

The Classic

Dave Scovill

The .44 Smith & Wesson Special made its debut in the Smith & Wesson New Century (aka Triple Lock) in 1907. Following in the tradition of one of the all-time great target cartridges – the .44 Russian – the .44 Special used the same 246-grain, .430-inch roundnose lead bullet in a slightly longer case that held 26 grains of black powder, three more grains than the Russian case. In spite of the increased powder charge, however, velocity of the Russian and Smith & Wesson loads was virtually the same, running around 760 fps, depending on the barrel length.

Of course, it was the birth of the big N-frame New Century Triple Lock that opened the door to modern-day, high-velocity magnum handguns. With experimenters like Elmer Keith at the helm, .44 Special performance was boosted to unheard of levels using heavy doses of slower-burning pistol powders – first DuPont 80, later by Hercules 2400.

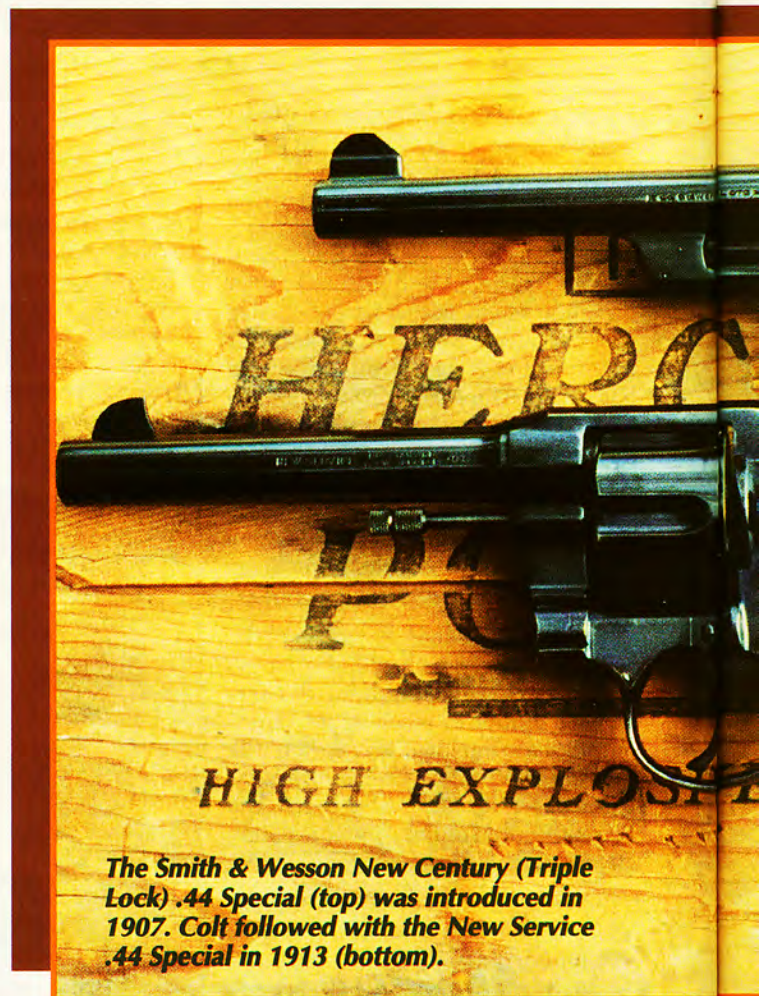
Using older balloonhead cases, Elmer Keith achieved upwards of 1,250 fps from a 4-inch barrel with his Lyman 429421 cast bullet design using 18.5 grains of 2400. When solid head cases became available, the load was reduced to 17.5 grains for a similar velocity.

By 1913, Colt apparently saw the light and began chambering the big New Service revolver for the .44 Special with barrels marked “New Service Russian and S&W Special 44.” For whatever reason, Colt refrained from chambering the Colt Single Action Army for the .44 Special until 1932.

According to McHenry and Roper (*Smith & Wesson Hand Guns*, Wolfe Publishing, 1994), the New Century First Model was changed at serial number 15,525 to eliminate the barrel shroud, and the first heat-treated cylinder was installed at serial number 16,600. The so-called triple lock feature on the cylinder yoke was discontinued in the same time frame.

The subsequent revolver is known to collectors as the Second Model Hand Ejector .44. Other minor changes include enlarging the cylinder cutout in the frame by .020 inch and a slightly larger cylinder diameter – apparently to accommodate the British demand for revolvers chambered for the .455 Eley at the outset of World War I. The Second Model evolved into the Model 1917, which was chambered for the .45 ACP (and .45 Auto Rim) from 1917 until the end of World War I. The Model 1917 Colt, a version of the standard New Service, was chambered for the same cartridges during the same period.

After the war, the Smith & Wesson .44 Special emerged as the Model 1926 and signaled the return of the barrel shroud.



The Smith & Wesson New Century (Triple Lock) .44 Special (top) was introduced in 1907. Colt followed with the New Service .44 Special in 1913 (bottom).

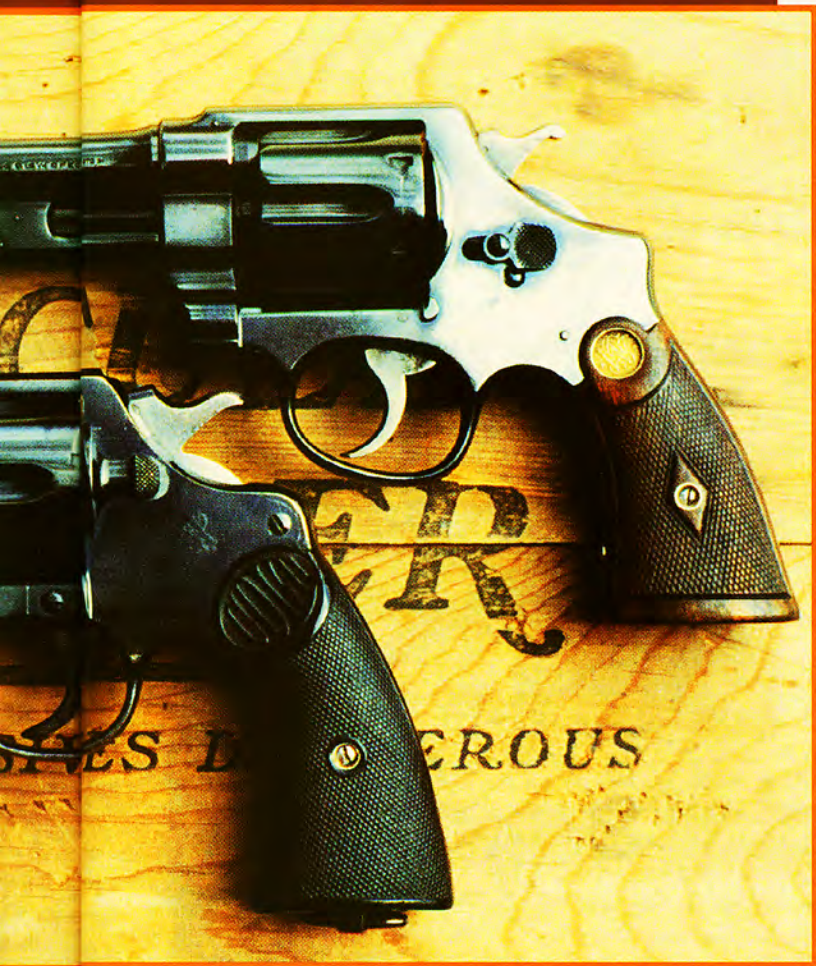
The Model 26 was discontinued during World War II and returned in 1946. In 1950, the Model 26 was designated as the Model 1950 and was changed to the Model 24 in 1957.

When the Colt New Service returned to the civilian market after World War I, it was chambered for the .38-40, .44-40, .45 Colt and .44 Special. The .38 Special was added in 1932, and the .357 Magnum was announced in 1936, although the latter was stamped “Colt New Service .357” on the barrel.

A few post-World War II New Service revolvers were assembled after 1944, but the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, essentially doomed the New Service.

In writing of his experiences in his book *Sixguns*, Elmer

.44 Special



Keith exudes affection for the Smith & Wesson N-frame .44 Specials, while dismissing the New Service as “too large” for average hands. While that may be true, the New Service was standard issue for a number of large law enforcement agencies from the early 1900s to well after the Korean War. A good number of New Service revolvers were also shipped to Canada. As such, with appropriate training, it seems the New Service was as easily handled as the slightly smaller framed Smith & Wesson. Nevertheless, Elmer Keith preferred the Triple Lock by virtue of its stronger lock up and construction – in spite of the fact that the cylinder was not heat treated, and the heavier New Service generated less recoil.

My first .44 Special was a Colt Single Action Army with a
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7.5-inch barrel. I had pretty much decided by that time in my life that a long 7.5-inch barrel was a bit of a nuisance to carry, but the Colt was in excellent shape; and, if nothing else, I could always replace the long tube with something shorter.

The first loads I used in that Colt .44 Special were Remington factory loads that were corked with the traditional roundnose lead bullet. Advertised velocity was in the 750 to 760-fps range, but that hardly mattered since they were superbly accurate, and I needed the brass to make up handloads anyway.

While I was using up the first box of factory loads, I managed to punch a jack rabbit at around 80 yards and found out first-hand that those roundnose bullets were very ineffective on relatively small game. Of course, that was what Elmer Keith had been saying in print for many years, but it is always nice to find out from personal experience, as opposed to passing along what others have said, without question.

I had to shoot several rabbits more than once, sometimes three times, before those roundnose lead bullets took effect. I wasted little time in locating one of those Lyman 429421 semiwadcuter cast bullet moulds that everyone seemed to rave about.

After casting several hundred 429421 bullets and sizing them to .429 inch (I later found out the Colt barrel miked .4275 inch), I worked up to Keith’s recommended loading using 17.5 grains of 2400 with the 251-grain cast bullets in solid head cases and decided it was too much of a good thing. Recoil was nasty, and I had no use for that kind of velocity, which most folks claimed was pushing 1,250 fps from a 4 or 5-inch barrel.

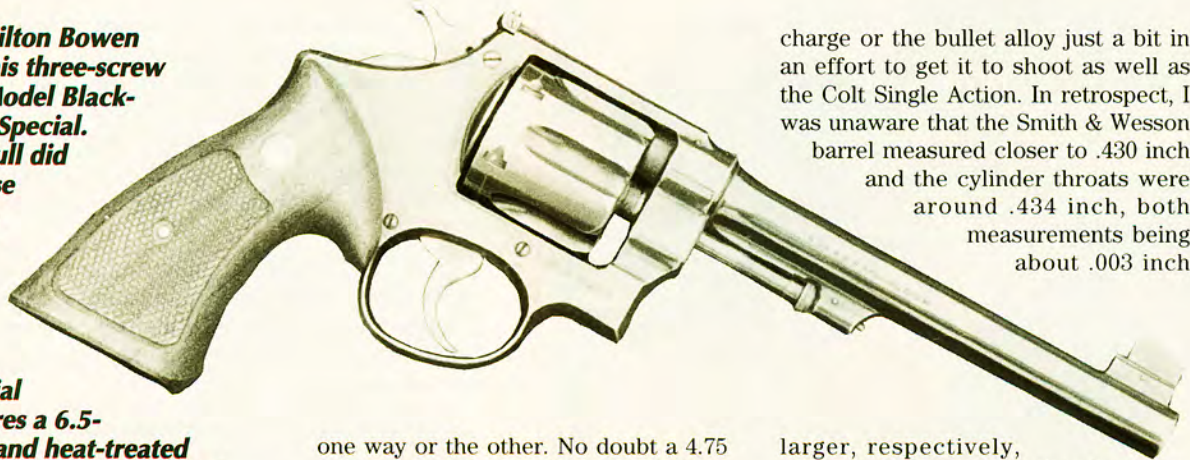
After considerable experimenting and whacking several dozen rabbits and a few coyotes in the process, it seemed that something like 13.5 to 14.0 grains of 2400 was all I needed for those daily sojourns across the ranch, popping everything from prairie dogs to marmots at ranges that varied from nearly point blank out to 80 yards or so.

Somewhere along the line I decided that 13.5 grains was plenty, and 13.2 grains of 2400 with the Markell cast bullet was right on the money, shooting inside 1.5 inches at 25 yards and something like 4 inches out around 100 long steps.

I also decided the 7.5-inch barrel had to go, but with no shorter barrels to be found locally, I cut the barrel back to 5 inches and relocated the front sight. Overall, the balance was nearly perfect and accuracy was not noticeably affected



Above, Hamilton Bowen converted this three-screw Ruger Old Model Blackhawk to .44 Special. Doug Turnbull did the color case work. Right, the Smith & Wesson Second Model Hand Ejector .44 Special Target features a 6.5-inch barrel and heat-treated cylinder. Below, the .44 Special was added to the Model P line-up in 1932.



charge or the bullet alloy just a bit in an effort to get it to shoot as well as the Colt Single Action. In retrospect, I was unaware that the Smith & Wesson barrel measured closer to .430 inch and the cylinder throats were around .434 inch, both measurements being about .003 inch

one way or the other. No doubt a 4.75 or 5.5-inch barrel would probably have served as well, but I completed the job in a few hours without any affect on the family finances.

A couple of years after I acquired the Colt Model P .44 Special, I located a Smith & Wesson Second Model Hand Ejector .44 Special Target with a 6.5-inch barrel in a local pawn shop. In those days it seemed a bit extravagant to have two handguns that were chambered for the same cartridge, so I sold the Colt and bought the Smith & Wesson.

Not being a collector, I was not aware that the Smith & Wesson Second Model Hand Ejector Target was one of the rarest handguns ever offered by Smith & Wesson. Ignorant of that fact, I carried the Second Model Target .44 Special on a daily basis, occasionally juggling the powder

larger, respectively, than the Colt Single Action. In effect, that meant my cast bullets were a bit too small as well. Unfortunately, I didn't know that, and it is probably the reason the Smith & Wesson never seemed to shoot as well as the Colt.

In an effort to improve the accuracy with the Lyman 429421 cast bullets in the Smith & Wesson, research suggested that the reloading dies might be part of the problem. From the outset, back in the late 1920s, Elmer Keith insisted that the inside neck diameter for the .44 Special should be .424 inch for his cast bullet sized to .429 or .430 inch. The expander plug in my Lyman All-American dies measured .426 inch. Eventually I polished it down to measure .4245 inch, but my loads still were not producing the kind of accuracy I expected.

Researching further into the .44 Spe-



cial, Elmer Keith also recommended a bullet alloy of about 16 parts lead to one part tin. I was using wheelweights, which most sources quote as being between 85 to 90 parts lead with various amounts of antimony and tin tossed in to allow reasonable casting characteristics.

Eventually, using plumber's lead alloy, the Smith & Wesson .44 Special was able to produce five-shot groups with the 429421 semiwadcutter sized to .431 inch over 13.5 grains of 2400 that measured less than 5 inches at 100 yards. On a good day, five shots would cluster inside 3 inches. I couldn't do any better with an iron-sighted carbine at the same range.

I also experimented with the jacketed .44-caliber bullets that were available, and while I could go into a whole dialogue about their general failures, it was evident that they simply were not

was a much better choice for hunting critters that might have a bad temper when bludgeoned between the eyes with a bullet.

The Smith & Wesson Second Model .44 Special Target was eventually carried on a limited basis in lieu of the creeping realization that it was probably worth a lot more to a collector, so I gradually switched over to a Colt Single Action .45 Colt for most of my daily routine. When an avid collector assured me that there might not be more than a handful of those sixguns in existence, I sold it, thus leaving me without a .44 Special.

With what seemed like a lifetime supply of 429421 cast bullets on hand, not to mention a good inventory of Winchester and Remington .44 Special brass, I kept a constant vigil for a good, used .44 Special for several years. In the interim I satiated the

solution to fill the obvious void in my gun locker. After putting the project off for several years, I acquired a good Old Model .357 Magnum and sent it off to Hamilton Bowen (Bowen Classic Arms, PO Box 67, Louisville TN 37777) with instructions to bore the barrel out to .429 inch and rechamber the cylinder for the .44 Special with .430-inch throats. I also asked if he would forward the frame and hammer to Doug Turnbull (Turnbull Restorations, PO Box 471, Bloomfield NY 14469) for color case finishing. The resultant sixgun was, and is, the best single-action .44 Special I have ever carried. The only problem was that I forgot to ask Hamilton to make the front sight a bit narrower, or to widen the notch in the rear blade, whichever might have been easier. In effect, with the handgun held at arms' length, the front sight was somewhat difficult to align in the rear notch. It was fine for shooting targets,



Current Lyman .44 Special dies include a fourth die for use with powder measures on progressive reloading machines. Representative cast bullet designs for the .44 Special include (1) RCBS 44-200, (2) Lyman 429434, (3) Lyman 429383 and (4) RCBS 44-250 Keith. Commercial bullets from Double A Limited (5, 6 and 7) range from 175 grains to 240 grains. The (8) Bull-X 240-grain semiwadcutter is cast from a relatively hard alloy that is intended for magnum pressures and velocities.

designed with the .44 Special in mind. Of the lot, only the Speer 225-grain, half-jacketed hollowpoint and 240-grain semiwadcutters seemed to have much merit in the .44 Special, and at that, they did not shoot as well as I would have liked in the Smith & Wesson. Not that any of them ever bounced off any coyotes or badgers, but one 225-grain jacketed hollowpoint did ricochet off a feral hog's skull at point-blank range. It seemed that in the interest of keeping my own hide intact, the cast semiwadcutter bullet

desire to shoot a .44-caliber sixgun by loading the .44 Magnum down with 18.5 grains of 2400 under the Keith 429421 cast semiwadcutter.

While on the lookout for a good .44 Special, I was of the opinion that the best little .44 that was never made was the Ruger Old Model (three-screw) with a 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch barrel. Skeeter Skelton, the long-time handgun editor with *Shooting Times*, had a .44 Special made up from an Old Model Ruger .357 Magnum, and it seemed the logical

but it was troublesome in the field. At any rate, I opened up the rear notch just a tad with a Swiss needle file, and the problem was solved.

Of course, nowadays, you can order a Colt replica single-action .44 Special from a variety of suppliers that import firearms from Uberti and Armi San Marco, including Navy Arms, Cimarron, EMF, United States Patent Firearms and Mitchell. Unfortunately, you can't buy a .44 Special from Colt since current production is limited to the .44

.44 Special

bullet (grains)	powder	charge (grains)	velocity (fps)	group (inches)
240 Speer JSWC	2400	13.5	1,002	
	800-X	8.5	1,015	3.5+
	H-4227	14.5	859	3.5+
225 Speer JSWC	2400	13.5	987	3.0
	800-X	8.5	1,036	3.0
	H-4227	14.5	958	3.0
	Un Clays	7.5	1,050	1.25
240 Sierra JHC	800-X	8.5	997	2.0
	VV-N340	7.7	1,056	1.5
240 Hornady XTP	VV-3N37	8.5	995	1.25
	HS-6	9.5	1,009	2.0
	Herco	9.0	1,120	1.5
240 Nosler JHP	VV-3N37	8.5	1,005	2.0
	Blue Dot	13.0	1,237	3.0
	VV-N340	7.7	1,011	2.25
200 Speer JHP	800-X	8.5	995	2.25
	VV-3N37	8.5	982	2.0
	Herco	9.5	1,179	3.0
200 Hornady XTP	VV-N340	7.7	1,019	2.0
180 Hornady XTP	700-X	7.0	1,061	1.25
	800-X	8.5	1,001	1.5
	VV-3N37	10.5	1,163	2.0
250 RCBS 44-250-KT	AAC-9	12.3	869	-
	Un Clays	7.5	1,011	3.0
	H-4227	16.0	1,102	2.0
	Blue Dot	13.0	1,273	1.25
	HS-6	9.5	1,028	2.0
	2400	13.5	1,108	2.0
	VV-N340	7.7	1,041	1.75
	Unique	8.0	1,064	2.0
247.5 Lyman 424383 roundnose	VV-3N37	8.5	1,021	2.0
	VV-N340	7.7	1,072	2.0
	Un Clays	7.5	1,022	3.0
230 Lyman 429434	Un Clays	7.5	1,038	2.0
	800-X	8.5	1,117	3.0
	VV-3N37	8.5	1,049	3.0
	Blue Dot	12.0	1,156	2.0
200 RCBS 44-200-FN	800-X	8.5	1,075	1.0
	VV-3N37	8.5	1,060	2.0
	HS-6	9.5	1,063	1.0
	Herco	9.5	1,253	2.75
	VV-N340	7.7	1,066	2.5
	AAC-7	9.8	871	2.25
240 Bull-X SWC	VV-N340	7.7	1,042	2.5
	800-X	8.5	1,032	1.5
243.5 Double A 406	2400	13.5	962	2.0
	800-X	8.5	1,001	2.0
218 Lyman 429215	VV-N340	7.7	1,058	1.75
240 Black Hills factory SWC			765	
200-CCI-Blazer JHP			814	

Note: Loads fired from a 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch barrel.

Be alert - Publisher cannot be responsible for errors in published load data.

and .38 WCF and .45 Colt. No doubt, you can have a special order Colt Model P made up, but they do get pricey.

Even though Smith & Wesson has made occasional runs of the Model 24 and 624, you can't buy a .44 Special from them either, at least not a new one. On the other hand, good, used N-frame Smith & Wesson .44 Specials and Colt Model P single actions can be had for a price at gun shows, pawn shops and through *Gun List* and *Shotgun News*. Again, mint sixguns can get pricey, but there are a number of good working guns, including the Taurus Model 431 (fixed sights) or Model 441 (adjustable sights), on the market for about the price of a new handgun from Colt or Smith & Wesson.

For anyone looking for a good working load in the .44 Special, I have had excellent success over the years with 13.5 grains of 2400 with the Lyman 429421 or RCBS reincarnation of the original Keith design, 44-250-KT. Either bullet weighs about 250 grains, depending on the alloy, and they are routinely sized to .430 inch. Almost any of the current crop of bullet lubes will work fine for moderate velocity loads, say upwards of 1,050 fps or so from a 5-inch barrel.

There are a number of commercial cast bullets available for the .44 calibers, but most of them are cast from an alloy that is much too hard for normal loads in the .44 Special. That is, they register about 15 or so on the Brinell hardness scale, which would require at least 21,000 psi to form an effective gas seal in the chamber. Since the average operating pressure for the .44 Special is closer to 14,000 psi, it is safe to say that commercial bullet alloys are too hard for routine loads in the .44 Special and just barely in line for what might be called +P loads.

Elmer Keith's favorite cast bullet alloy (16 to one, lead/tin) had a Brinell Hardness Number (BHN) of around 8 or 9. Since few folks would argue that Elmer's bullets were too soft, it makes sense that BHN 15 or so is much too hard for normal loads in the .44 Special.

The table lists selected loads I have worked with in the .44 Special over the years. They shoot well in most sixguns if the bullet is sized to fit the barrel. Most Colt .44 Special barrels measure around .427 inch across the grooves, and Smith & Wesson's run closer to .429, possibly .430 inch. If you want to

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The Classic .44 Special

(Continued from page 24)

shoot jacketed bullets, stick with the Speer 225-grain half-jacketed hollow-point or the softnose 240-grain version of the same semiwadcutter design, and heed Speer's cautions about shooting them at low velocities. The Winchester 210-grain Silvertip also works well. All the rest of the .44-caliber jacketed bullets are designed to function properly at magnum pressures and velocities (38,000 psi and from 1,300 to 1,600 fps, depending on the bullet weight). Most of them will punch right through the toughest game without any measurable expansion when impact is down around 900 fps or less from prudent .44 Special loads.

For whatever it is worth, my advice is to stay away from jacketed bullets in the .44 Special, with the exception of those listed in the load table. If you want expansion with cast bullets, use Elmer's 16 to one, lead/tin mix up to 1,100 fps at the muzzle for good performance on game out to 100 yards or so. Beyond that, expansion with cast bullets, regardless of how soft the alloy, is very limited and unreliable.

A number of loads that produce more velocity and pressure than those I have listed have been offered by a variety of sources over the years, but since the arrival of the .44 Magnum, there is simply no reason to horse the .44 Special up with hot loads. Besides, any good cast semiwadcutter or flatnose bullet weighing from 210 to 255 grains that is pushed to 1,000 fps from a 5-inch barrel will shoot through 36 inches of ballistic gelatin. By way of comparison, none of the .45 ACP or .40 S&W factory loads with jacketed hollowpoints will shoot through 18 inches of the same medium. Most are limited to 14 inches or less.

If you want magnum performance, by all means buy a big .44, .41 or .357 Magnum. If you want a handy sixgun that will do for 95 percent of the chores it might be called upon to solve, get your hands on a .44 Special. ●

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