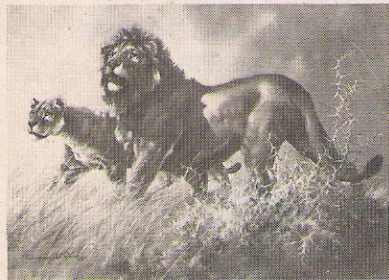


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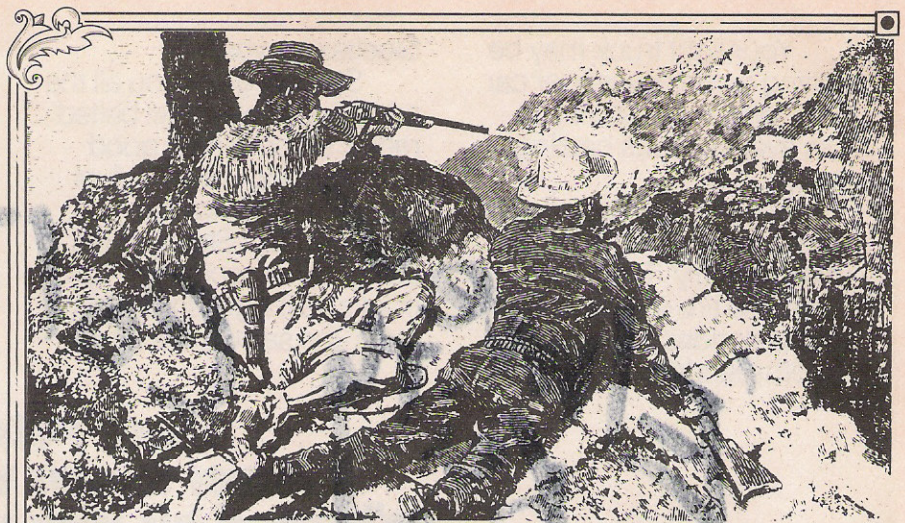


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## GUNNOTES

By Elmer Keith, Executive Editor

*After 60 years of pistol packing, Elmer Keith takes a hard look at his old favorite—the single-action six shooter.*

### THE RETURN OF THE SINGLE ACTION (Part 1)

□ I was born in 1899 and cut my teeth on the stock of an old .36 caliber Navy Colt. Twelve years later I was killing grouse and rabbit for the table with a similar single action. My first cartridge handgun was a Colt .32-20, which I bought new from Talley's Gun Store in Helena, Montana. It cost \$15.85 complete with checkered walnut grips. That old single action accounted for a raft of small game, as well as an elk and three mule deer. For the three years that I kept a record, the .32-20 produced 41 to 43 grouse per season—blue, ruffed, sharp tail and sage hens. It also finished many a race I had with coyotes.

Later I went to heavier calibers, but the single action was my favorite six-gun for a great many years. For one thing, it would safely handle heavier loads than most existing double-action guns of that time. Internal parts were few, simple and easily replaced when broken. The old gun would still function with many parts that were broken or gone. A novice will usually break a lot of single-action parts through ignorance and careless handling, practicing quick draw and fanning. I have never had a single-action part break at a critical moment, nor ever let me down. I wore the gun as often as my pants for over 20 years, and it saved my life several times.

Three times, mad range cattle gored and killed the horse under me and I had to shoot several. Once, I wound up with a green bronc while roping a wild range cow and had to kill her. Another time, an ungrateful old cow that I had

pulled out of a big hole, turned on me and threw me back in it. When she came up for me, I had to kill her as I was in up to my hips in the soft, brown, bottomless mud. I was so close that the old black powder .45 burned the white star on her forehead.

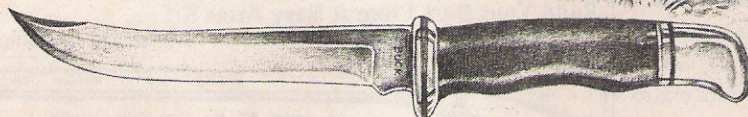
Another time a big 17-hand bronc I was breaking turned a somersault after hitting a badger hole. When he came out of it, my left spur had hooked around the stirrup leather and I was hung hard and fast. I lost the hackamore rope in the somersault and that bronc lit out across the country still bucking and kicking at me. As I was close to him, his hocks rather than his hooves hit me. I would have been kicked and dragged to doll rags in short order but for the old .45 single-action Colt. My first two slugs only sped him up, but the third angled upwards and broke his back. Then we really turned somersaults! I wound up out in front of the bronc, with my left foot still hung tight in the stirrup and the left spur around the stirrup leather. Luckily, I was not knocked out and still had a death grip on my gun. As the bronc came up on his front feet, I plugged him again in the forehead. That ended the business, and also my chances of collecting ten bucks for breaking him. I did no more riding for two weeks after that ordeal as I was badly battered and skinned.

Another time, in 1919, I foolishly went up to a big bull elk that I had downed with a neck shot from a .30-06 Springfield at about 90 yards. He was in deep snow and I could not see his

*continued on page 12*



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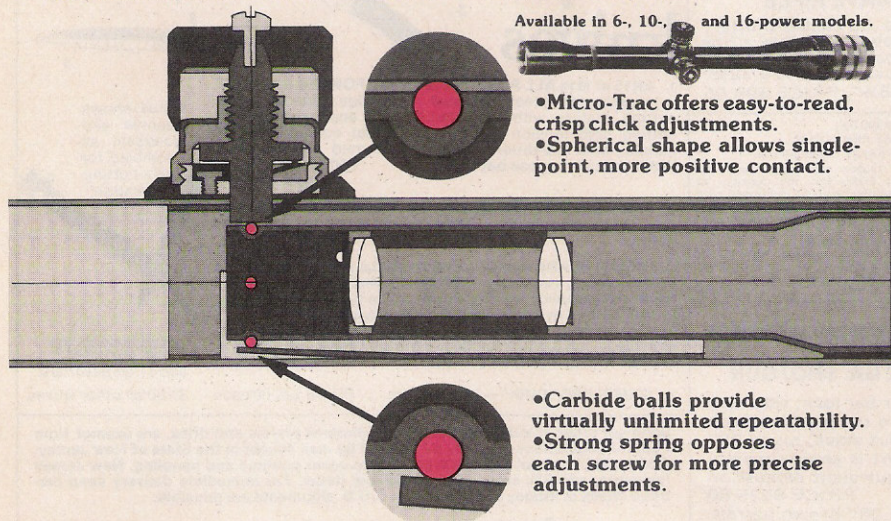


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## GUNNOTES

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eyes. When I poked him on top of the withers with the rifle, he exploded out of the snow and caught me with his brow points, throwing me over his back and far down the steep mountain slope. Then he came for me, after I planted the first .38-40 six-gun slug between his eyes. It was a weak, factory, smokeless load, that I alternated in the cylinder with heavy black powder loads. The next slug was one of my black powder hand loads and hit him between the eyes a trifle low for the brain. The slug went clear back into his jaw and dropped him. He then slid up on me. Being a green 20-year-old kid, I did not use my head. After finding my rifle and cleaning the snow out of the barrel, I went around behind the old bull. The only sensible thing I did do was to reload the .38-40 Colt. When I poked him in the rump with the rifle, he lashed out with both heels and sent me down the mountain again. He jumped up and started to run off. My next shot from the six-gun hit the left sword point and imbedded itself there. The following two hit a ham, but the fourth broke his back between the hips. The old boy went down and turned around with his hair standing on end and his teeth grinding, all the while pawing himself back toward me. I centered on the bulge of his neck with my next six-gun slug, and that did the business. I lost track of the rifle each time he hit me, and if it were not for the old single action, I would not be writing this now.

Though I later acquired and used all makes of six-guns, the old single-action will always have a warm place in my heart. No gun points as well for fast hip or instinctive shooting in the dark as the single-action. Colt's design was better than he knew in this old six-gun grip. Though it first came out in the Paterson model along about 1836 and later in the Walker and Dragoon models, it has never needed to be improved upon for fast accurate gun pointing, or for absorbing and cushioning the recoil of heavy six-gun loads.

The single-action Colt probably attained its greatest popularity in 1902 when 18,000 were produced, and was still very popular in 1907 when 16,000 were produced. The old gun was manufactured until 1940 when 859 were made. Then for some mysterious reason the Colt factory dropped production of this famous model. This was a sad mistake. The gun was really their trademark as much as the Rampant Colt they stamped on the grips.

In the late twenties, Harold Croft, J.D. O'Meara, Chauncey Thomas, Ashley Haines and I did a lot of work on and with the single-action Colt. We de-

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## GUNNOTES

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veloped heavier and more powerful loads in .38-40, .44-40, .44 Special and the .45 Colt calibers. Croft and I had a good many remodelled by R.F. Sedgley and Neil Houchins. We also made many improvements on the old gun and I strongly urged Colt to bring them out, but to no avail. At that time, all the advertising was on .22 and .38 calibers for target use—they seemed to forget that we living in the West still needed powerful heavy six-guns. They were tools of the trade, whether punching cows, guiding big game hunters, prospecting or trapping. The company catered to a few target buffs, probably not over five percent of the total shooters who used six-guns. They quit advertising the single-action, and finally in 1940, stopped producing them. During the changeover to war production, the machines and tools for making them were scrapped and sold for junk, and the single-action was officially dead. But, in the hands of thousands of Westerners, it would never die out, and the demand became ever stronger.

During the 1880s, Colt made flat-top target models in both S.A. Army and the Bisley models. The S.A. Army flat-top was, and is, the finest single-action Colt has ever turned out. Why it was not pushed and continued is beyond me. We flat-topped the frames and had them extended back over the hammer spur, which we lowered with Bisley-type thumb pieces and fitted adjustable target rear sights to the extreme rear end of the frame. We also developed new front sights—some adjustable for elevation, some fixed, and the first of the ramp-type sights, later to be called the Boughman sight. We fitted wide triggers that contoured the trigger finger, improved base pin catches and added large-head base pins that could be easily pulled out with the fingers. We also developed new and softer main springs. Sedgley even went so far as to make up a gun with all coil springs. We lightened the hammers and fitted short actions. In fact, we worked the old guns over until they would shoot as well as any handgun made. We made many five-shot groups with the two-hand rest position at 50 yards that went under 1½ inches, many of them with the heavy loads and new bullets I designed. The demand was there for a modern single-action gun, but Colt missed the boat. I even offered that they might copy and incorporate their improvements into a new model, but they ignored the offer.

Let us examine the single-action, evaluate its good points, and see just what is needed to make a real modern gun of it. Its strong solid frame is perfect for heavy loads, and leaves very little of the barrel projecting back

through the frame. This was a weak point on many double-action guns, and heavy loads would crack or split the rear end of the barrel. The grips are perfectly shaped for fast, accurate gun pointing. For those with abnormally large hands, the old .44 Army 1860 model grips, which were often fitted to single-actions by gun cranks, are more practical. What would have been even better were the old second Dragoon square-backed trigger guard grips. The base pin catch could well be improved upon, as Croft and I did, so that the jar of heavy loads would not loosen it out of its seat in the rear end of the frame. Incidentally, the old screw-front frame was the best in this respect, as its set screw held the base pin in place far better than the later spring-loaded cross pin frames. I developed a turning cross pin that beat either arrangement. The stock straps could be made in a one-piece casting, eliminating one joint at the front of the butt and the set screw.

The old hammer spur, while O.K. for movie actor fanning, was far too high and small a thumb piece for fastest one-hand drawing and firing. The answer was a sharply checkered wide hammer spur set lower on the old Bisley pattern. When the gun fired, it did not black out the sight picture. The trigger was too narrow and was placed in the left side of the guard. So, we made wider ones that perfectly contoured the shooters trigger finger. The bolt stud, or pawl, on the inside of the hammer came out twice as long as needed. This, in turn, placed undue strain on the bolt arm. The remedy was to file this stud off perfectly flat, leaving just the width of the bolt arm where it contacted the stud on the hammer. Then if the bolt itself was pounded between two tapered arms very few would break. Another weak point in the single-action is the sear spring. When both arms of this flat spring are tapered properly and the cut between the limbs rounded, very few would break. Hand polishing and timing the action would complete the picture. The single-action main spring is usually much stronger than needed. Whereas the heavy hammer blow will set off any and all primers that would often fail to fire under the much lighter blow of a double-action gun, the main spring need not be nearly as powerful. Croft developed a much better mainspring which cocked half as hard and was faster, yet delivered ample blow to fire any primer. We also used to place a small leather cushion under the extreme rear or lower end of the mainspring. Then by cinching the mainspring screw down on this, we greatly lightened the tension and also cushioned it. With these improvements, the old gun was very reliable—unless you allowed some kid or movie actor to play with it and practice quick draw or fanning.

continued next month.