

THE GUNUN S&W SHOULD HAVE MADE (BUT WISELY DIDN'T)!

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The perfect packing pistol?

It's no secret that we're in the golden age of handguns...if you want it, it's for sale somewhere out there.

At least, usually.

Ocasionaly, however, there's an itch that a manufacturer just can't scratch, and that where the custom pistolsmith comes in. And nowhere is that itch more prevalent than with the star-crossed .44 Special cartridge.

The .44 Magnum's little brother is the most written-about, most talked-about, and most revered sixgun cartridge in history. No less than the twin sixgun saints Elmer Keith and Skeeter Skelton decried the .44 Specials as the ne plus ultra of revolver cartridges...accurate beyond any rational concept of accurate, able to be loaded 'way down ot 'way up, perfectly suited to the two finest fighting wheelguns ever made — the Colt Single Action Army and the S&W Triple-Lock.

Here's the catch, though — ever since Remington, S&W and Bill Ruger sucked it up and launched the .44 Magnum, the Special has been in steady eclipse. Every few years executives from one or more of the gun companies start reading the gun mags — or, these days, the Internet...say sixgunner.com — see eloquent pieces from the spirtual heirs of Keith and Skelton and suddenly say, "Hey! Let's bring out a new .44 Special; it'll sell like hotcakes!"



The Bowen Mountain Gun and it's M-21 big brother

They do and it does...to me, John Taffin, Clint Smith and a few hundred other True Believers. Then the Specials just lay there on the gunstore shelves, pining away in their metallic minds for the Good Ole Days while embarrassed executives try to explain their .44 Special mistake to the bean-counters.

That said, the .44 Special is everything Keith, Skelton, Taffin, etc. said it was — powerful, accurate and, for the reloader, forgiving. It has for years been my choice of a trail gun, usually in the form of an ultra-light S&W 296 butt-ugly snubby or 396 Ultra-Lite Mountain Gun.

Those two guns, while light (in the case of the 296, almost too light!) and accurate, are limited to 200-grain or less bullets, both for wear and tear on the Scandium-framed guns and the tendency of heavy bullets under sharp recoil to de-crimp themselves and risk locking the gun up.

The 200-grain limit, while not an issue in a self-defense gun, limits its use as a trail gun, since much of the .44 Special's sterling rep is based on heavier 250-grain Keith-style bullets. Yeah, you could always fish around the Internet for an S&W Model 24 big N-Frame .44 Special, vintage mid-1980s, but the problem is that the 24 is the same as the legendary "...most powerful handgun in the world and will blow your head clean off..." Model 29 .44 Magnum. If you're going to carry the weight, you might as well cart the Magnum version.



A couple of years ago, Clint Smith from THUNDER RANCH did the impossible, which is convince Smith & Wesson to go back in time and build a retro-gun, a 4-inch fixed-sight blue steel N-frame .44 Special, essentially a rebirth of the older classic Hand-Ejector .44 Specials of the early part of the 20th Century. I got one of the new .44 Specials, and I enjoyed shooting it...but I got that itch.

From a field/trail standpoint, the fixed sights were a disadvantage, as was the heavier N-frame. In the late 1990s, when S&W was cranking out a new gun every month, they produced a stainless steel 5-shot .44 Special on the slightly smaller, round butt/adjustable-sighted L-frame, dubbed the M-696. I thought this was about the coolest revolver I'd ever seen, but it took me a bit to hustle up the bucks to get one.

I liked it a lot; the three-inch full-underlugged barrel pointed and shot well for me, especially with 200-grain or so loads. Unfortunately, that was in my gun-trading days, and someone wanted that 696 more than I did. So I let it go (along with a pristine M-24 .44 Special Lew Horton custom 3-inch). The only thing I can claim is a bout of virulent "1911 fever" — I was shooting IPSC competition pretty heavy then, and the hardware was darned expensive!

After spending a bunch of time (and rounds) on the new M-21 N-frame and a couple of other of my .44 Specials, including the 3-inch stainless Taurus 441, another marketplace failure that is very close to a 696, I got a feel for why I'd been too willing to let the 696 go — it's a spec too big to be a real snubbie and a spec too small to be a great trail gun...sort of stuck betwix and between.

And that got me to thinking...what did I REALLY want in a .44 Special?

So I started outlining my ideal .44 Special packing pistol. I'd want an L-frame like the 696, but with a 4-inch barrel. Ideally, I wanted one of the "Mountain Gun" profile barrels — thinner and, to my hand, with better balance than the fatter standard 4-inchers. All steel so I'd have no problems with heavier loads...a decent sight picture...great trigger job...nice looking, in keeping with the earlier classic S&Ws.

I took this list to gunsmith Hamilton Bowen, who you've seen on SHOOTING GALLERY (and, yes, you can buy the DVD!), and he said, "No problem...just give me your credit card number and a box of parts."

Those parts included a M-686 .357 "donor gun," which would supply the frame and the Hogue grips; a M-696 5-shot cylinder and hand purchased from Brownell's and a .357 "Mountain Gun" barrel purchased directly from S&W.

Hamilton had the barrel rebored to .44 Special, fit the cylinder and hand to the donor frame, made sure the timing was on the money ("Sort of a pain," Hamilton said), did his signature flawless trigger job (SA 2 pounds; DA 11 pounds) on the gun, added a set of his "Rough Country" S&W front and rear sights and his signature lanyard ring, plus a whole series of Bowen "touches" — a chamfering the front of the cylinder, for example, to give the revolver a more classic look; roll marking the barrel ".44 S&W Special Ctg." in the older, smaller style.

The result is a gun that looks every bit as classic as the old S&Ws, shoots amazingly well with both heavy and light loads and is perfectly suited as a packing pistol. The tall front sight is pretty much on for heavier weight bullets...when I settle on my final regular load, I'll fit the sight accordingly. I can't argue with the accuracy...look at my 10-yard groups!

I've fired several hundred of the 240-grain flat point lead Winchester cowboy loads, plus about 50 200-grain Silver Tips and a selection of other Special loads I had squirreled away, all with pretty much equal excellent results. The Bowen "Mountain Guns" points as well or better as any revolver I own, and the balance in my hand is just about perfect. I love Bowen "Rough Country" sights, because it gives me a nice flat-blade "Bomar-esque" sighting plane.

This is a gun that really makes you want to shoot it! Yesterday on the range I was surprised that I ran out of .44 Specials, since I'd bought, like, 600 rounds with me. Where'd the time go?

I am going to get a prettied up set of Hogue wood grips for the Bowen...it deserves that. If I was going to keep it by the bedside, yes, we'd go for the CT LaserGrips, just like the ones on my M-296 snubbie!

Holsterwise, I'm having two made up — one a "Tequila Hunter" rig from Kirkpatrick, a leather crossdraw based on my friend Tequila's excellent cowboy competition rig, and the other a Kydex holster from Chris at Ready Tactical. I'll have a 12-round set of loops on the leather rig and several of Chris' world-class speedloader holsters for the plastic.

We're planning to put together a Tactical Revolver class to film for SHOOTING GALLERY, and I plan to alternate between the M-21 6-shot and the Bowen 5-shot just to get a feel how the two guns work under pressure...that'll make for a great show!

And thank you, Hamilton, for producing another classic sixgun!

Smith & Wesson

<http://www.smith-wesson.com/>

Bowen Classic Arms

<http://www.bowenclassicarms.com/>

Hogue Grips

<http://www.getgrip.com/>

Kirkpatrick Leather

<http://www.kirkpatrickleather.com/>

Ready Tactical

<http://pistolpacking.com/>

Crimson Trace LaserGrips

<http://www.crimsontrace.com/>

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