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SHOOTING TIMES

MAY 2003

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**REVOLVERS
REIGN!**

Sheriff Wilson
Picks Some New
Favorites

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Playing Favorites:

2 Revolvers Reign

By Sheriff Jim Wilson,
Handgun Editor

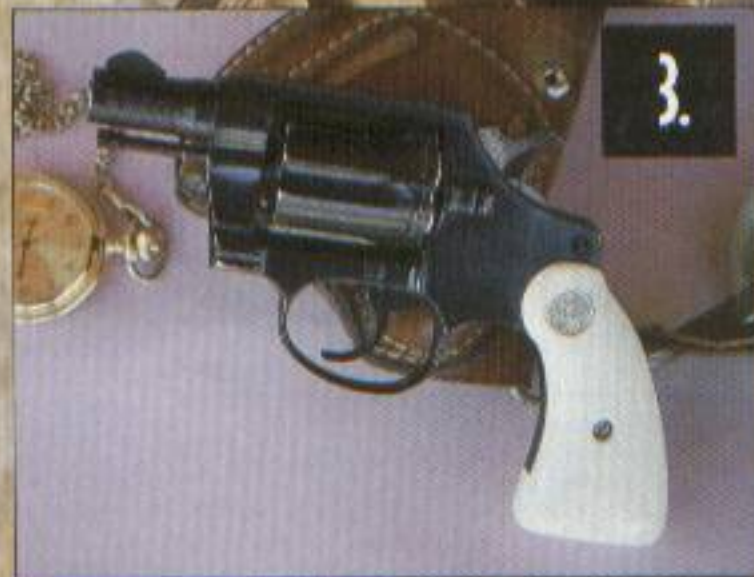
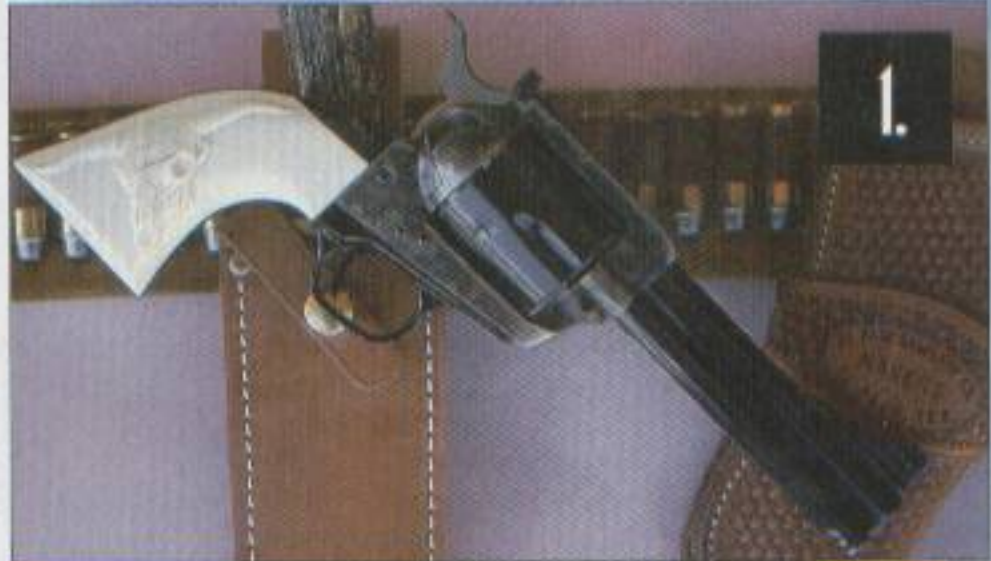
Jim has added five more models to his growing list of favorite guns. And they're all revolvers. Here are all the pertinent details.

Back in the January 1996 issue of *Shooting Times*, I did a piece called "Playing Favorites: The Sheriff's Top 5 Handguns." For that piece the editor cornered me into selecting my favorite handguns at the time. And while those old guns are still favorites, a lot of things have changed over the last seven years that have made me add a few more "favorites." For one thing, I am no longer a peace officer, having set that career aside after some 30 years. Nowadays, I hang out my shingle as a full-time gun writer. As a full-time writer I have been put in close association with many of the newer handguns and some of the more desirable older guns as well. And that's another factor that has caused me to make some additions to my list of favorite handguns. I thought you might be interested in some of the handguns that have attained that "favorite gun" status since my 1996 article.

Freedom Arms .454

In the early '90s I became acquainted with Wayne Baker, his son Bob, and the fine guns they produce under the Freedom Arms banner. It was about that time that the Bakers shipped me a Premier Grade Freedom Arms single action in .454 Casull. This big gun is a five-shooter, sports black micarta grips, and a 7 1/2-inch barrel.

The .454 Casull cartridge has been fondly referred to as just a .45 Colt on steroids. Using the same diameter bullet but in a longer case, the .454 Casull sends a 260-grain bullet downrange at over 1800 fps. And it will deliver a 300-grain bullet, from the 7 1/2-inch barrel at over 1600 fps. Over the years this cartridge has proven its worth on just about any size game a



1. Colt New Frontier
2. S&W Model 29
3. Colt Detective Special
4. Freedom Arms Premier Grade .454 Casull
5. Gallagher Custom Ruger Blackhawk



Jim likes the Freedom Arms Premier Grade .454 Casull for a hunting rig because of its power, accuracy, and ruggedness.



person would care to hunt.

From the beginning of my relationship with the Freedom Arms .454 Casull, I settled on the 300-grain bullet to handle my hunting chores. Back in those days Freedom Arms marketed its own ammunition, and I particularly liked the softpoint 300-grainer that the company loaded. However, in the ensuing years, Freedom Arms has discontinued marketing ammunition and Winchester has taken up the banner. I was pleased to learn that Winchester continues to use the 300-grain softpoint that was originally designed by Freedom Arms. In addition, Winchester has also marketed a 250-grain JHP load that runs at some 1300 fps—it's sort of a ".454 Casull Medium Load."

Regardless of bullet weight, I have always found this big .45 cartridge comfortable to shoot in the well-designed Freedom Arms gun. The revolver's properly shaped grip allows the big gun to roll in your hand and you don't feel pounded after a day at the

range. Being exceptionally accurate, the gun is capable of delivering one-inch five-shot groups when I am up to doing my part. Couple that with the fact that I've never had a minute's trouble with the Freedom Arms revolver and you can see why I choose it for a dependable, accurate hunting companion.

Shortly after acquiring the Freedom Arms .454 Casull, I decided to mate it to a good hunting holster. Since the Tom Threepersons holster from El Paso Saddlery is one of my favorites, I was pleased to find out that it is offered in a crossdraw configuration. Packing the big Freedom Arms revolver in a crossdraw rig makes it much more comfortable when sitting in a vehicle or tree stand, and the gun comes quickly to hand when game is sighted.

Since the early '90s I have taken a fair amount of big game with the Freedom Arms .454 Casull, including several whitetail and mule deer, a number of exotics, numerous feral hogs, and a black bear. All but the black bear were felled with one shot, and that bear was dying on its feet when I put one in the spine to finish it. The nicks and bumps on my Freedom Arms gun are proof that I haven't babied it while in the hunting field. It's a big, tough, accurate, workhorse of a gun and one that's never let me down.



Gallagher Custom Ruger Blackhawk

Another single action that I've become quite fond of is an Old Model Ruger Blackhawk that was customized and converted to .32-20 caliber by my friend John Gallagher. John took an Old Model Blackhawk frame and fitted it with a new cylinder that was bored



for the .32-20 cartridge. Then he added a custom barrel that was bored to the cartridge.

Gallagher had done several of these conversions and got tired of people asking him if the barrel was from a .30 Carbine Ruger Blackhawk. Since the .30 Carbine uses a .308-inch diameter bullet and the .32-20 has a .312-inch bullet, you can see where this would create problems with both accuracy and pressures. To put these issues to rest, John simply began to barrel these

tory load that is both accurate and pleasant to shoot.

Besides being an excellent gun for varmints and small game, my custom .32-20 is a good example of what custom pistolsmiths are able to produce. Its subdued beauty, reliability, and accuracy make it a definite keeper.

Colt Detective Special

My most recent "favorite gun" acquisition came from a trade with Border Patrolman Shane Jahn. When the dust

rel. The gun first became popular after J. H. FitzGerald, a Colt shooter, began to cut the Police Positive guns down to two inches for use as belly guns. In fact, FitzGerald went even further and bobbed the hammerspurs and cut out the front of the trigger guards in an attempt to make a real speed gun. They called them FitzGerald Specials, and many savvy gunmen preferred them for fighting guns.

Since getting my hands on this Colt .38, I've had Paul Persinger fit it out with a set of smooth ivory grips, complete with the Colt medallions. Paul did a wonderful job on the ivory grips but tells me that he doesn't care to get involved producing such grips because they are very time consuming.

Even though the Colt Detective Special has been discontinued for some years, there are quite a few of them still around in very good condition. In the near future, I am going to have this gun customized in the manner of the old FitzGerald Specials, just to honor a gunfighting era that has passed.

Smith & Wesson Model 29

Another favorite gun that came out of a gun trade is actually a double favorite. For some reason or another, Baggett and I got into a powerful gun trade one year at his annual deer hunt. I must have caught my rancher pal in a weak moment because I came away with his old Smith & Wesson Model 29



The Sheriff had an Old Model Ruger Blackhawk converted to .32-20 by gunsmith John Gallagher. The revolver is one of Jim's favorites for small game and varmint hunting.

.32-20 guns with an eight-inch barrel, so that folks would understand that he had properly mated the barrel to the cartridge.

John went on to install one of Hamilton Bowen's good adjustable rear sights and had the revolver frame casehardened. To top it all off, Gallagher fashioned a set of smooth grips from a piece of smooth walnut. The entire combination makes for a very attractive single action—one that shoots as good as it looks.

A few months after getting this custom Ruger, a colleague of mine responded to my questions as to good handloads for the .32-30 by saying, "Just use a good 115- to 120-grain cast bullet and lots of H110!"

It turned out that he was exactly right. Friend Penn Baggett, who had also acquired a custom .32-20 at about the same time, and I experimented with H110 and came up with a dandy load that was plenty accurate. To date, I've used the Ruger .32-20 to collect numerous Texas jackrabbits, a couple of Rio Grande turkeys, and one javelina. When ultimate power is not necessary, I use the Black Hills .32-20 cowboy fac-

GalleryofGuns.com

To learn more about some of these and other firearms, check out the GalleryofGuns.com website brought to you by Davidson's and *Shooting Times*. You can read gun reviews, search thousands of firearms, view photos with specifications, learn about firearms safety, keep up to date on the latest firearms news, and locate local retailers. You can even arrange to purchase through a local retailer.

had settled, I walked away the proud owner of a Colt Detective Special in .38 Special. This one has a two-inch barrel and an exposed ejector rod, like Colt built them from 1926 to 1972. My particular Detective Special left the Colt plant in the mid-1960s.

Over the years, I've owned several of these Colt snubnoses. In fact, my first off-duty gun was a Detective Special with the not-so-common three-inch bar-

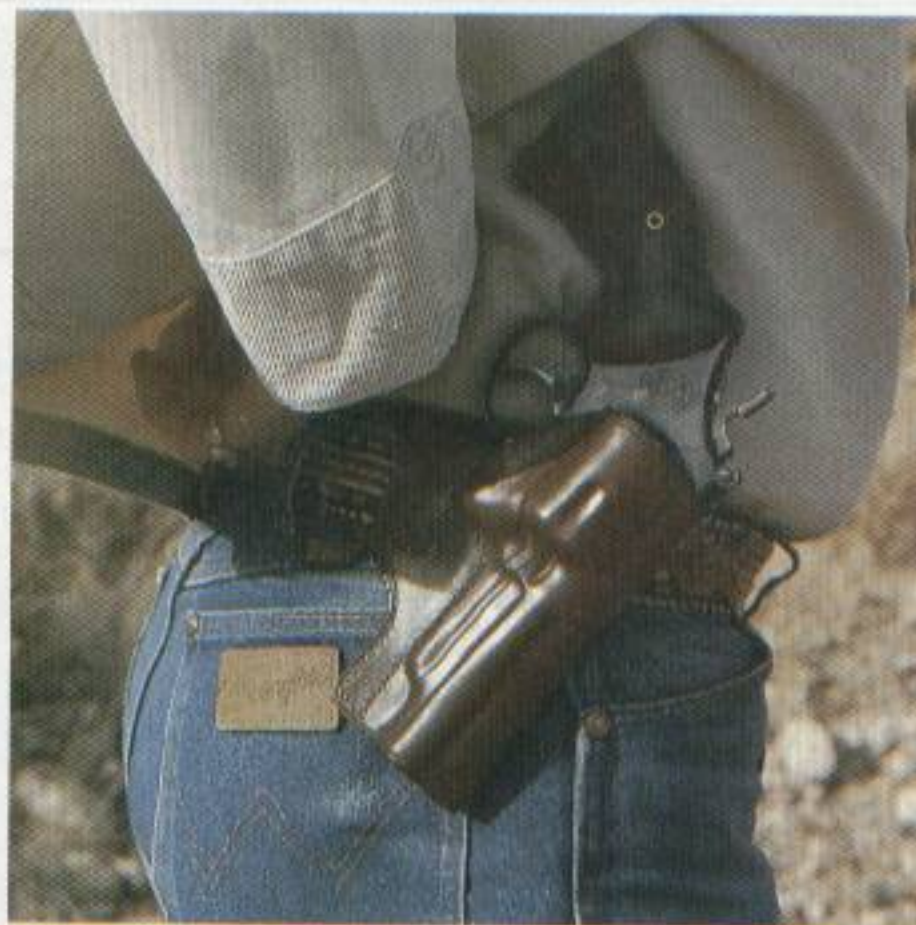


Jim's latest "favorite" acquisition is a discontinued Colt Detective Special. It makes for a lightweight but powerful carry revolver.

.44 Magnum. This gun is what we call a four-screw Smith & Wesson because it has a fourth screw in the frame just in front of the trigger guard. It is probably a first-year production gun, or close to it. In addition, it has the pinned barrel, recessed cylinder, and wide trigger and hammer of the old guns and is still quite accurate even though it has some blueing wear and you can tell it's been shot and packed quite a bit.

At about the same time I got this four-inch Model 29 I was visiting with Bart Skelton. During the course of our visit, Bart gave me a set of smooth walnut grips for it. The grips are crafted from a beautiful piece of walnut and are shaped like the grips that Walter Roper designed. Bart's dad, Skeeter, always liked this style of grip and later authorized Deacon Deason of Bear Hug Grips to build them using Skeeter's name. They are just about perfect for fast, double-action shooting.

My Model 29 stays loaded with the Black Hills .44 Magnum medium load that drives a 240-grain cast bullet at 950 fps. My favorite hand-load for the



This old four-screw S&W Model 29 with Skeeter Skelton-style grips is a double favorite of Jim's.

gun is built around the RCBS 250-grain Keith cast bullet and enough Hodgdon Universal Clays or Alliant Unique to deliver the same velocity. It generally rides in a Tom Threepersons holster from El Paso Saddlery or one of Derry Gallagher's (of Gallagher Holsters) high-ride holsters of horsehide.

Colt New Frontier

Speaking of Skeeter Skelton, he also figures into another of my favorite guns. Like me, you probably remember those great photos he used to run of his 4³/₄-inch Colt New Frontier in .44 Special, the one that wore one-piece ivory grips. Since those long-ago days, I've always wanted my own 4³/₄-inch New Frontier. The trouble is Colt just never made very many New Frontiers in that barrel length.

The Colt New Frontier is a target-sighted version of the Colt Single Action Army and was manufactured from 1961 to some time in the late 1980s. During its lifetime the New Frontier was chambered for most popular single-action cartridges, but for some reason it just never caught on with the shooting public. Skeeter and I were excep-

tions to that rule it appears.

A few years back, however, I traded for a like-new 7¹/₂-inch Colt New Frontier in .45 Colt. For a time it just sat on my shelf as I contemplated exactly what I was going to do with it. Finally, I contacted Eddie Janis at Peacemaker Specialists and sought his advice. Ja-



Manufacturers' Listings

Alliant Powder
Dept. ST
P.O. Box 6
Radford, VA 24141
www.alliantpowder.com

Black Hills
Ammunition Inc.
Dept. ST
Box 3090
Rapid City, SD 57709
www.black-hills.com

Bowen Classic Arms Corp.
Dept. ST
P.O. Box 67
Louisville, TN 37777
www.bowenclassicarms.com

Colt's Mfg. Co. Inc.
Dept. ST
Box 1868
Hartford, CT 06144
www.colt.com

El Paso Saddlery
Dept. ST
P.O. Box 27194
El Paso, TX 79926
www.epsaddlery.com

Freedom Arms Inc.
Dept. ST
P.O. Box 150
Freedom, WY 83120
www.freedomarms.com

Gallagher Holsters
Dept. ST
P.O. Box 720536
McAllen, TX 78504
www.dgallagherholsters.com

John Gallagher
Dept. ST
3923 Bird Farm Rd.
Jasper, AL 35503

Hodgdon Powder Co.
Dept. ST
P.O. Box 2932
Shawnee Mission, KS 66201
www.hodgdon.com

Peacemaker Specialists
Dept. ST
P.O. Box 157
Whitmore, CA 96096

Paul Persinger
Dept. ST
10441 Mackinaw St.
El Paso, TX 79924

Smith & Wesson
Dept. ST
2100 Roosevelt Ave.
Springfield, MA 01104
www.smith-wesson.com

Sturm, Ruger & Co.
Dept. ST
200 Ruger Rd.
Prescott, AZ 86301
www.ruger-firearms.com

Winchester/Olin Corp.
Dept. ST
427 N. Shamrock
East Alton, IL 62024
www.winchester.com

nis informed me that he just happened to have a brand-new New Frontier barrel in the 4^{3/4}-inch length, and lucky for me it was in .45 Colt caliber. I figured that was close enough and told Janis to put my name on it, I'd be sending him my New Frontier in short order.

Now, I had first run on to Janis a few years back and learned that he does some of the best action jobs you will find on any Colt single action. In addition to installing the 4^{3/4}-inch barrel, he tuned the gun's action to perfection. Among other things, Janis installed a hammerstop that keeps the SA hammer from peening each time it is thumbed back. The hammer pull is so light that you might swear it didn't have enough power to bust a primer. You might swear that, but you'd be wrong.

Janis also took a Colt .357 Magnum cylinder and reamed it out to .45 Colt. The reason for this is that there is generally a lot of variation in the diameter of the chamber throats in .45 Colt guns. I've measured chamber throats that went all the way from .452 to .458, and that was on the same gun. Tight chamber throats are important to accuracy and this was the reason that Janis fitted the new cylinder. On my custom New Frontier, the six chamber throats



Having always wanted a short-barreled Colt New Frontier similar to the one Skeeter used to write about, Jim had Peacemaker Specialists replace the factory-installed 7 1/2-inch barrel of this New Frontier with a 4 3/4-inch barrel.

are a uniform .453 inch, and the gun is surprisingly accurate with just about any .45 Colt load that you'd care to run through it.

Finally, my custom New Frontier

went out to El Paso and into the loving hands of Persinger. He fitted the gun with a set of one-piece ivory grips that had a longhorn steer skull carved on the right side.

As a surprise to me, he also carved my old *cinco* peso sheriff's badge in the left grip. This favorite single action generally rides in a 1920 Austin holster from El Paso Saddlery that is a copy of the holsters that used to be made by A. W. Brill of Austin, Texas. The cartridge belt, also from El Paso Saddlery, is made from soft chap-leather.

For ammunition in my custom Colt New Frontier, I like just about any of the factory loads that deliver a 250-grain bullet at about 850 fps. When working with handloads, I generally build a load that delivers a 250-grain SWC at about 950 fps.

So you can see that I've added a few more guns to the gun shelf that I reserve for my favorite handguns. And in a later installment, sometime down the road from now, I'll tell you about some of the defensive handguns that have attained "favorite" status.