single actions with ten inch barrels and found that with one hand only, they tended to shoot off to the left. Back in the late twenties, I drilled holes in the forward face of the hammer both one above and several below the firing pin, to lighten the hammer and speed up its stroke. Later, I cut off the top of the hammer so it would go under the extended flat top on which I perched the rear sight to give maximum sighting radius. Still later, in 1930, I had the late

continued on page 73

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THE SINGLE ACTION

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Herb Bradley of Salmon, Idaho, make and fit a rebounding firing pin in several Colts. This further lightened the hammer and speeded up its travel, as well as producing a much better system of firing pin that would not allow gas from a pierced primer to come back in the action. The pin did a very good job of ignition.

While in my teens in Montana, recuperating from terrible burns, I spent two summers with Samuel H. Fletcher who had served through the Civil War with the 2nd Illinois Cavalry and was one of the few of that outfit that returned after the war. He was an expert sixgun shot at any range and while he used a pair of Colt .36 Navys during the war, he later went to a 7½ inch .45 Colt single action. No target was safe out in the open, over dry dusty ground at 500 yards from his old sixgun.

I also had expert coaching from Chauncey Thomas, Sam Russell, Waldo Abbott, Harfield Conrad and others. While the Helena Rifle Club was shooting at Fort Harrison one day in 1916, we all witnessed some very fine 600 yard shooting by Harfield Conrad. After getting the range and finding out how much front sight to hold up on his 6½ inch Military .44 Special, he proceeded to stay on that B target at 600 yards off hand and most of the time in the bull, the 4 and 3 rings. It was a cloudy still day and the range was dry and dusty as usual. That was back in 1916.

About that time a revolver club in Kentucky regularly held 300 yard off hand turkey shoots with revolvers. They had special high rear sights built up and front sights to suit the individual and several of them could get three hits out of five shots on the turkey silhouette at 300 yards off hand. It was well publicized at the time. Each succeeding generation has to learn, and often the hard way, what the preceding generations have forgotten.

I have spent a good part of a lifetime trying to improve sixguns and their ammunition and believe I have made a considerable contribution to the game. It is gratifying to see a new crop of gun writers adopting my old long range sixgun positions and publicizing them.

Being the last of the old school gun editors and arms commentators in America, I am not getting any younger. I am now past 68 and my eyes are not as sharp as formerly, but I can still demonstrate long range sixgun work. I believe it is an art that should be carried on by future generations. My book "Sixguns" and the many articles I have written on the subject, will, I hope, help to develop the skill of younger generations.

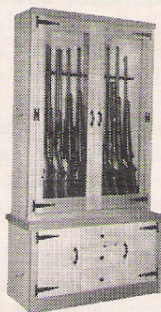


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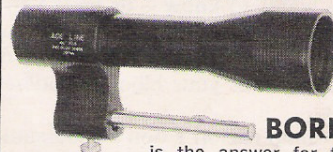
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