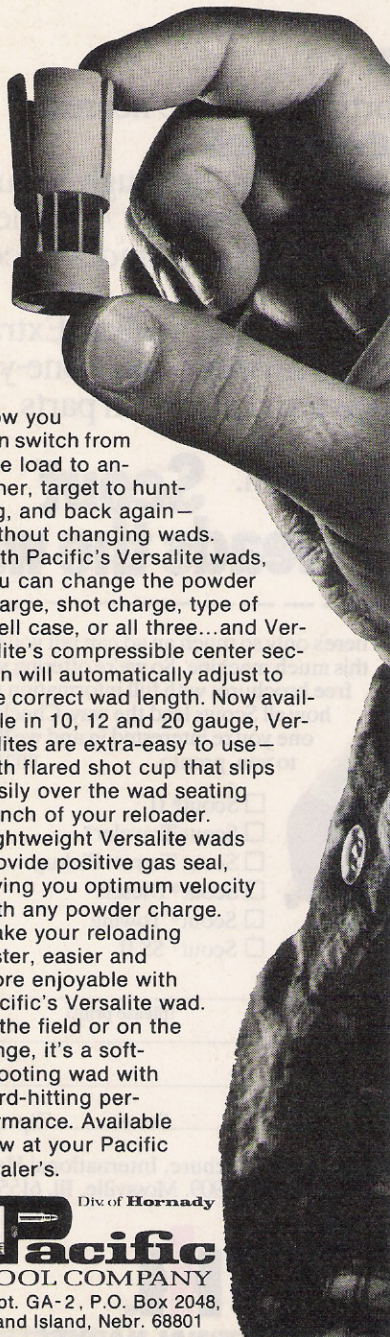


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GUNNOTES

By *Elmer Keith, Executive Editor*

More on the world's most popular revolver, by America's most famous six-gunner, Elmer Keith.

PART II

□ Fanning, was and is, very hard on any single-action and will ruin most of the old Colts in short order. Likewise, drawing the hammer back to half cock, or a trifle beyond, and letting it slip usually results in a broken hammer notch. It is also possible that the top of the trigger which forms the sear could be broken off. The heavy mainspring tension on factory guns increased the liability of breakage when the gun was so handled. In fanning, if the firer failed to hold the trigger back firmly against the back of the guard, the same thing could happen, and the gun would be put out of commission.

Fitting the old gun with a flat-top target frame, target rear sight (the best of which were the S&W type) and a lower Bisley-type hammer spur eliminated any chance of fanning or breakages. The wide, sharply checkered Bisley-shaped hammer spur also prevented any slippages of the thumb or sear and hammer notch breakage when the gun was cocked fast as in the fast draw work. A large head base pin that was cut out to contour the barrel and extractor housing prevented rotation of the pin and allowed its cut to be made larger so it would be better held by the base pin screw or catch. With all these improvements, plus a good flat-top target-type front sight of either square-face or ramp-shape with a gold insert at the top, the old single-action will shoot as well as any handgun. Owing to its solid frame, slow loading and case extraction, it cannot be reloaded as fast as modern double actions. Gus Peret had a single-action made up with a swing-out cylinder and simultaneous ejection.

But, the solid frame of the standard model is still stronger than his experimental single-action.

In this connection, and in regards to strength, we recently tested a huge single-action made after the pattern of the Colt by R.G. Wilson of Fulton, Michigan for the .45-70-405 factory load. In spite of having too small a grip for a weight of five pounds, it handled well, and the recoil was very mild. Properly made, the gun would handle perfectly at a weight of 4½ pounds.

When Colt dropped production of the single-action in 1940, prices soared. We saw old Army single-actions, with the U.S. stamp on the frame and the one-piece wood grips in good condition, sell for as much as \$200 each. These were the same old guns Bannerman sold for \$5 each when we were kids. In spite of Colt officially pronouncing the single-action dead and obsolete, it would not die out. The demand was there and increasing. It remained for a young man named William B. Ruger to get on the ball and do something about it. He paid us a visit out here in Idaho and examined all my old worked-over single-actions. He then went home and soon produced the famous Ruger Single Six. From the start, it was the most foolproof single-action yet produced and almost unbreakable. We saw one at the N.R.A. Convention that was placed on an electric machine, which cocked

continued on page 12

Elmer Keith receives such a volume of mail that it is no longer possible for him to individually answer all correspondence. Only letters with a self-addressed, stamped envelope will receive a reply.

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GUNNOTES

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and snapped the gun continuously night and day. It was still operating perfectly at the end of the convention. Bill Ruger had proven he had a reliable gun. Sales soared, and demand was greater than the output at his small factory in Southport, Connecticut. The gun had a few faults, but it is still one of the most popular .22 single-actions today.

From the start, I strongly urged Ruger to bring out the gun in larger form and calibers; preferably in .44 Special. His next model, the .357 Blackhawk, was a great improvement over the early Single Six. He left the frame flat and extended it back over the hammer nose. It was fitted with a Micro rear sight, adjustable for both elevation and windage, a barrel length of 4¾ inches and a ramp front sight. I never did like a Micro rear sight because if the elevation screw is raised too far, the sight will then wobble or protrude too high above the frame. The .357 caliber Blackhawk has proven to be a very popular, reliable and perfectly balanced gun with its all coil springs—production has never quite caught up with demand. Shooters welcomed it with open arms, and these guns are now in active service all over this continent.

About this time, William Wilson, who was then head of The Great Western Arms Company, brought out a complete line of single-actions patterned after the old Colt. They had the same design of internal parts and were produced in calibers from .22 LR to .45 Colt. Very good steels were used throughout. They turned out some excellent single-actions which were capable of handling the highest velocity .357 Magnum and .44 Special, as well as .45 Colt ammunition. They made me a 4¾-inch .44 Special, fitted with a ramp front and Micro rear sight that is a very accurate and reliable gun. Later they brought out the short 4-inch Deputy model, but I have not seen nor tested these later guns that were made after Bill Wilson left the company, so I cannot say how good they were.

In 1953, I spent all my available time with Mr. Peterson of the Remington Arms Company at Camp Perry at the National Matches. I urged him to bring out my heavy .44 Special loads. He was very enthusiastic about this and invited me to the factory. Later, I spent a week at the Remington plant with Henry Davis and Gail Evans and told them to bring out my heavy .44 Special loads that I had used so long in Colt single-actions and in the old Smith & Wesson Triple-Lock. They were afraid of the relative strength of the early Triple-Lock Smith & Wessons. So, I then suggested they make the case one-tenth of

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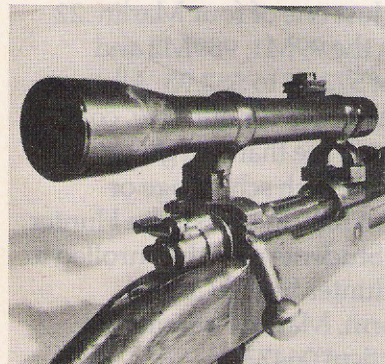
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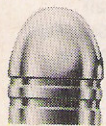
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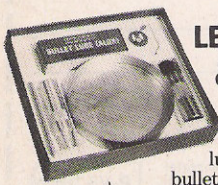
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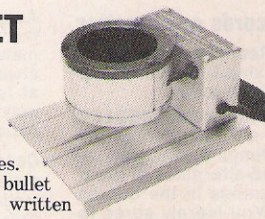
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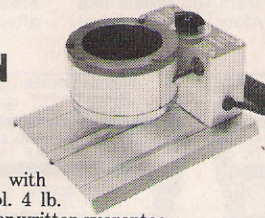
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GUNNOTES

continued from page 12

an inch longer and use my bullet and heavy .44 Special loading. Then only new guns could be chambered for my special round. They were very attentive. Evans made notes on my loads and said they would see what could be done.

I visited the Smith & Wesson plant at Springfield for a week at the request of Carl R. Hellstrom and urged that they cooperate with Remington and bring out their 1950 model chambered for my heavy .44 Special loads—or a new gun to handle them. Carl Hellstrom told me in his office that he could build a gun around any load Remington could bring out. During my last morning's visit with him, I again urged that he get together with the Remington men on such a venture. No one promised anything, and I was in the dark about the upcoming development. Harold Austin of Smith & Wesson, phoned me some time later and told me the very first .44 S&W Magnum was being shipped to me and that the ammunition would be forthcoming from the Remington people. He also said the second gun out of the plant was being sent to my old friend, General Hatcher. Finally, after 30 years of endeavor, experiment and the writing of hundreds of letters and many magazine articles urging a modern .44 caliber sixgun for my heavy loads, the dream became a reality.

The new 6½-inch Smith & Wesson and the Remington factory .44 Magnum loads proved to be all that Harold Austin said they were. I was delighted with both. It was the finest six-gun I have yet seen produced by any arms factory. The world now knows all about the heavy .44 Magnum loads with the one-tenth of an inch longer case and the redesigned bullet that allows soft factory lead to be used with a part jacket covering the base band and lower lubrication groove that will hold the rifling at higher velocities. The gun and load proved to be exactly what I had wanted for so many years. In spite of the fact that every six-gun crank in this country knew who was directly responsible for the .44 Magnum—gun and load development—one national magazine did their utmost to discredit me. The truth finally came out in the *Gun Digest* and other publications.

Although the .357 Magnum, gun and load, has taken all species of American big game, the .44 Magnum has proven to be twice as good a killer. I have now had reports of one-shot kills on all species of game, including Alaskan brown and grizzly bear, elk, moose, and caribou, as well as a good many black bear. I have killed three mule deer with the load. Two were with close-range brain shots and one spectacular kill

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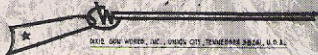
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GUNNOTES

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with two out of four shots at a three-legged running animal at extremely long rifle range. Shooting prone with both hands and all of the front sight blade held up over the top of the rear sight notch, I managed to lob one Remington 240-grain slug through a buck's jaw and out his mouth with the first shot. The second, as he turned up the mountain, went through both lungs. The part jacket stayed under the skin on the off side, but the soft-lead body of the bullet went completely through. A .50 caliber hole was cut through both lungs and a rib on each side, showing the gun still has authority out at 600-plus yards.

With the advent of the .44 Magnum cartridge, I urged Bill Ruger to make a larger version of his famous Blackhawk for the new load. He first made up three pilot models on his .357 Blackhawk frame. I wrote him that the frame should be enlarged, and the cylinder should be both longer and larger in diameter. He found this advice to be correct after considerable test firing and redesigned the frame and cylinder. He then brought out his famous Blackhawk .44 Magnum with a 6½-inch barrel. Bill made up a special 4¾-inch job for me, and it has proven to be a wonderfully

accurate modern single-action for the big load. It has handled all loads perfectly for me.

I consider the frame of the .357 Ruger, as well as that of the old Colt single-actions and the Great Western guns to be a bit light and small for the big loads. I do not recommend ever re-chambering any of these guns for the .44 Magnum. The big cartridge needs the larger frame, cylinder and greater length coupled with the finest of modern steels. Both Smith & Wesson and Ruger have used them in their .44 Magnum guns with great success.

At that time I could see no place for improvement in the fine Smith & Wesson .44 Magnums. There was still room for further improvement in the Ruger Blackhawk—in .44 Magnum caliber. I urged Bill to bring it out in a Dragoon model with the cylinder left straight with no flutes. The barrel should be 7½ inches long, the grip, a duplicate of the old Colt second model Dragoon with a square back trigger guard, and the material for the grip frame to be steel or a stronger metal than aluminum alloy. The hammer should be a lower Bisley-type with a wide sharply checkered thumb piece and trigger.

One fall I loaned Erv Malnarich my .44 Magnum Ruger to use while guiding elk hunters. It finished three

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GUNNOTES

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wounded elk for him with brain shots. He killed his own cow elk at 70 yards with a single broadside shoulder shot with the big .44 Ruger. He and Sid Hinkle once wounded a big bull elk across a canyon and had to follow him up. They finally killed the bull at about 75 yards—both making several lung shots on him before he went down.

Ruger has now improved the single-action to a finer degree over all existing makes and models. He used a grip shaped similar to that like the old Colt single-action. His adoption of the separate spring-loaded firing pin—first developed here at Salmon, Idaho by H.W. Bradley—is another big improvement over the old Colt. Ruger's all coil-spring action made the gun practically unbreakable.

Great Western copied the old Colt single-action in detail, save for the adoption of the Bradley-type firing pin and using much stronger, more modern steels. Great Western's Deputy Model, however, incorporated fine adjustable target sights, a short 4-inch barrel with a full rib, and a lower Bisley-type hammer spur. I have not seen, nor ever tested the Deputy model.

Ruger improved upon the old Remington design in the development and

production of another hand gun, the tiny Bearcat .22 rimfire. It resembled the famous Single Six—an excellent precision-made and very accurate little gun. Colt then borrowed Ruger's design of one-piece grip straps for their fine Frontier Scout .22. They also copied the spring-loaded separate firing pin, and used a much smaller aluminum alloy frame than the Ruger.

With the coming of World War II, the great firm of Colt went largely into the military production of machine guns, .45 autos, etc. After the war, few of their old key men in the pistol and revolver department remained. They had dropped the famous single-action from production, and marked it off as a dead number. When I visited the Colt plant in 1953, only one small shop was involved in pistol and revolver production. Then, the Colt Company changed ownership and along with it the management. The new management put the timehonored single-action back in production. The present modern production Colt single-action is the same basic design as the early pre-war model that was made from 1873 until World War II. It should have been improved and modernized, and the company should have used their old flat-top target design with further improvements and coil springs wherever possible.

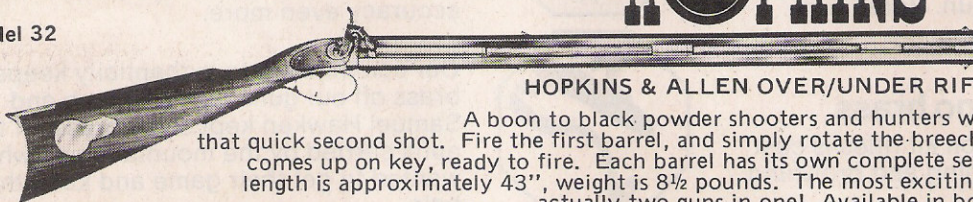
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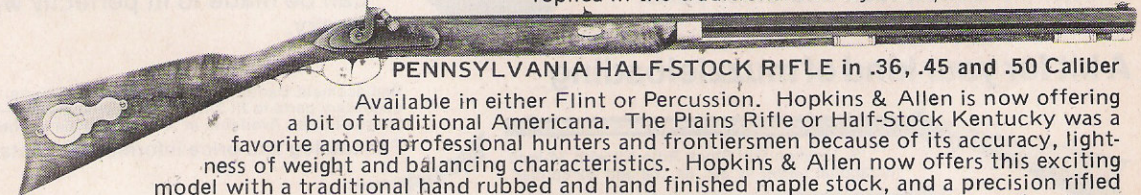
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