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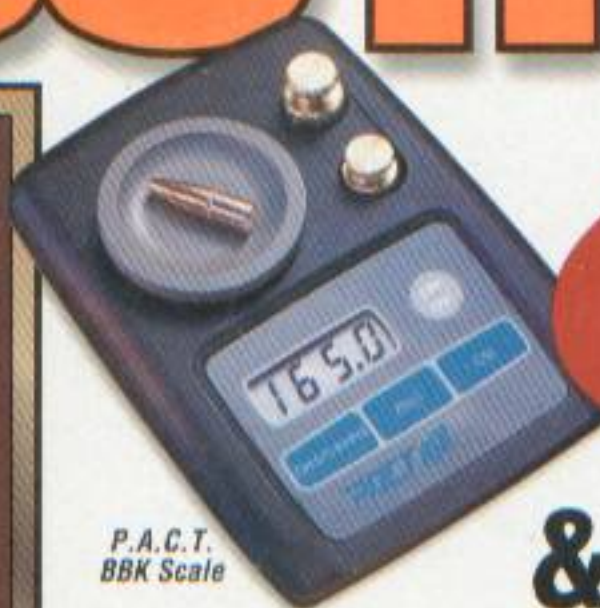
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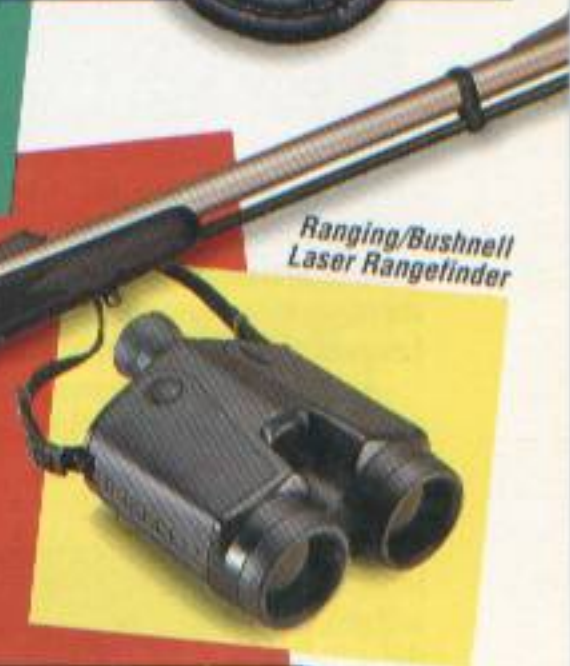
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**Sheriff  
Jim Wilson:  
My Favorite  
Handguns**



01



## THE SHERIFF'S TOP

# 5 HANDGUNS

By Sheriff Jim Wilson

**We really backed Sheriff Jim into a corner this time. We asked him to select his five favorite handguns. His choices may surprise you.**

**A**t first blush getting an assignment to write about your favorite handguns seems like a piece of cake. You just list a few of your particular favorites, tell a few yarns about them, and you're done. Happy editor. The check's in the mail, right? Wrong.

It turns out that what seemed like an easy task has become a whole lot like picking your favorite son or daughter. In any case, the problem is further compounded by the fact that for many years, I was an inveterate gun trader and rarely missed a gun show. Many of my early guns have simply been swapped off. That's what happened to the first handgun I ever owned, a Colt single action.

Another approach, I suppose, would be to list those handguns that have some sort of sentimental value to me. Like the Ruger Old Model .357 Blackhawk I used to take my first deer with a handgun. Or, maybe I should tell about the ugly old GI .45 auto that got me out of a particularly bad spot down in Mexico over 30 years ago. Another favorite that I wish I still had is the

factory-nickel, four-inch Python I carried in the early days of my law-enforcement career. But, like the other two, it was traded for something that was far more appealing at the time.

High on this particular list of favorites would be the five-screw S&W Military & Police snubnose that my uncle, Taylor Wilson, carried for nearly 25 years. I was about four or five when I figured out that he packed a sixgun and started pestering him about it. He actually took me out in the backyard of my Austin home and let me shoot it into the ground. Many years later, just before he died, Taylor gave me that sixgun and its old spring-loaded Bucheimer holster. You can bet that is one old handgun that hasn't been swapped off. In fact, it still does house-gun duty around the Wilson homestead.

But, I suppose the best way to deal with this issue of favorite handguns is to list the ones that are both particular favorites *and* see the most use. The guns that I reach for the most are the ones I use for my law-enforcement duties, handgun hunting, or just informal plinking and woods bumming.

### COLT SINGLE ACTION

In 1974, I was wandering through the tables at a Dallas gun show when I spotted a like-new Colt single action in its red-and-white stagecoach box. This 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch .45 looked to be brand new and had the prettiest set of one-piece ivory grips you ever saw, complete with Colt medallion. If memory serves me, I gave \$400 for the Colt, grips and all.

Taking it out to the range, I found that this was one of the few Colt SAs that would actually print factory loads



All of Sheriff Jim's favorite handguns are working guns, including his engraved Colt SAA in .45 Colt.



dead center at 25 yards. The action was perfectly timed, so I just eased up the trigger pull a little by padding the mainspring with a small piece of leather, a trick I learned from former *ST* Handgun Editor Skeeter Skelton. For years my standard .45 Colt handload has been a 250-grain Keith bullet over 8.0 grains of Unique. This old sixgun has fired thousands of rounds of that load and is as tight today as it was the day I bought it.

In about 1975, I decided that this sixgun was good enough to deserve a little special treatment. I figured it ought to be the first gun I ever had engraved. In those days Weldon Bledsoe was engraving guns in an office building in downtown Fort Worth. Bledsoe had studied under famed engraver Cole Agee and did a wonderful job on handguns. The scroll engraving that he did on my old Colt is absolutely perfect.

By that time I had also made the decision that all of my guns would be working guns, even the engraved ones. So I continued to carry and shoot my engraved single action. One night on a drug raid, I encountered a particularly belligerent individual who wouldn't take his hands out of his pockets. I thumb-cocked my single action as I stuck it under his nose, and his hands flew out of his pockets and into the air as if they were spring-loaded.

Last summer, at the Shootist's Holiday in Colorado, I had occasion to meet a young man named Eddie Janis. Janis operates Peacemaker Specialists (Dept. ST, Box 157, Whitmore, CA 96096) and does some exceptionally nice work on Colt single actions. I questioned him as closely as a father would his daughter's first boyfriend, and I finally decided to send him my engraved Colt. Janis installed fire-blue screws in the old gun to give it that truly custom look. He also did the best action job that I've ever seen on a single-action Colt. On cocking the pistol, you'd swear that the mainspring didn't have enough power left to bust a primer. He even installed an internal hammer stop so the rear of the hammer wouldn't get damaged during rapid-fire sessions.

I still carry and shoot this old sixgun, and it is still my favorite single action. The work of Bledsoe and Janis just made a good gun even better.

### SMITH & WESSON MODEL 19

The Model 19 Smith & Wesson is one of the classic fighting handguns of our times. *Shooting Times'* own Bill Jordan took a leading roll in designing the gun back in the mid-'50s. He

**The .357 Magnum S&W M19 was designed for law enforcement; author's M19 sees duty as a car and home protection gun.**



## "The Model 19 Smith & Wesson is one of the classic fighting handguns of our times."

wanted a .357 Magnum that an officer could pack all day without getting plumb tired out. Smith & Wesson took Jordan's ideas and incorporated them into its popular K-Frame line of revolvers. As originally listed, the sixgun was called the Combat Magnum; I've always liked that name better than an impersonal number designation.

When I went into police work in 1968, Jordan's book, *No Second Place Winner*, was about the only realistic study of this business of gunfighting. He influenced a whole generation of lawmen, myself included. In short order I was outfitted with a Jordan duty rig, Jordan grips, and a four-inch Combat Magnum. The grips soon had to go, however, since mine are ordinary-size human hands and not bear paws like Long Bill's.

My current Model 19 has been in my gun box for about 10 years. It is one of the last guns built with a pinned barrel and recessed chambers, two features that I prefer. The action was tuned by an old Border Patrol buddy of mine (and Bill's) who has a gunshop. This particular handgun is reminiscent of the several Model 19s that I have owned over the years.

As good as they come, the Model 19 can stand a bit of custom work that just makes it better. Many shooters,

myself included, have trouble barking their thumb knuckles on the cylinder latch of a K-Frame sixgun. Ed Brown Products (Dept. ST, Box 2922, Perry, MO 63462) offers a reshaped cylinder latch that will solve this problem quite nicely. The custom grips on my Model 19 were designed by Skelton as a modification of the old Roper design. About 1980, Skelton showed his modification to Deacon Deason of Bear Hug Grips and authorized him to produce the Skeeter Skelton Grips. Unfortunately, Deacon passed away last summer, and the grips are no longer available. And, no, mine aren't for sale.

Frankly, most of my defensive handgun needs are met with a Colt 1911. However, my Model 19 still sees duty as a car and house gun. In fact, my wife and I keep several around for just that sort of emergency. It doesn't really matter, though; I'd hang onto a Smith & Wesson Model 19 if for no other reason than to honor my good friend and great shootist Bill Jordan.

### RUGER SUPER BLACKHAWK

Since it was first introduced, I've thought that the Ruger Super Blackhawk was just about the epitome of what a hunting handgun ought to be. Chambered for the .44 Magnum cartridge, and wearing a 7½-inch barrel, these big sixguns are capable of taking any sort of game that a man has any business shooting at with a handgun.

My particular Super Blackhawk is sort of an evolutionary sixgun. In the July 1993 issue of *Shooting Times*, I reported on changing out the dragoon grip strap to better suit the size and shape of my hands. In its place I installed a stainless grip strap from a Ruger Old Army blackpowder sixgun. Since that time Tedd Adamovich (Blu Magnum Grips, Dept. ST, 5960 Wilson Rd., Colorado Springs, CO 80919) installed a set of beautiful maple grips on the old gun. He used my teardrop grip design that has a





For handgun hunting, author picks his .44 Mag. Ruger Super Blackhawk with custom rear sight, grip frame, and grips.



pronounced taper towards the lower edge of the grips to better fill the palm of the hand. And the improvements didn't stop there.

At the 1995 SHOT Show, I met Mark Stouse of BlackStar Accurizing Co., Dept. ST, 11609 Galayda St., Houston, TX 77086. BlackStar is the new electrochemical process of polishing a rifled bore for improved accuracy. BlackStar even offers a special process for cast bullet shooters that creates the slightest taper from forcing cone to muzzle. This past spring my old Super got the complete BlackStar treatment, and its accuracy has improved greatly. In my book a hunting handgun can never be too accurate.

As soon as the Super made it home from BlackStar, I shipped it off to Hamilton Bowen for one of his new replacement rear sights. Bowen has designed his sight much like the old Elliason with a sight blade at the rear of the sight system. This allows for much more adjustment in elevation which is often needed for the shooter to properly sight-in his .44 Magnum loads that are built around a 300-grain bullet. Bowen Custom Arms (Dept. ST, Box 67, Louisville, TN 37777) currently offers the new sight for the New Model Ruger and will soon market it for the Old Model as well.

My two standard hunting loads for the Super are built around cast Keith-type bullets. The first uses a 250-grain Keith (RCBS No. 44-250K) and 22.0 grains of 2400. The second load, reserved for larger game, uses a 295-grain Keith (BRP Cast Bullet Co. Model No. 5) over 21.5 grains of H110. Both are quite accurate and plenty powerful. I have taken deer, turkey, javelina, feral hogs, and several species of exotic sheep with my Ruger Super Blackhawk. I'll be hunting with Bart Skelton in southwest New Mexico this fall and with any luck, I'll be able to add mule deer to that list, too.

And I suspect that this Old Model Ruger Super Blackhawk will continue to be an evolutionary hunting hand

gun. As more hunting handgun improvements come out, you'll undoubtedly see this old sixgun again.

### COLT GOVERNMENT MODEL

I first became enamored with the Colt .45 automatic some 30 years ago. Prior to that, however, I had bought nearly all of the old wives' tales that encouraged us to believe that semiautomatic pistols just weren't reliable. Worse than that, I was repeating those claims as if they were gospel without any investigation of my own. Fellow lawman Johnny Guest finally got tired of listening to me and gave me an old GI .45 and a couple of boxes of surplus ammo. As I recall, he offered to eat my hat if I could make the gun malfunction. Johnny Guest has never gnawed on a Stetson on my account, and I've been hooked on the 1911 ever since.

About 1978, I was running a gunshop and also working at the Denton County Sheriff's Office, so I had a little extra money for buying handguns for my own use. Coincidentally, West Texas Wholesale had bought a bunch of factory-engraved Colt 1911s from the Custom Shop and was offering them at plumb reasonable prices. After a good deal of cogitation, I decided to order a blue-steel, D-engraved Government Model. It cost me right at \$800.

This fancy auto was of the '70-series design that

**Factory-engraved '70 Series Colt Government Model in .45 ACP accompanies Jim in most of his duties as county sheriff.**



featured the flanged bushing for improved accuracy. It also had one of the best factory triggers that I have ever found on a .45 automatic. A set of carved ivory grips was added to sort of guild the lily, and I had the finest .45 auto that I have ever owned.

This engraved 1911 is the gun that generally accompanies me in my duties as a county sheriff. It shoots to point of aim with most brands of 230-grain hollowpoint ammunition and has never jammed. A good-looking handgun that shoots well too is one of life's little joys. Long ago, I made the decision that I couldn't abide fancy guns that were meant to be hung on the wall. I'll keep on packing this engraved Colt and let my son hang it on the wall, assuming he wants to, after I'm gone.

### SMITH & WESSON MODEL 640

At the 1995 NRA Show, I had a good visit with fellow staffer Wiley Clapp. Clapp is another old pistol toter who did a stint as a lawman on the west coast. During the course of our conversation, as you might imagine, the talk got around to our favorite handguns. In reply to his question, I told him that my favorite belly gun is a Smith & Wesson Model 640. He just nodded and smiled because cops understand such things. Besides, Wiley was instrumental in getting Smith & Wesson to manufacture that particular gun.

Originally called the Centennial, the little revolver was introduced by Smith & Wesson in the 1950s. Handgun authority Colonel Rex Applegate suggested that the old lemon-squeezer grip safety, from the break-top era, ought to be incorporated into a J-Frame hammerless revolver. The Centennial was born. For some reason it never was as popular as the Model 36 with exposed hammer.





**Author's favorite belly gun is his .38 Special Smith & Wesson M640 Centennial with Tyler grip adapter.**

In 1990, at the urging of Clapp and other handgun authorities, Smith & Wesson reissued the Centennial. As the Model 640, the little belly gun was made in stainless steel and did not have the old grip safety. Sales have been very positive, and Smith & Wesson has recently offered the Model 640 in .357 Magnum with a beefed up frame and slightly longer barrel.

My particular Model 640 is one of the earlier models chambered in .38 Special. It also came with the small wood grips instead of the rubber boot grips of the later model. All of which suits me just fine. A belly gun generally shoots better with bigger grips, but its concealment value is decreased. Needing a filler behind the trigger guard, I installed an old Tyler grip adapter and never looked back.

My favorite .38 Special combat ammunition is the Winchester 158-grain lead hollowpoint that some call the FBI load. With this +P loading, the stainless 640 is a handful, but it's manageable with practice. The sights are surprisingly bold and pretty easy to pick up, but I would have preferred a blued front sight as it would be even easier to see.

The S&W Model 640 is one of the best belly guns available today. Mine rarely rides in any kind of holster since I prefer to stuff it under my shirt or down in my waistband. In the wintertime, it rides in a side pocket of my jacket and serves as a backup gun to my .45 auto. All things considered, it's a very useful little revolver.

Well, there you have it. The editors backed me against the wall and forced me to pick my favorites. Looking back on this list, every one of these handguns is a useful, practical pistol that meets my particular needs. In years to come I may add to the list, but you won't catch me taking any guns away from it.

If you have a favorite list of handguns, let me hear from you. You might be surprised, even a gun writer can learn something new. △