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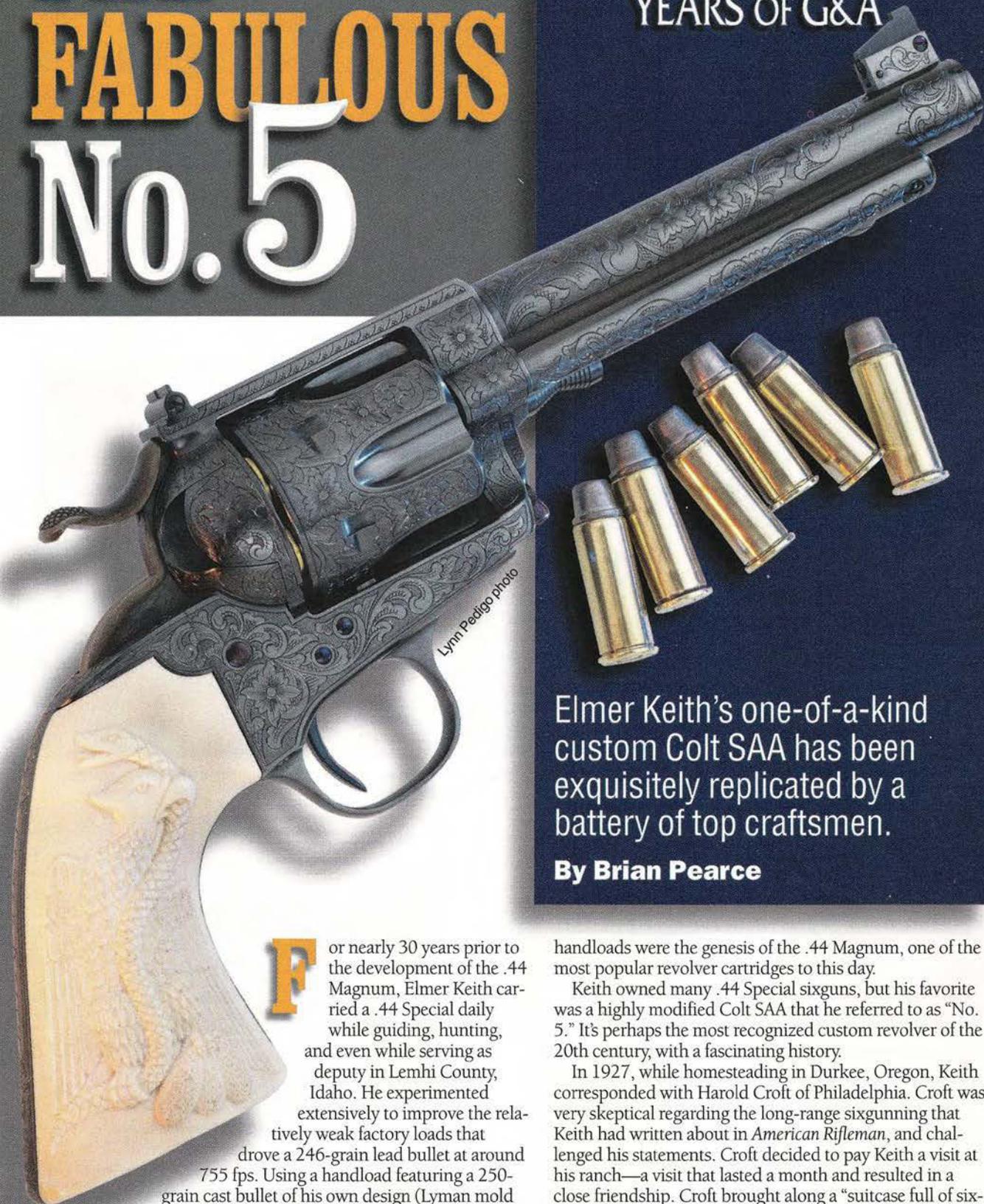
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THE FABULOUS No. 5

CELEBRATING
44
YEARS OF G&A



Elmer Keith's one-of-a-kind custom Colt SAA has been exquisitely replicated by a battery of top craftsmen.

By Brian Pearce

For nearly 30 years prior to the development of the .44 Magnum, Elmer Keith carried a .44 Special daily while guiding, hunting, and even while serving as deputy in Lemhi County, Idaho. He experimented extensively to improve the relatively weak factory loads that drove a 246-grain lead bullet at around 755 fps. Using a handload featuring a 250-grain cast bullet of his own design (Lyman mold No. 429421) in strong Colt and S&W revolvers, he achieved 1,200 fps, which made it significantly more powerful than either the .357 Magnum or .45 Colt. Keith's

handloads were the genesis of the .44 Magnum, one of the most popular revolver cartridges to this day.

Keith owned many .44 Special sixguns, but his favorite was a highly modified Colt SAA that he referred to as "No. 5." It's perhaps the most recognized custom revolver of the 20th century, with a fascinating history.

In 1927, while homesteading in Durkee, Oregon, Keith corresponded with Harold Croft of Philadelphia. Croft was very skeptical regarding the long-range sixgunning that Keith had written about in *American Rifleman*, and challenged his statements. Croft decided to pay Keith a visit at his ranch—a visit that lasted a month and resulted in a close friendship. Croft brought along a "suitcase full of sixguns," four of which were highly customized experimental Colt Single Actions numbered 1, 2, 3 and 4. (As a sidenote, Croft soon learned that Keith was indeed for real, as he



Paul Persinger made the hand-carved ivory grips (left) which feature the emblem of Mexico on the right panel. The grip frame (right) handles recoil comfortably and points naturally, allowing for a higher grip than the standard Colt SAA.

demonstrated long-range sixgunning at 700 yards by hitting a four-foot square target with a variety of Croft's revolvers!)

These sixguns are known today as the Croft Featherweights, and each was chambered in .45 Colt. Each had its frame lightened by removing excess metal from the rear of the recoil shield (on each side of the hammer) and along the sides of the lower frame. Numbers 1 and 3 were altered from a Colt SAA frame, while 2 and 4 were from a Bisley. Guns 2, 3 and 4 featured experimental grip frames and featured adjustable sights on 4¼- and 4½-inch barrels. Various base pin latches were part of the experiments, as were more durable mainsprings.

These features were the brainchild of Croft, but the custom work was performed by the finest craftsmen of the era. R.F. Sedgley (famous for his high-grade Model 1903 custom Springfields) made the base pin latches, welded the frames and grip frames and performed final finishing. Neal Houchins made the stocks, fitted the barrels and cylinders, and fine tuned the actions. Keith wrote the Croft guns up in the September 1928 issue of *American Rifleman*.

Although Keith was very fond of the Croft guns, he wanted to design one to his own specifications—blending the best ideas of Croft, Sedgley and Houchins—which would become the No. 5. He began by using a standard Colt Single-Action Army. It was welded into a flattop configuration, which extended back over the top of the hammer, where the adjustable rear sight was dovetailed into place. The grip frame was altered like the No. 3 Croft by using a Bisley backstrap and an SAA triggerguard. These parts did not simply bolt together, but had to be welded, shaped and re-welded. It was a major undertaking to bring about proper shape and fit.

The hammer was a hybrid with a Bisley spur and an SAA bottom half, which connected to a rather unconventional U-shaped mainspring that was less prone to breakage. A new 5½-inch Colt .44 Special barrel and cylinder were installed. The base pin head is very large—three-quarters of an inch long—and shaped like an hourglass for easy removal in cold weather or when the gun became dirty.

A clever base pin latch was designed that consisted of a little lever mounted to the front of the frame that pivoted the upper half into a slot in the base pin, holding it firmly. The front sight was adjustable for elevation. Stocks were of carved elephant ivory, fea-



The repro No. 5 features the vintage barrel marking "Russian and S&W Special 44." The outsized "hour glass" base pin head is designed for easy removal in cold weather.

turing the Mexican emblem on the right panel. Finally, the gun was topped off with full-coverage scroll type engraving, probably by W. H. Gough, a Colt engraver and chief engraver at A.H. Fox.

When Keith reported on the No. 5 in the April 1929 issue of *American Rifleman*, he said:

To my notion this is the finest and best Colt in existence...For general excellence of grip, balance, sights, trigger and hammer, I do not think this gun can be improved upon.

A young reader, Bill Ruger, was very impressed with the improvements Keith and Croft had made to the Colt SAA, which influenced his line of single-action revolvers some 24 years later.

Among circles of big-bore sixgunners and Keith fans, the No. 5 is often discussed, but there are precious few facts or details about this one-of-a-kind sixgun. From 1928 through 1956 (when the .44 Magnum was introduced) Keith used the No.5 extensively, probably more than any of his other revolvers. In fact, it was worn so frequently that it had to be reblued three times! This



The author used the No. 5 on a successful Idaho mountain lion hunt, where the gun and cartridge performed perfectly.

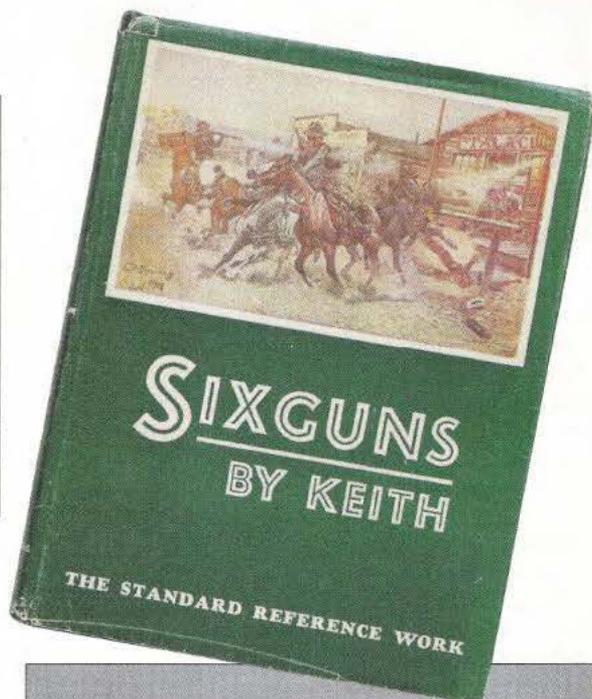
THE FABULOUS No. 5

beautiful sixgun, combined with his heavy handloads, convinced Keith of the merits of a heavy .44 sixgun and could be considered the parent gun and load of the .44 Magnum.

CLASSIC COLLABORATION

For more than 20 years I had been filing away notes, articles and photos to someday reproduce an exact copy of the No. 5. Finally, in the spring of 1999, exactly 100 years after Keith's birth, the timing seemed perfect. For more than a decade I had discussed the possibilities of this project with Hamilton Bowen of Bowen Classic Arms. He was excited to be involved, as he too had admired the gun and those who had crafted it. Furthermore, he considered the No.5 to be the most recognized custom revolver of the 20th century, and possibly the most significant.

Bowen specializes in a variety of custom revolver



The author is not alone in his opinion that the original No. 5 is the most significant custom revolver of the 20th century.

Keith began experimenting with the .44 Special in the 1920s to increase velocity and improve bullets, which ultimately influenced Smith & Wesson and Remington to develop the .44 Magnum. Left to right: .44 Special RN factory load, .44 Special handload with Keith-designed bullet, Keith-designed 250-grain cast bullet, .44 Magnum cartridge loaded with Keith bullet.



The No. 5 features a flattop frame and an adjustable rear sight (right). The front sight (left) is adjustable for elevation via a small screw in the rear of the base.

A LEGEND IN THE MAKING

To those who have been reading *Guns & Ammo* for more than 20 years, Elmer Keith needs no introduction. On the other hand, there is a new generation of shooters that may not be familiar with Keith's writing career and many contributions to the gun world, so a brief explanation seems appropriate.

Keith was born in Missouri on March 8, 1899, but his family moved to Montana when he was a small boy. This era was the final chapter of the American frontier and Keith's teachers were the old masters—Civil War veterans, Indian fighters, buffalo hunters, cowboys, gunfighters and lawmen.

In the 1920s he moved to western Idaho, where he met and married Loraine Randall. Soon after, the Keiths moved by horse-drawn wagon—using the famous old Oregon Trail along the Snake River—to Durkee, Oregon. They homesteaded a ranch near Lookout Mountain, where creeks were crystal clear and the air filled with the scent of high country sage and pines.

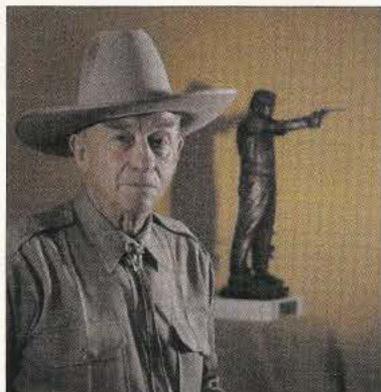
Although Keith had begun writing about guns and hunting as early as 1925 in *American Rifleman*, he was mainly a rancher. Deer and elk herds were weak in eastern Oregon at the time, and he yearned for better hunting opportunities. So in 1929 the Keith family moved to North Fork, Idaho, where he start guiding big-game hunters and anglers in the rugged Salmon River Wilderness Area.

In his spare time, Keith managed to write for virtually every outdoor and gun magazine published. Readers quickly realized Keith possessed a certain authority that only comes with extensive experience and sharp personal observation. His byline sold magazines and his work was always in high demand. He also managed to write 10 books on guns and hunting related topics, several of which are still in print.

In 1961 Petersen Publishing founder, Robert Petersen, and *Guns & Ammo* editor, Tom Siatos, made a trip to Idaho and offered Keith an exclusive position with G&A—a job he cherished until his death in 1984. In 1973, Keith was the first recipient of the "Outstanding American Handgunner Award" by an overwhelming vote.

While Keith is remembered primarily as a gunwriter, he was also a great experimenter and firearms designer, and contributed heavily to the world of sporting arms and cartridges. During the 1930s and '40s, he was involved in the development of several wildcats that influenced many of today's most popular rifle cartridges. He even helped design the Winchester Model 70.

Keith is probably best remembered for his role in getting the .44 Magnum introduced in 1956. Many others were involved in this project, but it was Keith who—for decades—had written articles urging ammo companies to introduce a modern .44 load. The finale came in 1953 when he spent a week at Remington and Smith & Wesson and wrung commitments from both firms to bring out a lengthened .44 Special case and a gun so chambered. The rest is history...



Elmer Keith, among his many other accomplishments, was the first Outstanding American Handgunner of the Year.

work, particularly caliber conversions. But he's also known for creating very high-grade custom revolvers displaying superb workmanship. His work is best described as modern technology and precision blended with Old World craftsmanship. Obviously, he was the right man for this job.

As of this writing, the original No. 5 is not available for study, but we had a couple of very lucky breaks with a set of never-before-published

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black and white photos showing many details of the revolver that could not be seen in books or magazines. Also, there was a grip tracing taken in 1973 by Dan Love that allowed us to duplicate the original grip frame perfectly. Without these two items, an exact duplicate would not have been possible.

I began by purchasing two frames—in the white—from United States Fire Arms Manufacturing Co. in SAA Flattop configuration. They are the straightest, finest quality SAA-style frames available today and preferred to all others. I purchased two because it seemed appropriate to create two No. 5s—a plain working version and a high-grade gun fully engraved with carved ivory stocks like the original.

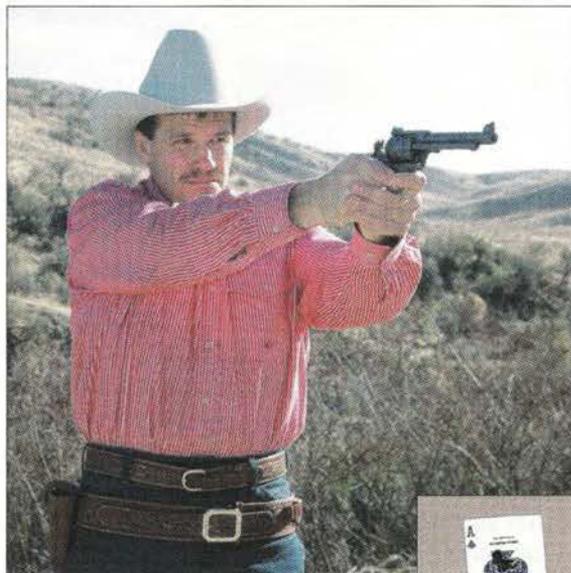
This project took more than a year to complete. Bowen masterfully welded the frame, shaped the top strap and grip frame, fitted a Douglas barrel and machined the sights from scratch. He also made the base pin and base pin latch. It was then ready for the specialized talents of several others.

Doug Turnbull roll-marked the barrel with proper vintage address and caliber lines. It was then ready for the Gough-style scroll engraving, which would be executed by master engraver Dan Love. Love was clearly the right man for the job, as he had known Keith and had handled and admired the original No. 5.

The elephant ivory grips were fitted and carved by

Paul Persinger, who crafts the finest ivory stocks I've ever seen. The Mexican emblem carved in the right panel is a work of art in itself.

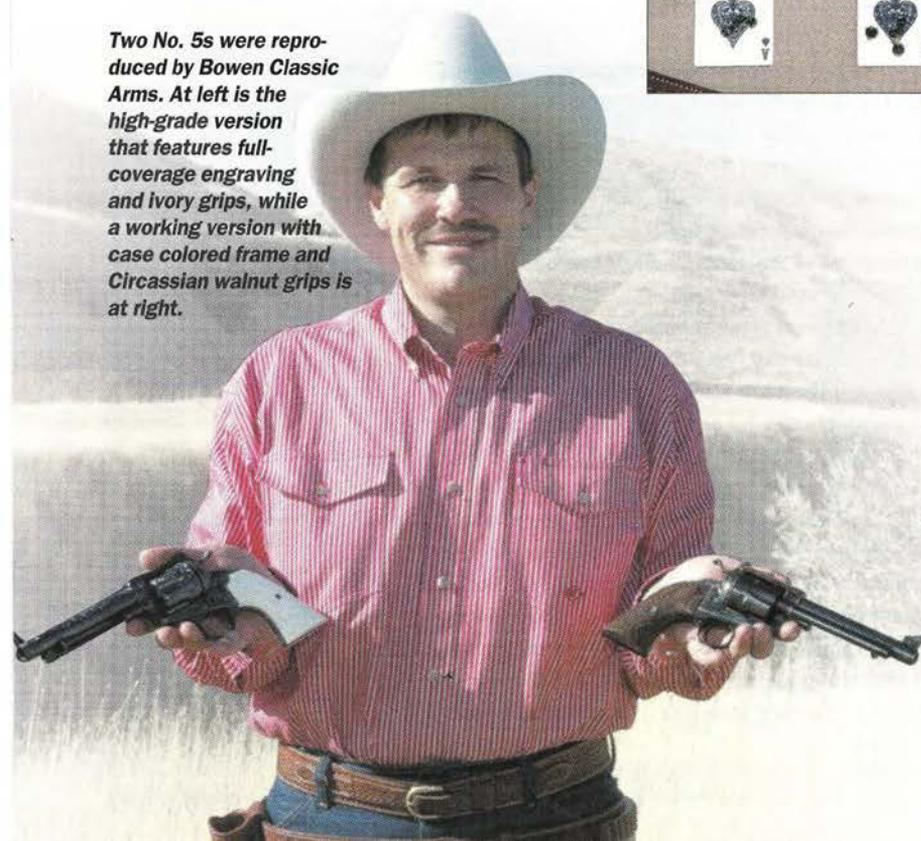
Finally, Doug Turnbull applied the final finish, which is a spectacular rust blueing. This produces a color and depth—particularly with



No matter how beautiful, Keith wouldn't have countenanced a gun that wouldn't shoot. Judging by these playing cards, he wouldn't have had to worry very much about the repro No. 5's performance.



Two No. 5s were reproduced by Bowen Classic Arms. At left is the high-grade version that features full-coverage engraving and ivory grips, while a working version with case colored frame and Circassian walnut grips is at right.



The hand-carved El Paso Saddlery holster and belt is the Model 1920 Threepersons. It's the author's favorite holster, as it carries the gun high, in line with the body and out of the way.



The base pin latch positively secures the base pin during the heavy recoil generated by Keith's hotrodded .44 Special handloads. It also pivots out of the way for easy removal of the base pin.

ivory grips—that can be gazed upon for hours.

With the team of craftsmen involved, I expected perfection. But the finished product was that. It's the finest sixgun I've ever seen. There is absolutely no doubt it is of finer quality—and shoots better—than the original.

MORE THAN JUST GOOD LOOKS

As to its handling characteristics, I would simply echo Keith's statement: For general excellence of grip, balance, sights, trigger and hammer, I do not think this gun can be improved upon. I may add that the grip frame and its angle allow for very natural pointing, and it handles recoil with ease.

Regarding the completed gun, Bowen says in his forthcoming book, *The Custom Revolver*:

"The grip screw was tightened and the gun lay on the bench pad whole for the first time. With trepidation, the author [Bowen] picked it up to have it fall to the hand perfectly, graceful as you please, as familiar as though he had held it a thousand times before."

This sixgun is such a work of art that it almost seems a shame to consider shooting it. On the other hand, it would be nothing short of criminal to leave it in a box, and I'm certain Keith would be disgusted at

the mere thought of relegating it to the showcase. So a black diamond target was set at 50 yards and a hand-load containing 250-grain Keith bullets was fired from a seated back-rested position. In spite of cold hands in Idaho winter weather, the first four shots went into less than 1½ inches and the fifth shot opened the group to two inches. I know the gun will do better.

In 1934 Keith used his No. 5 to take a record book mountain lion—and to save his own hide—so it seemed only appropriate to hunt big cats with the reproduction. I took a short drive to Idaho's gorgeous Sawtooth Mountains and joined Darl Allred for a sub-zero hunt in deep snow. On the second day we managed to take a nice cat, where the sixgun and Keith bullet performed perfectly.

Author's Note: I wish to thank those who assisted on this extensive project, for without them it would ever have come to completion.

KEITH NO. 5 PROJECT DIRECTORY

•Bowen Classic Arms Corp., Dept. GA, P.O. Box 67, Louisville, TN 37777; (865) 984-3583; www.bowenclassicarms.com

•Paul Persinger Ivory Grips, Dept. GA, 10441 Mackinaw St., El Paso, TX 79924; (915) 821-7541

•Doug Turnbull Restoration, Dept. GA, 6680 Rte. 5 & 20, Bloomfield, NY 14469; (716) 657-6338

•United States Fire Arms Mfg. Co., Dept. GA, 55 Van Dyke Ave., Hartford, CT 06106; (877) 227-6901; www.usfirearms.com

•Dan Love Engraving, Dept. GA, 6457 270th St., Arthur, IA 51431; (712) 367-2206

•Darl Allred/Sawtooth Wilderness Outfitters, Dept. GA, P.O. Box 81, Garden Valley, ID 83622; (208) 462-3416



A United States Firearms Mfg. Co. frame and cylinder in the white was the basis for the reproduction No. 5.