

## IN DEFENSE OF THE .44: IT'S STILL SPECIAL!

...JOHN TAFFIN

Quite often something I write sparks an interest in a reader who wants to share his special handgun or experience with me. Having found long ago that I can learn much from the readers of this magazine, I always read these letters with great interest and endeavor to answer every letter I receive. Many of the inquiries I get ask about a particular gun that the reader happens to own. This past winter I received such a correspondence from a reader in the deep south who wanted to know about a sixgun in his possession.

The caliber was .44, he wrote, the finish was nickel with a blue barrel, 5 1/2" in length, and cylinder; the grips were one piece ivory. He identified the .44 as a Colt Single Action, provided the serial number, and also the added information that the barrel was inscribed "COLT FRONTIER SIX-SHOOTER (BISLEY MODEL)." From the serial number I was able to ascertain that the Colt was a Second Generation Single Action Army manufactured in 1960, which I relayed to him along with the question as to whether the caliber was .44 Special or .44-40 as the barrel was a .44-40 barrel from a Colt Bisley Model that had not been made since 1912. "Obviously you have a half-breed, part Single Action and part Bisley."

A return letter and subsequent phone call revealed that the sixgun in question was indeed a .44 Special which is not so strange as Colt Single Action .44 Special barrels are the same groove diameter as .44-40 barrels. Of even more interest was that the gun was for sale or trade. Arrangements were made dealer-to-dealer to have the Colt Bisley/Single Action shipped to me for inspection and shooting. The sixgun was a good news/bad news proposition. The good news was that it shot nice little groups right to point of aim, and the grips were beautifully grained and creamy colored ivory. The bad news was that the grips, of the one-piece style consisting of two grip halves with a spacer glued in between, came apart in my hand when it was shot, and also the front sight was the worst example I had ever seen. It had started out correctly and then someone really messed it up in spades.

When the Bisley barrel was installed on the Single Action, a sight base was attached, cut with a slot parallel to the barrel, and then a blade front sight was pinned in place. So far so good. However, it did not shoot to point of aim but way to the left. I realize this from what was then done to the front sight. Someone, who hopefully will always remain unknown, then proceeded to bend, or rather push over the front blade to the left until the blade itself was

resting on the left side of the base. An ugly looking thing to be sure BUT it now shot to point of aim. The simple way, of course, was to turn the barrel in enough to bring the sight to the proper position.

The front sight would have to be replaced while the grips could be easily re-glued. It was a Colt Single Action, it was a .44 Special, and it was equipped with gorgeous ivory stocks. It was worth trading for. I had just been to a gun shop the day before and remembered that the showcase contained a Colt Gold Cup Stainless Steel .45 ACP, one of the pair of guns wanted in trade for the Single Action/ Bisley. A deal was struck, the second gun, a Ruger Stainless Steel Bisley Vaquero .45 was ordered and I had a new, to me, .44 Special.

Being unable to abide that obscenity of a front sight, the .44 Special was promptly sent off to Peacemaker Specialists with some sample loads that I intended to use in the .44 Special, namely 250 grain cast bullets over 7.5 grains of Unique, with the instructions to replace the front sight with a First Generation style Colt Single Action front sight as would have been originally found on the Bisley barrel.

I had also dismantled the Colt and found the full cock notch on the hammer was nearly worn through so Eddie Janis of Peacemaker Specialists was also instructed to rebuild the hammer notches, tighten everything up, and also smooth out the action. Janis had recently expertly rebuilt a First Generation Colt Single Action to a 7 1/2" .44 Special (See American Handgunner May/June 1998).

A few anxious months passed until UPS delivered my "new" Colt perfectly timed. With file in hand I removed enough metal from the top of the front sight to bring my loads to point of aim in my hands and with my eyes at 25 yards. The .44 was then returned to Janis to re-blue the barrel and cylinder. Ten days later it was back in my hands and ready for a long shooting life. Almost.

One last step remained. The Colt and ivory grips were turned over to friend Tony Kojis who re-glued the grips, and also matched them perfectly to the frame. I had a great new .44 Special Single Action Army. It would be fed a steady diet of 250 grain bullets, from Lyman (#429421), RCBS (#44-250KT), or NEI (#429.260) molds that dropped Keith's original design, over 7.5 grains of Unique for right at 900 fps. This load will handle the vast majority of duties, in fact most of what I want a sixgun cartridge to do.

With the trading stock and work performed I had spent about what a new Colt Single Action Army would cost, however, I also had one-piece ivories, an action job, and best of all, the .44 Special chambering that Colt no longer offers. I thought to myself, "God's In His Heaven, All's Right With The World!" Well at least my little part of it.

And then it happened. Coming back from Alaska and faced with a four hour bus ride from Vancouver BC to Seattle and then a four hour wait for the plane, I picked up a copy of one of our friendly competitor's magazines. I didn't read the cover or table of contents. I just purchased reading material to replace the western novels I had been feasting upon. Jeff Cooper has often said in so many words that we live in the rudest, crudest, most obnoxious society ever. And there on the cover of his magazine, rather the magazine his writings regularly appear in, was a grand example of what he has been talking about.

One of my pet peeves as a writer is the hype often found on magazine covers along with the captions that often do not mate with the pictures found in the articles published. Writers have no control over this. It happens regularly in all magazines, my magazine included, but what I saw on the cover caused my heart to skip several beats and not with joy. There in all its rude, crude, obnoxious, and terribly bad taste form were bright, bold letters proclaiming "SCREW THE .44 SPECIAL"!!!!

Now the author of the piece, entitled "Not So Special Anymore", found inside the covers was a man I have great deal of respect for. Wiley Clapp and I are about the same age, must have grown up around the same time, read the same gun literature, as we always seem to understand each other. I consider him a friend, a most knowledgeable and excellent writer when it comes to many of the things that I hold dear. To his credit he did not write the words found on the cover, he was probably as upset by it as I was, but he did attack something I hold nearly as dear as Mom, Apple Pie, and the Flag, namely the .44 Special.

By the time I had arrived at home, the phone calls and e-mail had already started. "John, what are you going to do about this?" I think they expected me to challenge Wiley to a duel! Well, Wiley is still a friend, I still respect his knowledge, and the vast majority of his taste in guns, but I can't let his deep sixing of the .44 Special pass unchallenged.

Wiley you said of Elmer Keith, quote: "I have a pretty good collection of period gun literature, and I can't find anything Keith wrote that was

particularly favorable to the .44 Special after 1956. Once he got that first .44 Magnum (Wiley, he actually got the second one, Major Hatcher received Number One), he never looked back." Oh, really! Let's see. These sound pretty favorable to me!

Elmer Keith May 1962: "I have a pair of four-inch .44 Special S&W 1950 Target guns, and both are sighted for 18.5 grains of 2400 and my heavy 250-grain slugs or the 235-grain hollow-point. Both guns will also hit regularly at 50 to 60 yards with factory .44 Special loads. I have found no other sixgun cartridge which will do this with both light and very powerful, high velocity loads. *I wish the .44 Magnum would do the same thing.*" Italics mine. I should also point out to the readers that Keith's load mentioned here for the .44 Special was assembled with old style balloon head brass that had a larger case capacity than modern solid head brass. This load is way too heavy for use in modern brass.

Elmer Keith August 1973. Speaking of Handguns For Peace Officers, Keith says: "In conclusion, I would like to see all officers carry .41 or .44 Magnums, .45 Auto or .45 Colts, or *heavy-loaded .44 Specials.*"

Elmer Keith June 1974: "...if my 250-grain bullet was loaded in a .44 Special case with 5 grains of Bulls-eye or 7 grains of Unique, it would be a far more effective man-stopper than even the best loads from the .357 Magnum....Even with light factory loads of 246-grains at 750 fps, I would prefer the .44 Special to any and all .38 calibers or 9mm autos, and if properly handloaded with my 250-grain bullet, it would badly beat any .357 load as well."

In the beginning of your article you used the words "Before we get into my reasons for *condemning* the grand old round..." Again, italics mine. Wiley I don't think your heart was really into condemning as you pointed out so many good things about the .44 Special and the guns built to house it. "Undeniably the Special is a wonderfully popular cartridge that reeks of the late frontier period, as well as one that bears the imprimatur of Keith and Skelton." Why in the world would anyone want to condemn such a cartridge? If the First Lady can connect with Eleanor in the White House, I can certainly connect with Elmer Keith and Skeeter Skelton every time I fire a Colt Single Action or Smith & Wesson 1950 Target chambered for, you guessed it, the .44 Special. What loads do I use? Keith's 250 grain bullet over 17.0 grains of #2400 in modern brass, or 18.5 grains in the good supply of balloon head brass I have, or Skeeter's favorite 7.5 grains of Unique with the same bullet. The former loads do 1100 to 1200 fps while Skeeter's is a more sedate and user friendly 900-950 fps.

Skeeter and Elmer were the best. There never has been any other gunwriter either before or since that could stimulate interest in fine sixguns and cartridges as they could. Yes, Elmer pretty much retired his .44 Specials after the advent of the .44 Magnum in 1956. However, Skeeter, who arrived on the gun writing scene long after the .44 Magnum had been established, tried the .44 Magnum and found the .44 Special better for his needs for everything except possibly big game hunting. I prefer the .44 Magnum over the .44 Special for many of my hunting endeavors but not all of them. My hunting load in the .44 Special uses the Speer 225 grain jacketed hollow point, the old style with a copper cup and a lead core, at 1150 fps. I have little patience in any other part of my life but I am a patient hunter and will only take my shot which is normally a standing broadside shot on deer-sized game. The .44 Special hunting load performs just fine.

You also said; "Another run of Colts and/or S&Ws would doubtless sell once again..." Of course they would! Probably in record numbers. Remember when we sat together in a Colt meeting at a SHOT Show a few years ago and could not believe that Colt would not even consider the return of the .44 Special in a Single Action Army. It didn't make sense then and still doesn't. At the last local gun show I saw a Third Generation 7 1/2" .44 Special Colt Single Action Army for sale for only \$1450! Fortunately for us .44 Special lovers, Third Generation New Frontiers in .44 Special can be picked up for about one-half of this amount and Smith & Wesson Models 24 and 624 can be found for considerably less than the New Frontiers.

Those that love the .44 Special have hard time in life as they are not easy to find. After four decades of shooting the Special, I just recently found my first affordable New Service .44 Special. In addition to the above mentioned Colt and Smith & Wessons, you have correctly pointed out that replica single actions are now available. I have extensively tested examples from Cimarron, EMF, and USFA and they are all good shooting sixguns. The USFA example also comes marked on the side of the barrel with the old Colt marking of "RUSSIAN AND S&W SPECIAL 44".

The easiest way to get a .great 44 Special these days is to start with a Ruger Flat-Top or Three Screw (Old Model) .357 Blackhawk or S&W Highway Patrolman .357 and have them expertly converted to .44 Special by such as Hamilton Bowen, Andy Horvath, or David Clements. The Ruger especially makes into a lightweight, nearly indestructible, extremely easy packin' sixgun. Loaded with 250 grain bullets at 900+ fps it is also both pleasant to shoot and powerful enough for most situations. You even said "Personally, I'd like to see a stainless steel Model 21 (Model 621), the fixed sighted N-frame

chambered for the .44 Special." To this I say Yeah and Amen, but why would you want one if you wish to condemn the .44 Special? A sixgun such as you mention would make a wonderful packin' pistol even if chambered in the .44 Special.

You have also put forth for one of your reasons to get rid of the .44 Special the statement that "factory ammunition is woefully underpowered and inaccurate." But Wiley you only tested it in one sixgun with a three-inch barrel! I've done extensive testing of all the factory loads as well as thousands of handloads for all the calibers used in Cowboy Action shooting from the .38 Long Colt through the .45 Colt including the .44 Special. The results are in the accompanying chart. Inaccurate? Not hardly. More than adequate for Cowboy Shooting and notice also that most of these loads have more muzzle energy than the highly rated .40 S&W.

You might also be interested to know that Winchester's old round-nose factory load cuts one hole groups in my 6 1/2" Smith & Wesson Model 24 .44 Special. The only other load that will do that in this particular sixgun is Keith's load of 17 grains of #2400 under a 250 grain cast bullet.

"Another fault of the .44 Special is its lack of ability to do what the .44 Magnum does; the longer cartridge is way ahead of the game." I'll give you the latter but not the former. Of course the .44 Magnum is way ahead in factory loadings. But guess what? Some of the most popular .44 Magnum loadings are the mid-range loads that propel a 250 grain bullet at 1100 to 1200 fps or exactly what Keith's old heavy loaded .44 Special does. In fact, one of my favorite .44 Magnum loads for use in my older Smiths and Rugers is Keith's bullet over 10 grains of Unique in Magnum brass for 1150 fps. Sound familiar? Its a heavy .44 Special equivalent!

Now as to your former statement. How can you condemn the .44 Special because it can't do what the .44 Magnum does? The .44 Magnum is a wonderful cartridge but does it make the .44 Special any less of a great cartridge? I think not! I would also remind you that neither one of us can do what we used to and a lot of men can outdo us BUT we are a long way from being ready to be condemned to the bone pile!

Most of your argument against the .44 Special is the lack of factory ammunition available. Don't blame the cartridge for this. I would remind you that this has always been so but there are more choices available today in .44 Special than ever. The lack of factory ammunition has never kept the .44 Special from surviving simply because it is the cartridge of the connoisseur. It

comes to life when handloaded. You even said this yourself. I have probably received more loading data on the .44 Special from readers than any other cartridge. There are an awful lot of .44 Special lovers out there. I'm sure you will hear from many of them!

"I would like to see the ammo makers produce a true .44 Special JHP heavy bullet that expands immediately and violently yet drives some 14 or 15 inches into gelatin." There comes your true feeling again. You don't really want to condemn the .44 Special; you simply want it made better for defensive use. Perhaps this load is already here. Check out Cor-Bon's 180 grain load and Omega should have their .44 Special load ready by the time you read this.

You mentioned several alternatives for the .44 Special. I would remind you that these are only alternatives not replacements. The three you mentioned in sixgun chamberings, the .45 ACP, the .41 Magnum, and the .357 Magnum are all great cartridges. There is probably no better defense gun than the double action Smith & Wesson chambered for the .45 ACP with the use of full moon clips. But only for defensive use. It is simply not as versatile a combination as the same basic sixgun chambered in .44 Special.

The .41 Magnum? Remember when it was introduced and many said "What can it do that the .44 Special cannot do?" Is the .44 Special any less of a cartridge than it was 35 years ago? You are right about the .357 Magnum being the cartridge that would probably supply the most Magnum needs. That is unless one is a fan of the .44 Special. When the .357 Magnum came along with a 158 grain bullet at 1500 fps the .44 Special users tried it, yawned collectively, and went back to their .44's with a 250 grain bullet at 1200 fps.

Wiley, I'll meet with you at the next SHOT Show, buy you a coke, and then we will proceed together to the Smith & Wesson booth to try to persuade Ken Jorgensen to carry the torch for that Model 621. We may even go over to the Colt booth and lobby for the return of the Single Action Army in .44 Special form. We don't have the pull of a Keith or Skelton, but they will at least listen to us.

Not So Special Anymore? If not I've spent an awful lot of time and money putting together a working collection of great shootin', easy packin' single action and double action .44 Specials. Wiley, like faith, family, friends, and freedom, the .44 Special is worth fighting for. After 90+ years it is just as special, even more so, than it ever was.

**.44 SPECIAL FACTORY LOADS: FIVE SHOTS AT 50 FEET.**

	<i>Colt SA 7 1/2"</i>		<i>Colt SA 5 1/2"</i>		<i>Colt SA 4 3/4"</i>	
<b>LOAD</b>	<b>MV</b>	<b>GROUP</b>	<b>MV</b>	<b>GROUP</b>	<b>MV</b>	<b>GROUP</b>
Black Hills 210	774	1 5/8"	764	2 7/8"	720	1 3/4"
Black Hills 240	837	1 1/2"	797	1 1/4"	756	1 3/8"
Winchester 246RN	755	1 5/8"	720	1 1/4"	699	1 1/2"
Winchester 240	769	1 1/2"	735	1 7/8"	693	1"
Remington 246RN	778	7/8"	728	2 1/8"	703	2 1/4"
Federal 200	995	1 1/8"	909	2"	844	2"
3-D 200RN	771	1 5/8"	713	2 1/4"	684	1 1/8"