

The .44 Special

By John Taffin

After nearly forty years of shooting big bore sixguns of every size, shape, and persuasion, I have come full circle and am right back to square one. My first true love is still my greatest love. First, last, and always it is the .44 Special.

There are a lot of reasons for the fact that the .44 Special holds a special place in my heart, soul, and spirit. First, of course, there was Elmer Keith. Keith spent thirty years extolling the virtues of the .44 Special until we finally saw the birth of the .44 Magnum as a direct result of his campaign for a ".44 Special Magnum". Except for his urgings we would probably have never seen the advent of the .44 Magnum.

Secondly, there is my wife. Her first present to me was my first .44 Special, a six and one-half inch barreled Smith & Wesson .44 Special 1950 Target. Some three dozen plus .44 Specials have been in my hands at one time or the other over the last thirty-five years with barrels or frames marked Charter Arms, Colt, Cimarron, Great Western, Hartford, Rossi, Ruger, Smith & Wesson, and Taurus but the one gun I lust over now is CCI's Allan Jones' Colt New Service Target .44 Special. It is truly one of the finest forty-fours ever assembled.

Thirdly, the .44 Special has been chambered in sixguns that are very easy to pack such as the Colt Single Action Army and New Frontier and the Smith & Wesson Model 24/624. These guns normally come in at least a half pound lighter than their Magnum brothers and that makes a big difference after a long day. Many .44 Magnum shooters actually shoot .44 Special loads in their bigger, heavier sixguns and would get along quite well with a .44 Special. A four to five and one-half inch .44 Special in an El Paso Tom Threepersons holster on a two and one-half inch lined belt with twelve cartridge loops on the off-side, a day in the Idaho mountains, foothills, or desert, well it just doesn't get any better than this. If you love the .44 Special I don't need to explain this to you; if you don't, I can't.

In the past much of my loading with the .44 Special in heavy frame sixguns such as the Colt Single Action Army or Smith & Wesson Model 24 has been with the Keith load, that is 17.0 grains of #2400 and the 250 grain Keith hard cast bullet from a Lyman, NEI, or RCBS mold. This is a powerful loading that will give a full 1200 feet per second but is one I use very sparingly anymore. I suspect #2400 has gotten hotter over the past forty years and one would do well to drop back to 15.5 grains and work up slowly.

Keith's original loading with old-style folded head, or balloon head brass only was 18.5 grains of #2400. Recently a friend somehow got this loading into new solid head .44 Special brass. I clocked them by shooting them in a five and one-half inch .44 Magnum Ruger Super Blackhawk and they clocked out at 1440 feet per second! That is hotter than most factory .44 Magnum loadings today and they would be dangerous to say the least in a .44 Special. Keith's original load in .44 Special balloon head brass went right at 1200 feet per second from a seven and one-half inch barreled sixgun. Just this morning I chronographed a batch of factory 240 grain .44 Magnums and they clocked out at a whopping 1201 feet per second!

Reloading for the .44 Special is the same as any other straight-walled revolver cartridge with one minor glitch. Sixguns chambered for the Special cartridge come with barrel groove diameters as small as .426" and as large as .430". If the chamber mouths are also sized accordingly, that is, tight when mated with .426-428" barrels and larger with the barrels that mike out at .430" or more, then the best accuracy is delivered with bullets sized accordingly. I have pretty much standardized at .428" and .430" diameters when sizing cast bullets for the .44 Special. My dies are RCBS and I have an extra expander button that has been turned smaller for use with the .428" bullets.

That, however, is only part of the glitch. My .44 Special loading is with either Federal, Winchester, or Remington brass. When sized in a RCBS carbide sizer, Remington brass is still too large to use with .428" bullets as they will slide down into a sized case and are a loose fit even with a good crimp. The solution is simple; use Remington brass for reloads with .430" bullets and Winchester or Federal brass for the smaller bullets.

For hunting with the .44 Special, I now use Speer's 225 grain jacketed hollow point #4435 JHP-SWC. This is the copper cupped, lead core bullet as contrasted with the more modern MAG-JHP series of true jacketed bullets. It is perfect for deer-sized game at close range and will do right at 1100 feet per second from a seven and one-half inch .44 Special when loaded over 7.7 grains of Unique or 17.0 grains of H4227.

Most of my shooting needs with the .44 Special are much simpler and I get by very well with a Bull-X or Master Caster 240 grain semi-wadcutters at 800 to 900 feet per second. Some of my most accurate loadings lately with these commercial cast bullets have been with 5.5 grains of 452AA for 850 feet per second and 7.5 grains of Herco for 880 feet per second. Very pleasant to shoot and will shoot right at one-inch in a good sixgun at 25 yards.

Two superb cast bullet designs for the .44 Special were designed by Ray Thompson back in the early 1950's. This is the same Thompson whose name is attached to the famous #358156 gas-checked bullet designed for the .357 Magnum. The man was very simply a genius when it came to bullet design. His two .44 Special bullets are by Lyman and are #429244GC and #429215GC. The last three digits denote the approximate bullet weight. With my alloy, they come out at 254 and 222 grains respectively when sized, lubed, and gas-checked.

Lyman's #429244 is used sparingly with 17.0 grains of #2400 but mostly with 7.5 grains of Unique for 950 feet per second while its somewhat smaller brother is a great performer at 1050 feet per second over 8.5 grains of Unique. Quite often a .44 Special or .44 Magnum sixgun that is cranky will settle down when fed these superb gas-checked bullets. BRP (1210 Alexander Rd., Colorado Springs Colorado 80909) offers a gas-checked 240 grain .44 bullet that is also a superbly accurate bullet in .44 Specials.

A recent session with the relatively new Universal powder from Hodgdon's points up the joys and frustrations of shooting a sixgun. Loadings of 7.0 to 7.5 grains of Universal were used in Remington brass with CCI #300 primers and three bullet types. First, one of my all time favorite .44 cast bullets, NEI's duplicate of Keith's original design, the 260 grain #260.429. These are cast lovingly with great care by myself or my good friend Joe Penner. The second bullet type was represented by the 240 grain bevel-base machine cast bullets from Rushmore(P.O.

Box 1995, Rapid City SD 57709) and the third bullet, in between these two types was the Premium 250 grain hard cast bullet from Fusilier (10010 North 6000 West, Highland Utah 84003).

The first loads tried with my NEI bullet, a bullet that has proven its accuracy over and over again, resulted in three to four-inch groups at 25 yards! The Rushmore machine cast bullets were much better easily going under two inches, and the Fusiliers, over 7.5 grains of Universal at 904 feet per second, shot into one-inch at 25 yards. How can store-bought shoot better than home cast? Sure keeps things interesting.

Neither Colt nor Smith & Wesson catalogs a full-sized .44 Special at this writing and the only new large framed .44 Special sixguns available are the Colt replicas from Cimarron or EMF. Ruger never has made a .44 Special although the original plan was to offer the .357 Blackhawk that first saw the light of day in 1955 in both .44 Special and .45 Colt. The coming of the .44 Magnum one year later saw Ruger go directly to a larger framed Blackhawk for the new Magnum round.

For a long time now I have tried to take care of Ruger's oversight by grabbing up every reasonably priced Flat-Top (1955-1963) or Old Model (1963-1973) Ruger .357 Blackhawk I could find to have them converted to .44 Special by someone like Hamilton Bowen or Andy Horvath. Since 1973, Ruger .357 Blackhawks have been made on the same sized frame as the .44 Super Blackhawk and are larger and heavier than the older, trimmer Flat-Tops and Old Models. When I recently found an old Flat-Top that looked like it had been ridden hard and put up wet but was sound mechanically, I shipped it off to Bowen and had it re-chambered and re-bored to .44 Special thus keeping the original barrel and cylinder. Since this particular sixgun had some minor pitting and since I did not want to spend a lot of money on polishing and filing and since I needed a good working type .44 Special (one always needs one more .44 Special!), it was decided to simply bead blast the entire gun before bluing. The result is a very subdued satin blue finish that I like very much.

Shortly after having this .44 Special sixgun built up I was browsing through a local gun show and spotted an N-frame Smith with a price tag of only \$200. It was a rather strange looking sixgun with its dull blue finish overall except for the

contrasting four-inch barrel which was bright blue and was marked ".44 S&W Special". It turned out to be a re-chambered .357 Magnum Highway Patrolman fitted with a Smith & Wesson Model 24 barrel. "Why is this gun so cheap?" "The guy who owned it said it wouldn't shoot."

It certainly looked good to me and a deal was struck with the stipulation that I would bring it back if it really turned out to be a non-shooter. The former owner was right. It wouldn't shoot at all. But a little turning of the elevation and windage screws to sight it in and I was popping empty shotgun shells at thirty-five yards with my working loads. It is just incredulous to me that someone would spend the money on a .357 Highway Patrolman, which normally goes around \$300 in my area, put out another \$100 for a barrel, and then pay a gunsmith good money to re-chamber the cylinder and fit the barrel, and all the time not know that the sights could be adjusted! The four-inch find was sent off to Bowen for a complete bead blast and re-bluing and I now have a double action companion .44 Special working sixgun to my single action Flat-Top conversion that is one of my favorite sixguns.

The .44 Special is now nearing its ninetieth birthday and has been hopelessly outgunned by the .44 Magnum, .454 Casull, and the Linebaughs and Maximums. Outgunned maybe but never outclassed. It has died many times but always seems to resurrect. In the past twenty years we have seen the coming, and going, of the single action .44 Special in the Third Generation Colt Single Action Army and New Frontier and in double action persuasion in the Smith & Wesson Model 24 and 624. It has been said the .44 Special will not be back. I've heard that before. I didn't believe it then and I don't believe it now.

LOADS FOR THE .44 SPECIAL

BRASS: REMINGTON .44 SPECIAL BARREL LENGTH: 6 1/2"-7 1/2"

BULLET: 240 GRAIN SWC CHRONOGRAPH: OEHLER MODEL 35P

<i>LOAD</i>	<i>MV</i>
6.5 gr. WW231	875
5.5 gr. WW452AA	850

6.0 gr. WW452	900
7.5 gr. 800X	852
8.0 gr. 800X	886
6.5 gr. Unique	852
7.5 gr. Unique	975
7.5 gr. Herco	882
8.0 gr. Herco	982
9.0 gr. HS-6	786
5.0 gr. Bullseye	757
5.5 gr. Bullseye	854
6.0 gr. Bullseye	917
14.5 gr. H4227	824
15.5 gr. H4227	868
16.5 gr. H4227	1046
17.0 gr. H4227	1072
11.0 gr. AA#7	808
12.0 gr. AA#7	896
13.0 gr. AA#7	985
10.0 gr. HS-7	850
10.5 gr. HS-7	885
11.0 gr. HS-7	944
9.0 gr. WW540	790
6.0 gr. HP-38	813
5.5 gr. AA#2	791
6.0 gr. AA#2	856

HUNTING LOADS:

Speer 225 gr. JHP-SWC 7.7 gr. Unique 1089 FPS

Speer 225 gr. JHP-SWC 17.0 gr. H4227 1105 FPS