VERSATILE .44 Spl.

By Bob Hagel

THE .44 SMITH & WESSON Special cartridge has been around a bit longer than most of us can remember. In fact, it was produced at about the time smokeless powders were taking over — just after the turn of the century. The cartridge worked quite well with black powder, but was at its best with smokeless. However, the standard factory load, using a 246-grain round-point bullet loaded to a muzzle velocity of 755 fps, left something to be desired as far as a really powerful handgun cartridge is concerned.

That 755 velocity has never been increased in factory-loaded ammunition. The main reason is that, while the cartridge is capable of much higher velocities, many of the guns chambered for it will not withstand the pressure of high velocity loading.

Like most of the handgun cartridges of the day, the round-nose bullet was of very soft lead and, even at the low velocity used, tended to upset and expand somewhat on game if bone was encountered. If little or no heavy bone was struck, I have yet to see one that expanded to any extent. It was not until the advent of such bullets as the flat-nose Keith design (Lyman No. 429421), that the .44 Special became a top-hole hunting cartridge. While this did give the cartridge somewhat more stopping power, it was still far from a really potent load when loaded with standard pistol powders.

There is little doubt that Elmer Keith had more to do with making the .44 Special cartridge into the power-package it can be loaded to, than any other man — living or dead. When he was working extensively with this cartridge — in the early 1930's — he used all of the pistol powders available, and many of the fast rifle powders, as well as some of the shotgun variety. After much experimenting, he finally settled on Hercules No. 2400 as being the most effective with his 250-grain flat-point bullet. For many years a charge of 18.5 grains of this powder has been more or less standard with .44 Special fans for a heavy game load, using anything from 235 to 250-grain bullets.

This heavy powder charge is to be used *only* in high quality guns in top condition. Another point to be remembered is that this load was worked up to be used with the old style "balloon head" case, and *not* the more recent cases with solid heads. The older case, not having the solid web, has somewhat more powder capacity and will handle a heavier charge of powder than the newer case.

It is generally recommended that charges be cut by 1.5 to 2 grains when using modern cases with solid or web-bed heads. However, velocity seems to run about the same either way. There may be room for argument as to whether the heavier charge is as safe in the old balloon head case as the lighter one in the newer case, even though the newer case has less powder capacity. On this point I have only one comment: I've fired thousands of rounds through several guns chambered for the cartridge — from old Colt Frontier sixguns to 1926 and 1950 Smith & Wessons — and I have yet to have the 250-18.5-2400 load give any trouble. Many cases have been fired at least 20 times and show no sign of giving up.

This is the most accurate combination of any of the heavy hunting loads

The author fires at a target in the lower branches of pine, and Ruger .44 Magnum is shown in full recoil. The old .44 Special cartridge is not as powerful but has the advantage of less weight and recoil.

I have ever used. But I do not believe that velocity ran as high as was first reported. The old Lyman Ideal Handbook listed it as having a muzzle velocity of 1,200 fps. I wonder if this was clocked in a pressure barrel with no loss of gas between cylinder and barrel. It may also have been taken in 8 to 10-inch barrels. My own 1950 S&W with 6½-inch barrel shows only 1,015 m.v. (with Rem. No. 2½ Primers) with bullets cast hard (one part tin to ten parts lead) and sized .429. With softer bullets, say 1-16 mixture, bullet upset would be faster and more complete, could raise pressures somewhat and result in slightly higher velocities.

While this load only turns up some 560 foot pounds of muzzle energy, it has always been quite reliable on game if placed in the right spot. This is especially true if the animal is large and penetration must be deep. With the hard 1-10 bullets, very little expansion takes place even on heavy bone and, on deer-size game, penetration is almost always complete. The 1-16 mixture will expand somewhat better on game, but is about as soft as is advisable to use with a bullet without a gas check. Even then, unmarred bullets that are retrieved, will show considerable slippage where they took the lands when entering the leade.

At one time or another, I've killed most of the big game the West provides with the 250-grain Keith bullet backed by the 18.5 charge of 2400, with both hard and soft bullets. I've put the big, flat bullets through big buck mule deer and left holes in both sides, and the same thing goes for the average black bear.

While not my idea of a top-drawer elk cartridge, there have been some that didn't make many more tracks after one of the big slugs splashed through. Enough mountain lions have been toppled from high fir trees to make one hell of a long rug.

This load in the old .44 Special cartridge has always done a good job if I did my part.

Within the last few years swaged bullets with various degrees of jackets have appeared. This allows using softer cores (usually pure lead) and, of course, gives much better expansion on game. Most of these .44 bullets use some kind of a flat-point design. This also helps upset the bullet faster for greater shock, especially on the lighter game. But if I had to tie into a big animal from almost any angle, I'd still take a cast bullet made hard. And this goes for the .357, .41 or .44 Magnums, as well as the old .44 Special.

Several years ago, Mason Williams, of Shooter's Service, sent me some of their swaged bullets with short jackets to try on game. These bullets proved quite accurate with 2400 powder, and expanded very well indeed. I never did get to try them on anything large, but did shoot several porcupines with them in the 240-grain weight.

A big porky is a pretty solid critter and makes a bullet expand faster than many larger animals. When you shot one under the chin with this bullet, it didn't usually reach the root of his thorny tail, but it did expand to twice its original diameter, and sure did raise hell on the way back.

Lately, I've been doing some shooting with the Speer 240 and 225-grain jacketed bullets. These have jackets that leave only a small band of lead ahead of the jacket to bear on the barrel. These bullets must be seated deep so that the case can be crimped over the end of the jacket and into this lead band to hold the bullet from forward jump under recoil of heavy loads. This requires cutting powder charges somewhat from that used with cast bullets with shallower seating — about two grains less for No. 2400. However, 17 grains of 2400 gave just under 1,100 m.v. with their 240-grain in my gun with the old style cases. The Speer Loading Manual No. 6 lists 16 grains of 2400 at 1,174 from 6½" pressure barrel. I assume this is with the later solid head case.

Another powder that seems to give excellent velocity with this bullet is Alcan AL-8. Sixteen grains of this powder turned up 1,190 m.v. in my gun with the old case. And 14 to 15 grains should do the same with the heavier cases. Accuracy seems to be good with this combination.

The same powder charge of the same AL-8 clocked out at 1,222 with the 225-grain H. P. Speer bullet. Accuracy of this load left much to be desired, at least in my gun. Both of these loads are on the hot side but work very well with no case trouble whatever. There is little doubt that they would be very potent game loads, as they will surely expand well at reasonable ranges (you'd better use a rifle if the range isn't reasonable), and both churn up some 770 foot pounds of muzzle energy. For all loads with AL-8 powder, I used CCI 350 primers.

Hercules Unique powder also makes an efficient propellant for the old .44 Special cartridge with nearly any bullet. Like the old cartridge, Unique has been around quite a while, and it is still as good or better than many more recent powders. It seems to work quite well with either light or heavy bullets, and with either moderate or heavy charges. It seems more versatile than 2400, which does its best with heavy bullets and big charges — otherwise burning is far from complete.

As an example, 10 grains of Unique gave the Speer 225-grain H.P. 1,023 fps in old cases, and 8 grains will do about the same thing with the newer heavy cases from a 6½" revolver. Accuracy was fair but not outstanding. But remember that this is a pretty hefty load and might show much better target accuracy if cut somewhat.

When you get out of the heavy powder charges required for shooting large

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Various big pistol cartridges and bullets, and what may be expected in way of expansion in hard fir block. Left, .357 Magnum and 158-grain Modern Bond bullet; .44 Special and 250-grain Keith bullet; .44 Mag. and 250-grain Keith bullet; and Remington factory load with 240-grain short jacketed bullet. All cast bullets are one part tin to 10 parts lead.

er with 100-lb. ivory (per tusk) you can plan on doing a hundred foot-miles to come up with the prize. With these facts in mind, I wanted to know from Buhmiller how much walking he thought he had done after the game he has brought to bag.

"We hunted, Fundi and me, seven days a week. We'd leave the Thom place before daylight and go it afoot. Ordinarily I'd take three or four boys with me beside my No.1. These boys carried the lunch, water and whatever else we thought we'd need. By late afternoon we would be from 12 to 15 miles from the headquarters. Then we had to turn back. An elephant herd is continually on the move. The mob will not seem to go fast but actually it is traveling six miles per hour. About the best we could do would be four miles per hour. Unless the game bushed up for an afternoon siesta we simply never caught up that day."

Undoubtedly the most amazing part of this story is that John Buhmiller, barrel-maker, handloader, experimenter and elephant hunter extraordinary, was 63 years old before he made his first African soiree! He was 70 when he made his last big swing into the Dark Continent. It takes an innate toughness of fiber and soul, a tenacity, an abiding faith and the heart of a great sportsman to do what our Montanan has done. And at an age when most huntsmen are content to sit it out beside the fire and reflect on former glories. ●

The .44 Special

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animals, and want to cut velocity for either small game shooting for the pot or target work, there are several powders that work well. One of the most accurate combinations I have used in several guns is 5 grains of Bullseye behind the 250-grain Keith bullet, sized .429 and cast either 1 to 10 or 1 to 16 tin and lead. While I have never chronographed this particular load, it will give a bit over 800 m.v. It makes a real nice load for shooting grouse, rabbits and what-have-you for the pot. It would seem the big flat-point bullets would tear these small animals and birds to shreds, but this is not the case. They punch a clean hole the size of the bullet, but tear up very little tissue outside the wound channel.

In fact, they destroy much less meat than a .22 Long Rifle hollow point bullet.

DuPont Pistol No. 6 also works very well with bullets from 220 to 250 grains. Accuracy is normally good, but this powder seems to be quite touchy when near maximum loads are used. It burns too fast for high velocity loads, and even a half grain will send pressures skyrocketing when they are near maximum. Better hold this one down below six grains and 800 to 850 fps.

One disadvantage of low velocity loads when you are packing a handgun for both large and small game at the same time, is that they will surely shoot to different points of impact. I have never been able to work out a light load that would shoot into the same group with the heavy hunting loads. It has always seemed that the best idea was to use heavy bullets cast hard when hunting with a handgun, and where either large or small game might be shot. If you tie into the big ones, the heavy loading will do the job, and, strange as it may seem, they leave plenty of meat for the pot when shooting smaller game.

At the end of World War II I got caught with very few components with which to cork up pistol ammo. It was then that I became acutely aware of the extreme versatility of this old cartridge. At the time I was spending a lot of time in the saddle, and when I wasn't straddling a pony, I was pushing a pair of snowshoes over a trapline or after a cougar for bounty. In that kind of work I wore a sixgun almost as much as I wore my hat. I did have cases and a bullet mould, and wasn't about to let a shortage of powder or primers interfere with my shooting.

At the time I was packing an old Colt Frontier with a 4¾-inch barrel, and the things I fed through that tough old gun would make most of us turn green today.

When I ran out of pistol primers, large rifle primers were substituted. Sure, they were hard, but I made a new longer firing pin and beefed up the mainspring. It worked. That was one advantage of the old single action Colt; you could make a part from about any good steel.

With pistol powder no longer on the shelf, everything from No. 80 rifle powder to shotgun powders were used. Bullets were cast from battery metal, old type metal — about anything that would melt. The hardness, in most cases, was unknown, but they came out of the far end of the barrel with enough whop and accuracy to kill a lot of game.

There is no use kidding yourself — the good old .44 Special will not deliver the power of the new magnums, like the .44 and .41, but it is perhaps a more versatile cartridge in many ways. Another advantage is the weight of the gun when you tote it on your hip or slung under your armpit. The 1950 .44 Target S&W will weigh a bit over a half-pound less than either of the magnums with the same barrel length. This can make a difference when the going gets rough.

For most serious hunting of large animals, there is little doubt that either the .41 or .44 Magnum is a better choice than the old .44 Special, and they may some day nose it out entirely. But a lot of us will always have a lot of respect for this versatile old cartridge. ●

The School Of Hush

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Squirrel hunting is good for you. It will peel your eye, hush your footfall, callous your hunkers, deepen your patience, clear your ears, ease your fretting, and give you a chance to eat two breakfasts. We've never known a squirrel hunter who wasn't strong, quiet and durable. So is an oak fencepost, but few posts go on to greater things. Squirrel hunters can.

Squirrel hunting is the great school of hush—basic training for almost any kind of hunting that needs a keen eye and a light touch. Nothing can equal it for teaching man or boy the ABC's of woods hunting. The squirrel hunter sees the woods and its citizens at the best time of day, and they will teach him much if he shuts up and pays attention.

We've known old squirrel hunters who paid such close attention that they grew moss on their north sides, and their rifle stocks sprouted suckers and took root. The loudest noise they made was when they blinked every hour or so. In a good hickory grove, when the squirrels are working, a real hunter has been known to quit breathing for three days at a time.

That's what it takes to cut game, be it squirrel, gobbler, deer or elk. Part of the fun of a squirrel hunt is knowing that about the same things would work for a trophy buck. The only difference is caliber. The same basics, and the same frame of mind, apply to both..—John Madson.