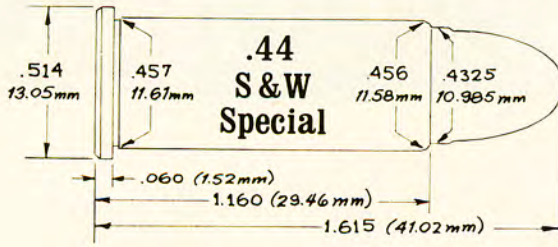




CARTRIDGE of the MONTH

.44 S&W SPECIAL



THERE WAS A time, back before about 1955, when you simply weren't at all *with* the big-bore sixgun fraternity, unless you owned and handloaded for one or two .44 Special revolvers. Most likely, the gun would be one of several Smith & Wesson N-frame guns from the Triple Lock onward, but it might be a New Service Colt, or the venerable Colt Single Action Army. It didn't matter that the .44-40 would drive bullets faster, or that the .45 Colt threw a bigger chunk of lead.

The .44 Special was *the* epitome of sixgun cartridges, mainly because it had undergone more handloading development than all the other big bores combined. Various hull-stuffers, of which our good friend Elmer Keith was doubtless foremost, had jazzed the 1908 vintage .44 Smith & Wesson Special up until it produced nearly twice the puny factory load's velocity, and much more energy. They did all this with heavy, cast bullets, and maintained superb accuracy. When it came to long-range accuracy and butt-stomping power, the properly loaded .44 Special outstripped all else available, including Doug Wesson's .357 Magnum of 1935.

But, in 1955, Smith & Wesson introduced its now-famous .44 Magnum (itself a direct outgrowth of the .44 Special) with velocity, bellow, power, and blast that put the .44 Special in the shade. Pistoleros who had for decades been comfortable in the knowledge that their .44 Specials were the best to be had, suddenly woke up in a cold sweat, mortgaged their houses, and dashed madly out to buy the new Super Boomer. They started a run on .44 Magnums that hasn't ended yet, nearly 20 years later.

Looking back, the .44 Special has an interesting lineage. About 1869-70, Smith

& Wesson introduced its first .44, the so-called .44 American or .44 Smith & Wesson, in 1870 along with its Model No. 3 First Model (First Model American) single-action, top-break revolver. At first the cartridge was designated ".44-100," but this was dropped in short order. The new .44 was an outside-lubricated type, using a heeled bullet and a case diameter matching the bullet. With a 205-grain bullet at a mere 682 fps, it was no world-beater by today's standards; it was the earliest practical, big-bore, centerfire revolver cartridge in this country, and that gave it much advantage.

When Russia selected the S&W revolver in .44 caliber for the Czar's troops in 1870, they demanded changes in the cartridge. Case diameter was increased to allow the use of an inside-lubricated bullet, and a blunter, heavier, 246-grain bullet was added. Case length was increased .060-inch to .970,

and the powder charge was increased to produce a velocity of 770 fps.

While the .44 American gathered no great reputation for accuracy, the improved Russian number soon began setting accuracy records all over the country, and then abroad. It seems all the top-flight competitive and exhibition shooters of the day used S&W revolvers so chambered. Contemporary writers speak of it performing well even at 200 yards — something difficult to visualize in the light of what today's cartridges can do.

When good smokeless powders became available for revolver cartridges, Smith & Wesson lengthened the .44 Russian cartridge case to 1.16 inches, retaining the same head dimensions, presumably to function more efficiently with bulky smokeless powders of the period. The same .44 Russian bullet was used, and in 1907 the ".44 Smith & Wesson Special" cartridge was introduced in the ".44 Hand Ejector New Century" model of 1908, known otherwise as the "Triple Lock" after its unique three-station cylinder lock design.

Of nominal .457-inch head diameter and 1.16-inch length, the case was of what we now call "balloon head" design; it was then classified as "solid head." Loaded to an overall length of 1.62-inch, the new loading virtually duplicated that of the earlier .44 Russian. Published reports vary, but ballistics tables of the times show both the Special and the Russian driving the same bullet at velocities in the 750-775 fps range.

Smith & Wesson missed a good bet — by 1907-08 there were powders that would easily have given that 246-grain bullet over 1,000 fps at modest pressures. This would have placed the .44 Special out in front of the popular .45 Colt, .44-40, and .38-40 cartridges for which Colt was

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Loads for the .44 Special

Bullet	Powder Charge	Velocity, [fps]	Pressure, [c.u.p.]
185 WC	4.5/Bullseye	850	negligible
185 WC	5.2/Bullseye	920	negligible
185 WC	6.0/Bullseye	1,030	13,000
220	5.0/Bullseye	800	8,000
220	17.0/2400	1,050	19,000
230 HP	16.0/2400	1,050	17,000
240 SWC	5.0/Bullseye	830	9,000
240 SWC	8.0/Unique	950	13,000
240 SWC	16.5/2400	1,075	21,000
250 SWC	7.5/Unique	900	11,000
250 SWC	5.0/Bullseye	820	10,000
250 SWC	16.5/2400	1,100	19,000
250 SWC	17.5/2400	1,150	23,000

All above loads in modern solid-head cases with heavily crimped bullet. Performance will be slightly lower in old balloon-head cases.



These .44 Special cartridges from left are the W-W factory load with Lubaloy plated bullet, recent R-P factory load with plain lead bullet, old wadcutter factory load and handloaded Keith-type bullet in solid head case.

COM: .44 Special

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offering competitive guns (the SAA and New Service). In fact, S&W offered its fine new revolver chambered for those cartridges, to suit the shooters who wanted more pizzazz than the .44 Special had to offer.

The .44 Special did well, though, and developed a reputation for exceeding its competitors in accuracy, if not in power. By the late 1920's, several writers had publicized the upgrading of the .44 Special by handloading, and by the late 1930's, it was the *ne plus ultra* for the sixgun buff. Though thousands of different loads, many impractical and some dangerous, had been publicized by the late 1940's, almost every .44 aficionado eventually settled on — you guessed it — Elmer Keith's classic: the 250-grain lead Keith/Lyman (plain or gas check) bullet sized to barrel groove diameter and propelled by 18.5 grains of Hercules 2400 powder. This load produced around 1,200 fps in 6½-inch S&W revolvers, nearly 1,250 fps in a lab test barrel of the same length. Chamber pressure was only 20,000 c.u.p., about half what the later .44 Magnum generates to drive a lighter bullet about 250 fps faster.

After World War II, though, ammunition makers switched to solid-head (as we know it) case construction for all handgun calibers. Their reduced capacity necessitated a reduction of one grain of 2400 in the classic Keith load, to produce

essentially the same pressure and velocity. Handloaders using loading data published before the early 1950's should keep in mind that the data most likely was developed with balloon head cases — so heavy loads should be cut back in solid head brass.

One intriguing factor about the .44 Special is that so many of the shooters who deserted it for the .44 Magnum are actually shooting .44 Special loads. Using a wide variety of excuses, they use 18 to 20-grain charges of 2400 in the maggies, which downgrades it exactly to the old Keith Special load. Strange people, these pistoleros.

Though the .44 Special gained its reputation for smashing power combined with accuracy, it is superbly accurate with light and medium loads. With the Hensley and Gibbs 185-grain wadcutter and 4.5 grains of Bullseye, it moves out at about 850 fps, with hardly any recoil, and shoots one-hole groups consistently. There are many other powder/bullet combinations in between the two extremes to serve almost any imaginable need. My favorite general-purpose load, for 25 years, has been the 250-grain SWC bullet and 7.5 grains of Unique, for a bit over 900 fps in a 6½-inch barrel. It's stiff but comfortable, and equals the .45 Colt factory load for power, but exceeds it in penetration.

Loading the .44 Special is simplicity personified. It goes like any other revolver cartridge. Cases are plentiful, and should have an inside mouth diameter of about .429-inch for lead bullets sized to the correct .431. Bullets should be cast fairly hard for best accuracy, and gas checks aren't needed. Light loads get by with hardly any crimp, but the Keith load requires all the crimp you can apply; I crimp all loads the same — heavily. Even with light loads, consistent bullet pull is important, and it is more likely to be had with a good, solid crimp.

Even with the .44 Magnum blotting out the sun, the .44 Special is still one of the best all-around loads for the handloading sixgunner.



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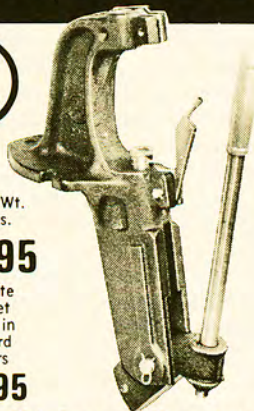
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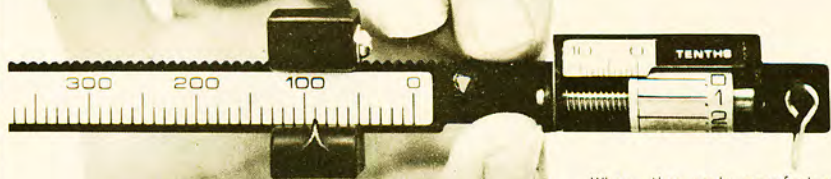
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