

## The Fabulous .44 Special

**M**Y CHILDHOOD HEROES were that hardy bunch of lawmen who kept the peace in "Medio Mexico," the land between San Antonio and the Rio Grande. These individuals came from several different agencies. The Texas Rangers were well represented by A.Y. Allee, Zeno Smith and Walter Russell. Texas sheriffs who made the grade were Alonzo Taylor and Vail Ennis, while the U.S. Border Patrol fielded the likes of Emanuel Avant "Dogie" Wright and Bill Jordan. Even today, I take great pride in the fact that many of these officers were personal friends of mine.

This bunch of badge toters, however, were about as different as night and day. No two of them creased their hats the same or wore the same kind of boots. Some were as jovial as a circuit preacher, others had the temperament of a mad rattlesnake. One thing you could bet on, though, all of them were tougher than a Montana boot if you pushed them too far. I have packed a badge for 25 years, trying to fill their boots.

Another thing these veteran peace officers didn't agree on were pistols. You could, however, easily corral their pistol tastes into about three categories. Some still clung to their dependable old Colt Single Actions, usually in .45 Colt. Others, particularly the ones who had seen military service, could find no better service weapon than the Colt 1911 .45 Auto. The third group sang the praises of the Smith & Wesson .44 Special sixgun.

### .44 Special Handloads

bullet (grains)	powder	charge (grains)	velocity (fps)			remarks
			4-inch Taurus	4-inch Ruger	6-inch Smith & Wesson	
240 Precision SWC	W-231	5.3	705	740	756	
		7.1	914	953	979	
Lyman 429421	AAC-2	6.0	827	837	891	very accurate load
	AAC-5	9.4	856	908	938	
RCBS 250K	Unique	7.5	908	977	1,006	powerful, accurate load
245 BRP SWC	2400	17.5	1,179	1,228	1,254	great hunting load — not for light pistols

Notes: CCI 300 primers used in all of the loads. These loads were tested using a PACT Professional Chronograph with the screens set 15 feet in front of the muzzle. Temperature during tests was approximately 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

**Be alert — Publisher cannot accept responsibility for errors in published load data.**

I suppose I would have to admit that this is where my interest in the .44 Special really began. Of course, Colt offered their Single Action in .44 Special, but the usual choice was in the .45 Colt cartridge. Most .44 Special advocates packed the Smith & Wesson double-action sixgun. Their personal favorite might have been the First Model .44 Hand Ejector, better known as the Triple Lock, or it might have been the Third Model Hand Ejector that was commissioned by the Fort Worth firm of Wolf & Klar in 1926. This pistol would later be designated the Model 1926.

It was also in the 1920s that Elmer Keith began to experiment with the various big-bore sixguns. Keith found that the factory .44 Special cartridge,

which pushed a 246-grain bullet at about 770 fps, was quite accurate. He also found that the heavy-framed Colt and Smith & Wesson handguns in this caliber could be safely loaded to much higher velocities and power. When Mr. Keith first loaded a 250-grain semi-wadcutter (SWC) over 17.5 grains of 2400, a whole new chapter was written in handgun history. It says a lot about the cartridge when you realize that Elmer Keith packed some sort of .44 Special sixgun for right at 50 years, setting it aside only after the advent of the .44 Magnum.

Another champion of the .44 Special cartridge was Skeeter Skelton. On numerous occasions, Mr. Skelton declared the .44 Special to be his favorite pistol cartridge. Skelton led the way in converting Ruger Blackhawks and N-frame Smith & Wessons to the cartridge. He is directly responsible for the reintroduction of the S&W Model 24, and later, the Model 624. Skelton's early .44 experiments were with Keith's heavy load; however, he later settled on a 250-grain SWC over 7.5 grains of Unique for field and law enforcement use.

Most recently, Col. Jeff Cooper has gone on record as saying that a double-action .44 Special sixgun makes one heckuva good defense gun. Colonel Cooper is quick to point out that it isn't quite as good as a Colt 1911 .45, you understand, but an excellent choice nonetheless. This is pretty lofty praise

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Personally, I got into the .44 Special business in sort of a backward way. My first .44s were all of the magnum variety. I started loading the .44 Special cartridge for those times when full magnum power was not indicated. I used the Special case in order to minimize confusion. If I picked up some cartridges loaded in magnum cases, I knew immediately that these were full-house loads. My handloads using the Special case were midrange loads, now called "medium" loads, and could be expected to generate about 900 fps.

A couple of years ago, I realized that I ought to have a true .44 Special six-gun. An Old Model Ruger .357 Blackhawk was traded for and promptly shipped off to Hamilton Bowen. Hamilton worked his usual magic and soon delivered my newly converted .44 Special Ruger, complete with case-colored frame and custom 4-inch barrel. The accuracy and portability of this piece pleased me greatly and has now become a favorite carry gun.

When one takes a serious look at the fine .44 Special cartridge, he soon realizes that it must be handloaded to realize its full potential. The original factory load (246-grain roundnose bullet at 770 fps) is accurate enough, but suffers from lack of good bullet design and power. It is certainly a fine load for small game, but that's about the size of it. Later factory loads, featuring 200-grain hollowpoints traveling slightly faster, don't cut the mustard either. The lighter bullets cause accuracy to suffer and are at their best as close-range defense loads.

With judicious handloads, the .44 Special builds into the nicest of woods guns. They are easily capable of tak-

ing game up to the size of whitetail deer if the ranges are kept on the conservative side. This same sort of load makes an excellent choice for defensive handguns too. Yes, it's true. Even in this day of the "miracle" high-capacity autos, a man is still well armed with a big-bore sixgun.

In preparing this .44 Special survey, I chose to test the various handloads through three very different .44 Special handguns. The first gun is the custom Bowen/Ruger that I mentioned earlier. Aside from its pleasing exterior, the sixgun was assembled with minimum tolerances throughout. Such true custom work allows for greater accuracy and more efficient burning of powder. In the accompanying load table, you will notice that this 4-inch Ruger .44 regularly gives higher velocities than does the 4-inch Taurus. This is not a condemnation of the good Taurus pistol but, rather, just the results of Bowen's knowledgeable custom work.

The Taurus pistol used in these tests is a 4-inch Model 441. This stainless, five-shot pistol features adjustable sights and a heavy barrel. The lightest of the three guns used, it exhibited substantial recoil with the heavier loads. The Taurus, however, is a strong, serviceable handgun that is an excellent .44 Special "carry" gun.

Rounding out my trio of .44 Special test guns was a 6-inch Smith & Wesson Model 624. All of the good things that are usually said about S&W N-frame sixguns applies to this stainless .44. Unfortunately, it is once again out of production. It is too good to drop, and maybe the S&W folks can be encouraged to resume its manufacture.

Over the years, numerous bullet weights have been used in .44 Special handloads. I have always had the best results using cast bullets weighing at least 240 grains. One of the new bullets that I tested is manufactured by Precision Bullet Co. (5200 Florence Loop, Dunsmuir CA 96025). This cast bullet is coated with a dry lubricant that reduces the lead in your barrel as well as in the air. The Precision bullets tested were quite accurate and very uniform in weight.

The BRP 245-grain SWC is cast of hard Linotype and is a very accurate bullet. I have used BRP bullets for most of my handgun chores in recent years and have been very pleased with the results. BRP Cast Bullets can be

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## Handguns

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contacted at 1210 Alexander Road, Colorado Springs CO 80909.

Another cast bullet worthy of mention is the RCBS 250-K. This is a very faithful reproduction of Elmer Keith's original semiwadcutter design. Our editor had a hand in locating some of these original bullets and providing them to RCBS. These moulds are now a standard production item for RCBS.

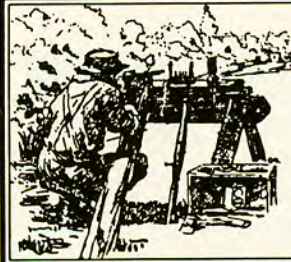
Elmer Keith originally began building .44 Special handloads using the old balloon-head cases. He finally settled on a load of 18.5 grains of 2400 behind his 250-grain SWC. With the advent of the stronger, solid-head cases, Keith reduced his load to 17.5 grains of 2400. Make no mistake, this is a powerful handload. I would advise against using it often in any small-frame .44 Special. Touching a few of these off in the five-shot Taurus gives one a hands-on impression of what velocity and pressure is all about. It would not be my load of choice in the Taurus or, for that matter, in a Charter Arms. In heavy-frame sixguns the old Keith load is a powerful and accurate combat/hunting load that is fully capable of taking deer and black bear at reasonable ranges.

Skeeter's old .44 Special load, using 7.5 grains of Unique, is admittedly a favorite of mine. It will deliver about 940 fps out of a 4-inch barrel and 1,000 fps out of a 6-inch tube. Over the years, I have used it to take deer, feral dogs and countless jack rabbits. In most sixguns, its recoil is manageable enough to allow fast, repeat shots for defensive use too. Lately, however, I've been doing quite a bit of experimenting with W-231 and really figured that it would perform better than Unique. Goodness knows, it's sure cleaner burning, although these tests gave Unique a slight edge over W-231. Using my custom Ruger .44, this load gave me 977 fps with an extreme spread of 18 fps and an average variation of only .59 percent.

The most impressive load was built around the Lyman 429421 cast bullet and 6.0 grains of Accurate Arms No. 2 powder. In the Taurus five-shot, this load gave 827 fps with a standard deviation of 3.7 and an average variation of only .34 percent. The load shot quite accurately in all three guns, and it would be an excellent choice as a small game/combat load. Accurate Arms No. 2 and the .44 Special seem to be made for each other.

I know that I will hear from some of you because your favorite .44 Special load wasn't featured in my tests. Well, that's just fine. I would like to hear from you. Besides, you ought to share

your good handload with the rest of us. If you'll send me your favorite .44 Special load, I'll feature it in a "Readers Choice" column in the very near future.



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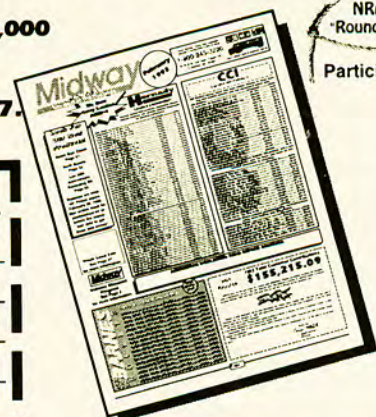
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