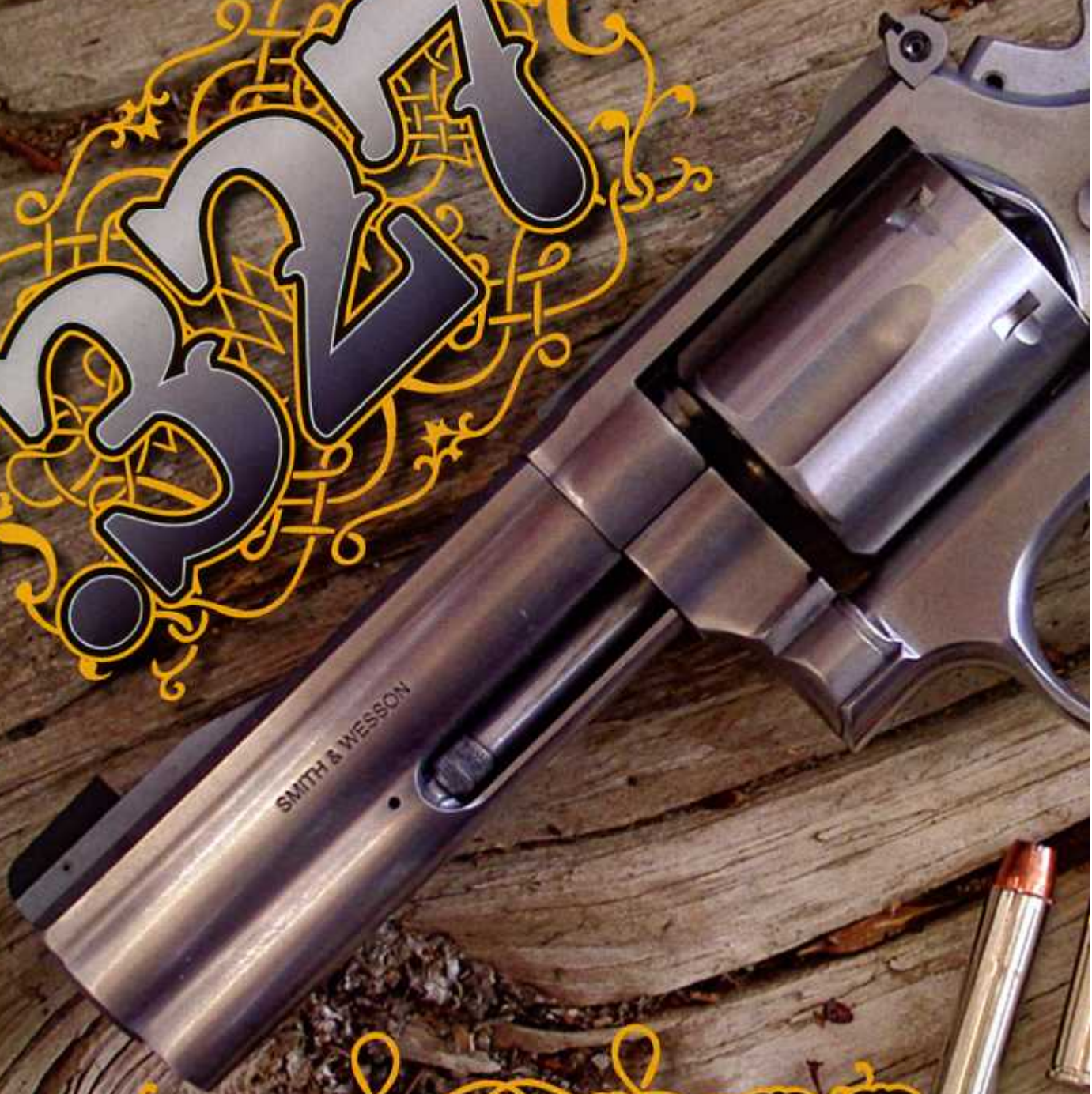


S&W



SMITH & WESSON

**FEDERAL
MAGNUM**

AMERICAN HANDGUNNER • 2009 SPECIAL EDITION



John Taffin

HAMILTON BOWEN STYLE

We live in an amazing time and this is ever so true when it comes to firearms. I love the old classic sixguns of the 1950s and earlier. But I have to admit today's revolvers are stronger, usually more accurate, relatively less expensive, and definitely more readily available. When it comes to custom sixguns, they were very scarce in 1950 and earlier with very few well-known

sixgunsmiths plying their trade. Today I can make a long list from memory of superb craftsmen who can build the finest sixguns possible. At the top of that list is Hamilton Bowen of Bowen Classic Arms.

The Master Craftsmen

I first met Hamilton in the mid 1980s when we were both much younger and he was just starting to

make a name for himself as a top custom revolver maker. The first two of his creations I shot were five-shooters, a .500 Linebaugh on a Ruger Redhawk and a .44 Special on a Ruger Security-Six. In the more than two decades which has passed since that first meeting Hamilton has done just about everything, which is possible to accomplish in customizing a sixgun.

Not only has Hamilton done



Be still my heart! Hamilton Bowen's 7 1/2" .327 Federal Magnum Single-Six.

just about everything there is to do with a custom revolver, he also wrote the book which not so coincidentally is titled *The Custom Revolver*. When I was a kid I spent hours looking over the few rare pictures I could find of custom sixguns. Most of these were found in the old articles by Elmer Keith and also in his book, *Sixguns*. The cover and first chapter of

Hamilton's book is basically dedicated to Elmer Keith and his #5 Single Action. Both the original and Hamilton's re-creation are chambered in .44 Special.

The rest of the book is more of the stuff dreams are made of as Hamilton explains and pictures just about everything there is to know about the custom revolver. He has chambered about everything possible

in a sixgun including the .475 and .500 Linebaughs and also the maximum length versions of these cartridges — the problem with making customs in these calibers is they have to be test-fired. You can bet Hamilton's favorite cartridge is not found among any of these big bores!

Making Treasures

I have had him do several conversions for me on Ruger .357 Old Model Blackhawks, turning them into .41 and .44 Specials. However, one of the neatest single action sixguns I have was built by Hamilton using a Colt Single Action instead of a Ruger. Starting with a .44 Special from which I had stolen the barrel and cylinder for another project, Hamilton made a new unfluted cylinder, fitted an 8 1/2" barrel, and matched up a post front sight with a Smith & Wesson rear sight. I finished off the project with a pair of one-piece ebony stocks checkered in the fleur-de-lis pattern by Paul Persinger. It's one of the prettiest, and certainly one of the best shooting sixguns I own.

This special Colt Single Action is chambered in Hamilton's favorite cartridge, at least it appears to be so to me, from meeting with him at many



Test results with the Bowen Classic Arms custom .327.



The stuff dreams are made of! A pair of Bowen .327 Federal Magnums with case colored frames and Bisley Model hammers.

Shootists Holidays and also reading his book. I'm pretty sure mine was the first he made. However, shortly after he started with a Ruger .357 Old Model, removed the adjustable sights, welded and re-contoured the flat-top frame, fitted a new barrel and cylinder, and the result is a Ruger that is a dead ringer for a Colt Single Action.

I'll let him tell you about the chambering. "Perhaps the most entertaining in the vintage cartridges adapted to the medium-frame Ruger is the .32-20. In deference to older, weaker actions, .32-20 ammunition is loaded conservatively. Loaded to .357 Magnum pressures and fired in a stout gun with a rebounding firing pin, performance is spectacular, especially when applied to small varmints. In the Bowen Classic Arms conversions the .32-20 will safely propel a 115-grain cast bullet to 1,500 to 1,600 fps in a 7 1/2" barrel and shoot it as flat as a banjo string. No finer field revolver exists for marksmen who shoot standing on their own two feet as the gods intended."

Flat Shooter

The .32-20, as Hamilton has pointed out, shoots flat. And with the proper load it's also quite accurate

and recoil is exceptionally mild when compared to the big magnums. It's simply a fun cartridge to shoot and is an excellent performer on small game and varmints. Elmer Keith's first cartridge firing sixgun was a 7 1/2" Colt Single Action .32-20 and he took more than a few mule deer with that cartridge.

With all its great virtues, the .32-20 cartridge isn't perfect. It's not a straight walled cartridge but rather tapered and bottle-necked, which means there are no carbide sizing dies available. More importantly, at least until recently, .32-20 brass has been very fragile in the neck area and I would lose a few cases every time I resized them for reloading. Today that problem has been solved as I only use Starline's excellent .32-20 brass.

Another cartridge in the same league as the .32-20 is the .30 Carbine. In this case we have a straight walled, or nearly so, cartridge. But it doesn't have a rim requiring head spacing on the front of the case which in turn doesn't allow for proper crimping of the bullet. So for those sixgunners wanting a flat-shooting, low recoil, .30-.32 caliber sixgun cartridge, a choice has to be made. We can have a bottlenecked

cartridge allowing proper crimping or we could have a nearly straight walled cartridge allowing for easy sizing but no crimping.

For decades I, as well as other sixgunners, hoped for a blending of the two cartridges into one straight walled, rimmed small bore sixgun cartridge.

Almost There

In the 1980s we came really close with the arrival of the .32 H&R Magnum. This is a magnificent little cartridge, however, it is much shorter than either the .32-20 or .30 Carbine. It was originally chambered in H&R revolvers so factory rounds have always been loaded rather anemically. It was a great start and many of us hoped we would see a true .32 Magnum someday.

The spotlight didn't stay on the .32 very long as everyone, myself included, gravitated to a long line of truly big bore cartridges starting with the .454 Casull which has since been followed by the Linebaugh cartridges already mentioned, as well as the .445 SuperMag, 480 Ruger, 460 and .500 S&W Magnums, and the .500 Wyoming Express as well as several wildcat cartridges.



With its heavy underlug barrel and Keith Brown stocks, this Bowen .327 is as attractive as a stainless steel double action revolver can be.

These are all grand and powerful cartridges suited to hunting big game and especially so for those considered dangerous. However, we finally got to the point where many sixgunners started looking for a return back down the ladder to more pleasant shooting cartridges.

It's Special

The .44 Special, which was first touted by Elmer Keith in the 1920s as the finest sixgun cartridge until it was overshadowed by the .44 Magnum in the 1950s, was brought back to life by Skeeter Skelton in the 1970s, and then fell on hard times with the last full-sized .44 Specials being made in

the 1980s. Thankfully, S&W recently revived the .44 Special.

I have tried to pick up Skeeter's torch writing about .44 Special conversions for the past 20 years. In talking to several sixgunsmiths, I find a most popular conversion today is the easy shooting .44 Special on an Old Model .357 Magnum Blackhawk. With a return to this "sixgun normalcy" would it be possible to actually see a new cartridge on the small side rather than seeing who could make the largest and most powerful chambering?

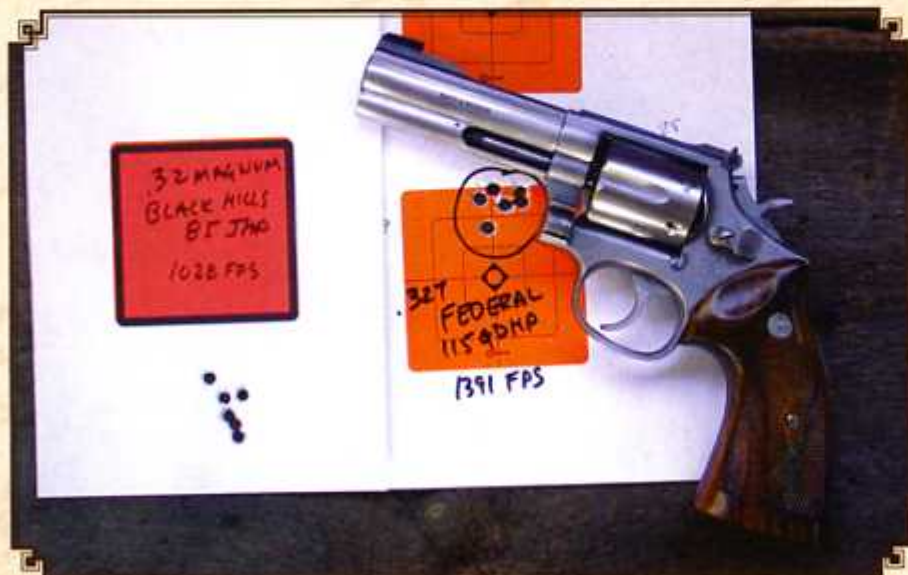
It finally happened in late 2007. Hornady teamed up with Ruger to bring out a new cartridge chambered

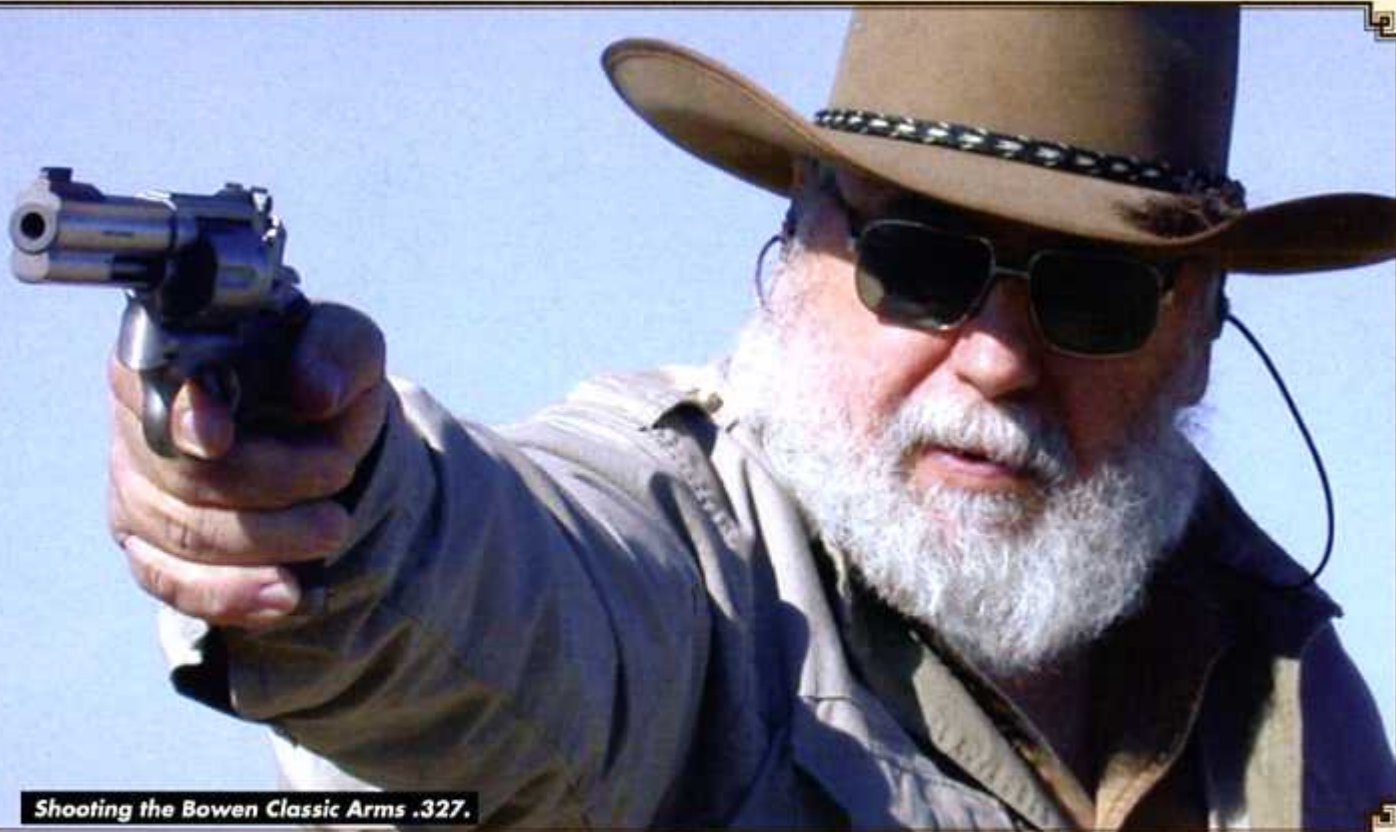
in the Ruger SP101 as a defensive cartridge close to the capability of the .357 Magnum without the heavy recoil in a pocket pistol. The new cartridge is the .327 Federal Magnum, which is nothing more than a longer version of the .32 H&R Magnum. It's not quite that simple as .327 Federal brass has heavier walls toward the base than the .32 Magnum. However, I reload the .327 Federal Magnum using .32 Magnum dies. The .327 Federal Magnum is the modernized version of the .32-20 and .30 Carbine we have been looking for.

.327 Federal Magnum

When the .327 was first introduced posters on websites divided quickly into two camps: those who saw it as an excellent varmint and small game cartridge, and those who saw no use for it whatsoever. Those in the latter group need to take a couple aspirins and go to bed until they feel better. With some I think it's a macho thing and they are simply afraid to admit they would actually shoot something that doesn't use a 250-300 grain or heavier bullet at 1,200 fps, or more.

There is a place for the big cartridges. There is also a much larger place for the pleasant shooting little cartridges. I agree with Hamilton who told me, while talking about custom revolvers he has built for the .327, "I am more excited about the cartridge than anything since the .44 Magnum, and all custom revolvers we have built so far have proven to be





Shooting the Bowen Classic Arms .327.

astonishing shooters with American Eagle/Federal ammo. Better still, the case is so much smaller than the .32-20, we can work it through smaller guns. Still, it makes a nice medium-frame Ruger SA cartridge. We will probably have available a dual-cylinder New Model Flat-Top before it is all said and done." I must say I agree totally with Hamilton's assessment of the .327 Federal.

The .327 Federal case length at 1.196" falls in between the .32 Magnum at 1.072" and the .32-20 which is 1.280"; it is closer to the .32-20 but just short enough it can be chambered in a Ruger Single-Six using a custom cylinder made as long as possible. Above, Hamilton mentioned the possibility of 1,500 to 1,600 fps with a 115 cast bullet in a .32-20 built on a Ruger .357 Magnum Old Model; Federal's .327 factory load using a 115 Gold

Dot JHP does 1,500+ fps in a 7 1/2" Bowen Single-Six while the American Eagle 100 JFP is just under 1,700 fps. We definitely have the modern .32-20 we have been looking for!

Making .327s

Hamilton has been busy this summer building four custom .327 Federal Magnums on Ruger and Smith & Wesson platforms. Sometimes everything just works out right. Every one of the sixguns is already sold, but each one of the owners allowed me to have access to them first. Normally, when I test a new factory sixgun I push it pretty hard. I don't do this with someone else's high dollar custom revolver especially when they have been generous enough to let me try it first. I did use all the .327 Federal Magnum factory loads available, although I

kept my reloads relatively mild and I thank each one of these men for allowing me the pleasure of breaking in their new sixguns — they won't be disappointed with what they have.

Of the four Bowen Classic Arms .327 Federal Magnum custom revolvers Hamilton sent to me, two are on the Ruger Single-Six platform. One is a dual-cylindered New Model which started life as a .357 50th Anniversary Flat-Top, and the final custom .327 is built on, though not easily recognized as such, a Smith & Wesson Model 66. Let's take a look at all four.

Hamilton's .327 Magnum Smith & Wesson is one of the best looking smallbore double action sixguns to be found. For several years Bowen has been using S&W K-frames to make custom .32-20s using K22 barrels and cylinders which have been re-bored and re-chambered. Those blued

HANDLOADED AMMO PERFORMANCE

.327 FEDERAL MAGNUM		7 1/2" SINGLE-SIX		4 5/8" SINGLE-SIX	
BULLET	POWDER	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)
Hornady 100 XTP	12.5 gr. Lil' Gun	1,401	1 1/8	1,351	1
Speer 100 JHP	12.5 gr. Lil' Gun	1,382	7/8	1,312	1 5/8
.327 FEDERAL MAGNUM		5 1/2" BLACKHAWK		4" SMITH & WESSON	
BULLET	POWDER	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)
Hornady 100 XTP	12.5 gr. Lil' Gun	1,410	1 1/4	1,352	1 3/8
Speer 100 JHP	12.5 gr. Lil' Gun	1,412	1 5/8	1,326	1 5/8

Notes: Groups the product of 5 of 6 Shots at 20 yards. Chronograph screens set at 10' from muzzle. CCI #500 primers used in Starline brass. * This sixgun is a .32-20 with an extra .327 cylinder.



HANDLOADED AMMO PERFORMANCE

.32 H&R MAGNUM		7-1/2" SINGLE-SIX		4 5/8" SINGLE-SIX	
BULLET	POWDER	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)
Hornady 85 XTP	10.0 gr. H4227	1,091	1 1/4	1,049	1 3/8
Hornady 85 XTP	8.5 gr. #2400	1,131	1 5/8	1,128	7/8
Sierra 90 JHC	8.5 gr. #2400	1,178	1 5/8	1,103	1 1/8
Speer 85 JHP	8.5 gr. #2400	1,139	1 3/8	1,059	7/8

.32 H&R MAGNUM		5 1/2" BLACKHAWK		4" SMITH & WESSON	
BULLET	POWDER	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)
Hornady 85 XTP	10.0 gr. H4227	1,115	1 3/8	1,044	1 3/8
Hornady 85 XTP	8.5 gr. #2400	1,177	1 3/4	1,128	1 1/2
Sierra 90 JHC	8.5 gr. #2400	1,209	1 1/2	1,064	1 3/8
Speer 85 JHP	8.5 gr. #2400	1,127	1 1/2	1,093	1 1/2

FACTORY AMMO PERFORMANCE

.327 FEDERAL MAGNUM		7 1/2" SINGLE-SIX		4 5/8" SINGLE-SIX	
LOAD		VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)
Federal Low Recoil 85 JHP		1,617	1 3/8	1,514	1 3/4
Federal 115 Gold Dot HP		1,508	1 3/8	1,437	1
American Eagle 100 JFP		1,681	1 3/8	1,584	1
Black Hills .32 Mag. 85 JHP		1,104	1 3/8	1,057	1

.327 FEDERAL MAGNUM		5 1/2" BLACKHAWK		4" SMITH & WESSON	
LOAD		VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)	VELOCITY (fps)	GROUP (inches)
Federal Low Recoil 85 JHP		1,591	1 3/8	1,474	1 1/4
Federal 115 Gold Dot HP		1,412	1	1,391	3/4
American Eagle 100 JFP		1,669	1 3/8	1,485	1 3/4
Black Hills .32 Mag. 85 JHP		1,100	1 3/4	1,028	1 1/2





Bowen Classic Arms 4 5/8" .327 Federal Magnum Single-Six features a ribbed barrel and a lanyard ring.

barrels and cylinders have pretty much dried up so Hamilton has switched to stainless steel Model 617 parts.

S&W Conversion

This conversion starts with a 4" Model 617 .22 barrel which is re-bored and marked ".327 FED. MAG. CTG." on the right side of the barrel. This full under-lugged barrel is fitted to a Model 66-2 frame which then receives a Model 617 cylinder chambered to .327 Federal Magnum. Of course the Model 66 is tightened and tuned, with the single action

trigger pull set at three pounds, and an undercut front post of the proper height fitted to the ramp on the Model 617 barrel. The whole package is finished off with a pair of exquisite "diamond" Smith & Wesson Target stocks. They are not S&W stocks but in fact perfect recreations of original S&W .357 Combat Magnum stocks carried out in fancy walnut by stock maker Keith Brown who not only duplicates early Smith & Wesson Target and Magna stocks but classic Roper and Kearsarge pre-war stocks as well. The entire result is not only

eye pleasing, the operation and accuracy of this .327 S&W definitely stirs the smallbore sixgunner's heart, mind, soul, and spirit.

Blackhawk Conversion

We have mentioned how perfectly suited Old Model .357 Magnum Blackhawks — which are basically the same size as a Colt Single Action, are for conversions to .44 and .41 Special. One of the best sixguns to come along in this still relatively new century has been Ruger's 50th Anniversary .357 Magnum Blackhawk. It's the



Hamilton Bowen's custom single action on the Ruger 50th Anniversary Model has a 5 1/2" barrel and two cylinders, one in .327 and the other .32-20.

same size as the original Ruger .357 Blackhawk, uses the original sized XR3 grip frame, and is all steel.

Hamilton not only does the standard conversions on this New Model Blackhawk, he has also used it for five-shot conversions chambered in .44 Magnum and .50 G.I. For his latest project he uses this platform for a dual cylindered .32-20 and .327 Federal.

To easily distinguish between the two chamberings the .32-20 is fluted while the .327 cylinder is not; both

are expertly fitted to the frame which has a 5 1/2" Douglas barrel. The front sight is a tapered post on a ramp and is matched up with one of Hamilton's heavy-duty field rear sights. The hammer and frame are case colored by Turnbull, a locking large knurled head base pin is fitted, the action is tightened and tuned, and the trigger pull set at 2 1/2 pounds. At 46 ounces this is a relatively heavy sixgun which makes it even more pleasant when shooting either cartridge.

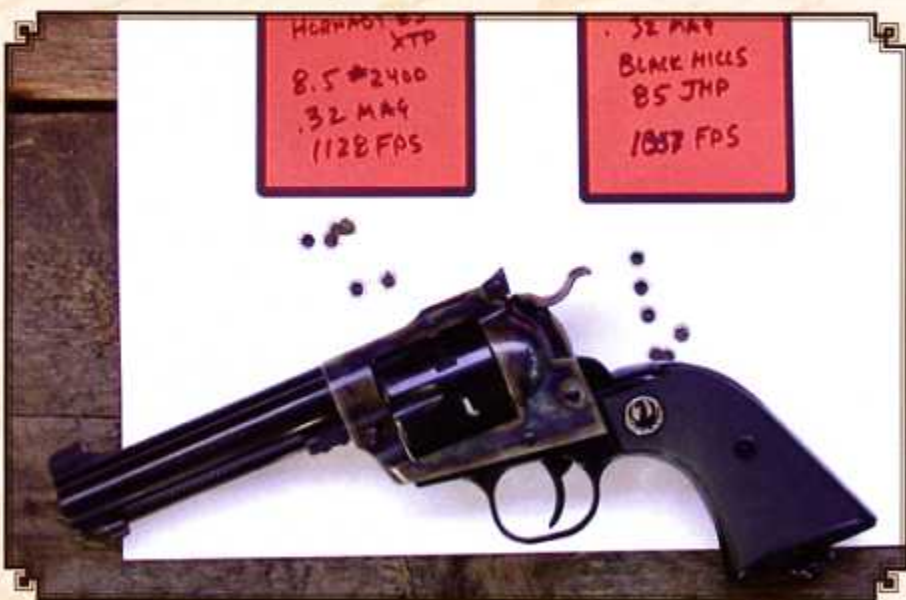
I mainly concentrated my shooting

with the .327 Federal, but I did have two factory .32-20 loads on hand from Black Hills and Winchester. Both shot very well with the former clocking at 872 fps and the latter at 866 fps. With carefully tailored handloads in this particular sixgun these muzzle velocities can almost be doubled.

Single-Six

Now we come to my favorite BCA .327 (actually favorites as we have a pair of custom Single-Sixes). Hamilton says the Ruger Single-Six in .32 Magnum "... in my view, the natural home for the .327 in a single-action. The cylinder diameter is adequate for six-shots (walls and webs are similar to K-frame .357s) and only have to be longer. No receiver modifications are necessary. Factory ammo will work fine as well as most suitable cast bullets. Unfortunately, some 120-130 gr. LBT LFN GC bullets out there are too long for this particular example. While production cylinders will be a hair longer, we need to find a source for suitable LBT bullets."

The two .327 Single-Sixes are basically the same except for the barrels. Hamilton is a man after my own heart when he says "I like 7 1/2" barrels on classic-style single-actions so that's what we made." Amen to that, Hamilton! For me 7 1/2" single actions balance the best





and are the easiest to shoot. For this .327 Hamilton line-bored the cylinder which is both fluted and black powder chamfered. The action is totally tuned, trigger pull set at just a hair over 3 pounds, Bisley hammer and frame color cased by Turnbull, steel ejector rod housing installed, oversized locking base pin fitted, and a BCA heavy-duty rear field sight matched up with a serrated front ramp sight.

To complete this perfect example of a smallbore 7 1/2" both the steel XR3 grip frame and Black Eagle grips from a Ruger 50th Anniversary Model have been fitted. It's always heart rending to send custom sixguns back, and this is the toughest one to release.

I certainly hope the new owner appreciates it as much as I have.

Last Of The Quartet

The final old .327 in this Classic Quartet is basically the same style .327 Single-Six except for the barrel which gives it a totally different look and feel. This time Hamilton started with a Smith & Wesson ribbed K22 barrel, machined off the underlug, re-bored it to .327, cut it to 4 5/8", and installed it along with a steel ejector rod housing. The ribbed barrel matches up beautifully with the Single-Six frame. This time the front sight is an undercut post and a really nice touch is the installation of a lanyard ring. For anyone who carries a sixgun while canoeing,

traveling by horseback, or hiking in rough country a lanyard ring makes a whole lot of sense and can prevent losing a cherished revolver.

I have tested virtually every sixgun in every caliber over the past 40 plus years. This session with Hamilton Bowen's .327s is without a doubt the most enjoyable I have ever experienced. There is something very relaxing about shooting accurate sixguns with no concern about recoil. As this is written the only factory made .327 Federal Magnums are short-barreled pocket pistols. Hamilton has shown what really can be done using the .327 Federal Magnum and test-firing results are in the accompanying chart. These four sixguns are without a doubt superb examples of what a master craftsman can accomplish. 🏹



Comparing the .32s: .32 S&W, .32 S&W Long, .32 Magnum, .327 Federal Magnum, and the .32-20.

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