

THE SIXGUNNER

John Taffin



Bowen has replicated Keith's #5SAAs.



Photo: Ichiro Nagata

The Sixguns of Hamilton Bowen

Several days this past week were spent on "Holy Ground" helping to put the finishing touches on the newly opened Elmer Keith Museum at the Boise, Idaho Cabelas. It was my great privilege to be able to help place the firearms and also write the descriptions for each one. I chose the center for his #5SAA and his 7½" Colt .44 Specials, both custom sixguns built for Keith in the late 1920s-early 1930s. With these sixguns in my hands once again I marveled at the work performed by such artists as King, Houchins, Sedgley and O'Meara, all of whom practiced their craft between the two world wars. As good as the men were at what they did, the best sixgunsmiths whoever lived are alive and well and working today. At the top of the list is Hamilton Bowen.

High Artistry In Steel

Hamilton is as responsible as anyone for bringing custom revolvers

One of the hardest to shoot revolvers is the S&W J-frame so Bowen makes it easier with his Hi-Viz sights.

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The .50 G.I. SA is unique and handy. Grips are by Larry Caudill.

Photo: Ichiro Nagata

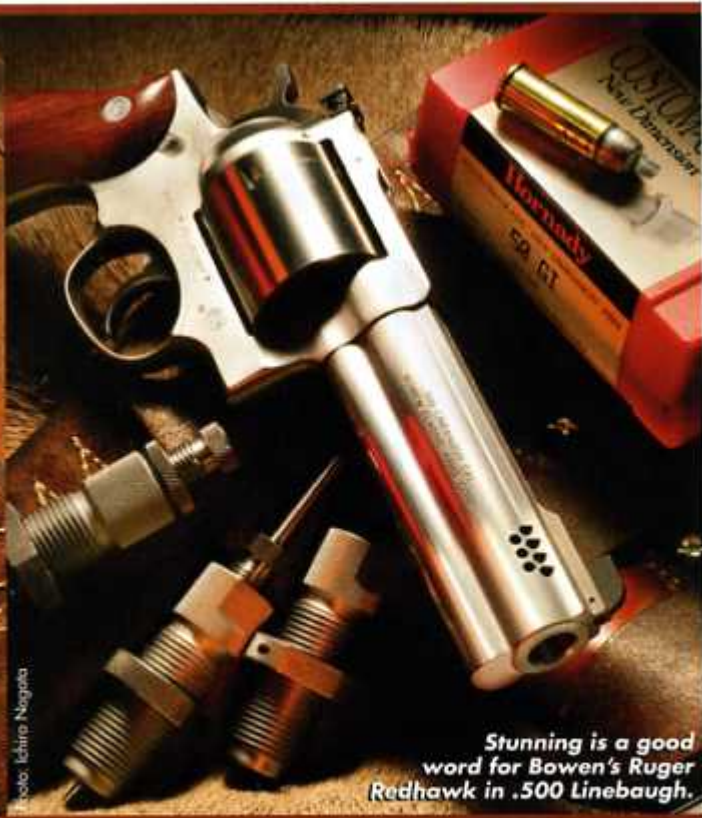
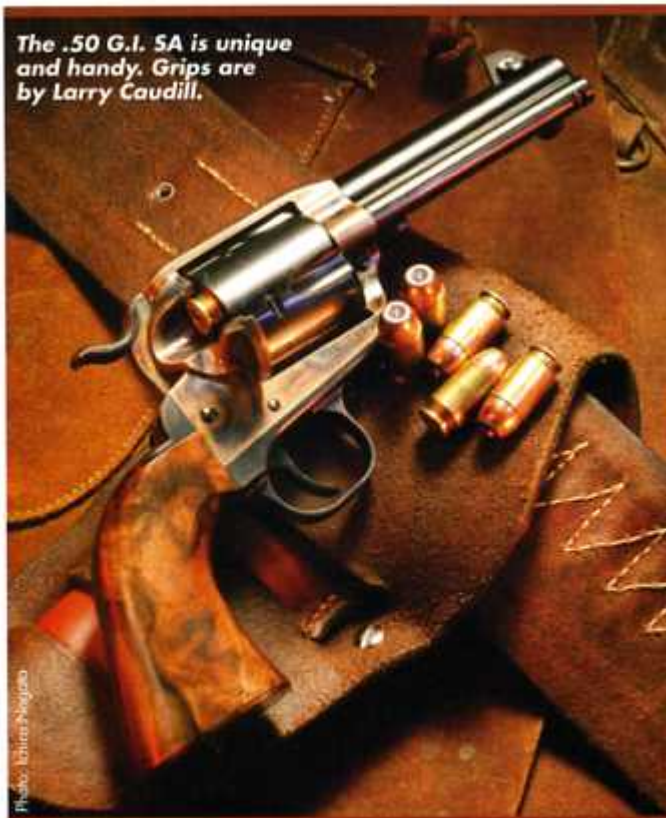


Photo: Ichiro Nagata

Stunning is a good word for Bowen's Ruger Redhawk in .500 Linebaugh.

to a high art form. In fact many of his creations would be right at home in an art museum. Hamilton says: "Our focus is on classic style revolvers, but with a contemporary twist, combining modern materials and engineering with traditional elegance. We offer an extensive complement of modifications ranging from the simple to sophisticated that will enhance the appearance, performance and value of your revolver." Many gunsmiths specialize on such things as 1911s or really big bore six-guns. Hamilton covers the gamut from the .25 Flea up to the .500 Linebaugh. Whether it's a \$125 action job or a custom, one-of-a-kind, totally unique \$15,000 sixgun — or anything in between — it's handled with style by Bowen Classic Arms.

Bowen offers unique services for customizing Ruger single action and



The .50 G.I. Bowen is a solid shooter.

BCA's .45 Colt Heavy Duty complete with ivory stocks by Roy Fishpaw.

double action revolvers; Colt Single Actions and the classic Smith & Wesson sixguns. He has also brought back the very sensible idea of equipping revolvers with lanyard rings. He routinely installs his uniquely designed

dovetail front sight on fixed-sighted revolvers, and has also designed and supplies heavy-duty adjustable rear sights, both target grade and field grade, to replace standard Ruger sights.

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Both of these .500 Linebaugh custom Rugers by BCA should exceptionally well with Grizzly Ammunition's 410 gr. load.

A Perfect Packin' Pistol should shoot perfectly; Bowen's custom Ruger .44 Special.

SIXGUNNER

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One of his latest innovations is a set of high visibility sights for S&W J-frames. As far as I know, we were the first team of sixgunner and sixgunsmith to collaborate on a .41 Special Colt Single Action Army nearly 20 years ago. In fact, the Colt he turned into a custom .41 for me along with a second Colt Single Action Army fitted with a custom cylinder and an 8½" barrel in .32-20 were the first Colts he had ever worked on. They have proven to be excellent sixguns.

Best Of The Best

In the timeframe between the two world wars the sixguns mostly used for custom conversions were Colts, both the Single Action Army and the New Service. Today sixgunsmiths have replaced the old Colts with Rugers, both the single action Blackhawk and the double action Redhawk. One of the slickest conversions on a Flat-Top or Old Model .357 Magnum is to turn it into the first big bore of the 20th century, a .44 Special. The .44 special on a Ruger Three-Screw .357 is just about the finest sixgun Ruger never produced. Over the past two decades I've com-

missioned Hamilton to do several .44 Special conversions, as well as one in .41 Special on Three Screw Ruger Blackhawks. The latest .44 Special, pictured exquisitely by Ichi, is not mine (sigh) but rather belongs to a customer of BCA who graciously allowed me to shoot it first. As one who has been on a lifelong quest for the Perfect Packin' Pistol, I can say flat-out this relatively compact, six-shot .44 Special need take a backseat to no other PPP. All of Hamilton sixguns are high art and this one may very well be the highest of the high, with the emphasis definitely on Perfect.

Bowen's mild .50 is one I would certainly label as Way Cool.

Starting with an Old Model Ruger .357 Blackhawk, Bowen goes all-out on this one. The cylinder is re-chambered to .44 Special, a new .44 barrel is fitted, the action is tuned and tightened with absolutely no play in the cylinder, all metal parts are highly polished with the frame and hammer being case hardened and the balance blued. Sights are all Bowen with one of his adjustable

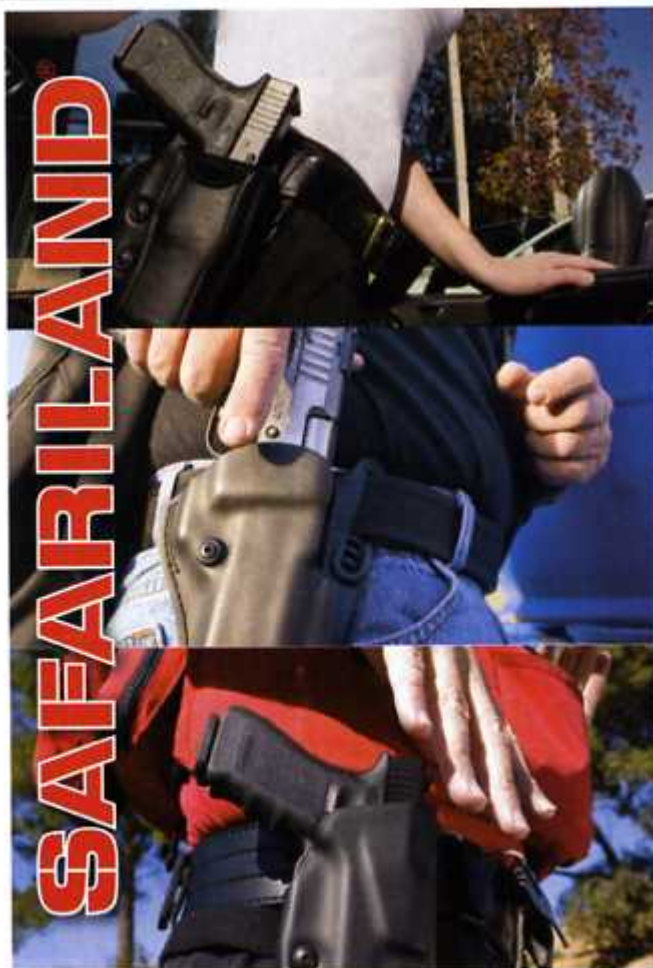
rear sights mated up with his front sight on a ramp.

The final touch is the fitting of a Power Custom steel grip frame. This allows the fitting of Colt-style one-piece grips which in this case are fancy walnut expertly crafted by the master gripmaker, Roy Fishpaw. This little sixgun shot well with every load tried including my handload of Lyman Keith bullet #429421, over 7.5 grs. of Power Pistol clocking out at 875 fps and grouping five shots in 1" at 20 yards. This is the real beauty of a custom .44 Special such as this one — accuracy combined with gentleness.

Cooler Of The Cool

While I dub great sixguns as candidates for Perfect Packin' Pistols, my friend, fellow Shootist, and creator of the Ashley Sight System, Ashley Emerson, uses "Cool" and "Way Cool" in describing sixguns. Ashley regularly shoots a Bowen five-shot .500 Linebaugh on a 4" Ruger Redhawk with full power loads. He can handle it, I can't. It is a wild .50 to be sure, however Bowen's mild .50 is one I would certainly label as Way Cool.

The advent of the Colt SAA-sized New Vaquero from Ruger opens many new possibilities for custom sixguns. Hamilton does a 4" lightweight conversion to the .50 GI (Guncrafter



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Industries) using a five-shot line-bored cylinder, Bisley hammer, Colt Sheriff's Model style front sight on a dovetail, scalloped receiver and loading gate to reduce weight. It features Doug Turnbull case hardening on frame and hammer, and tops off the whole package with beautifully crafted fancy walnut stocks by another high quality custom grip-maker, Larry Caudill. Another nice touch is the Colt-style "three screws" on the left side of the frame. You'd expect such a small sixgun to exhibit heavy felt recoil with 300 gr. bullets at 900 fps. Instead, its very easy to shoot and groups four shots into 1 1/4" at 20 yards.

.44 Way Cool

Another Way Cool five-shot big bore sixgun on the Ruger Vaquero by Bowen is the .44 Magnum. Starting with a stainless-steel New Vaquero, Hamilton tunes and tightens the action, installs a new barrel and line-bored custom cylinder which fully fills in the frame window, places the "three screws" on the left side of the frame, serrates the front sight blade to reduce glare, and installs a locking base pin. The same basic conversion is also available in a five-shot .45 Colt.

I found this little sixgun almost

addictive and spent quite a bit of time shooting five .44 Special and eight .44 Magnum loads through it. With its all steel construction and checkered factory rubber stocks it was much easier to control than expected. My handload consisting of the Cast Performance Bullet Co.'s 255 gr. bullet over 18.5 grs. of #2400 in Starline .44 Magnum brass clocks out at 1,300 fps and places four shots in 7/8" at 20 yards. Call it a Perfect Packin' Pistol or Way Cool, this is one fine sixgun.

Biggest Of The Big

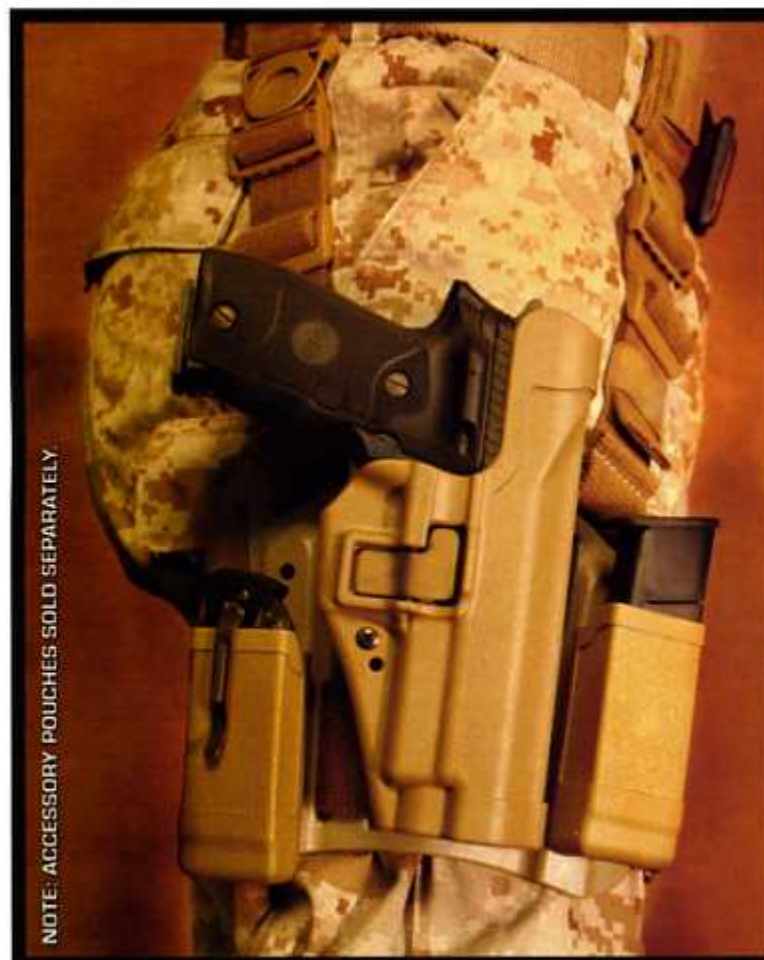
It wasn't too long ago when .45 was as large as it gets when it comes to sixguns, however we now have access to six .50 caliber versions. The lineup is the .50 AE, .50 GI, .500 Linebaugh, .500 Wyoming Express, .500 Maximum, and .500 S&W. The latter two .50s require large, heavy sixguns, while the first two are great choices for lightweight easy packin' sixguns. The .500 Linebaugh and .500 Wyoming Express fit right in between, making them perfect for standard sized sixguns.

Hamilton builds five-shot versions of the .500 Linebaugh on both the Ruger Redhawk and Bisley Model and sent along versions of both for testing and showcasing for our readers. The Redhawk .500 features a full-sized

five-shot cylinder, line-bored, and tightly fitted with no end play or side-to-side movement. A custom L-frame style heavy ribbed barrel with an integral compensator and very easy to see sights consisting of a Bowen heavy-duty Rough Country white outline adjustable rear sight matched up with a slanted black post front sight with a white bar inlaid in the face of the sight, round it out. The front sight is on a base and is of the interchangeable variety allowing the full range of different front sights.

The Bisley Model .500 features all the same attention to detail and sights as the Ruger Redhawk. Instead of stainless, it's blued with case hardened hammer and frame and fitted with an oversized base pin. The crowning touch is the custom barrel, which is octagonal instead of round. Octagonal barrels matched up with the flat top of the Ruger mainframe are especially attractive. Hamilton offers these barrels on several conversions in either 5 1/2" or 7 1/2" length. This little big, or big little sixgun is especially difficult for me to send back. Fortunately, or unfortunately, Hamilton trusts me to do just that very thing.

Both .500 sixguns were test-fired with Grizzly Ammunition's 410 gr. plain-based LFN bullet rated at 900 fps. This is not what you would call a hot load, but



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rather an easy to shoot and control big bore load. In the 5" Ruger Redhawk it clocks out at 900 fps over the PACT PC, grouping four shots in 3/4" at 20 yards, while the 5 1/2" Bisley Model does 945 fps and 5/8" respectively.

Piece De Resistance

I've saved what may be the "Way Coolest" for last. From 1926 to 1941 Smith & Wesson offered their pre-war Third Model Hand Ejector in .44 Special. The same basic sixgun was called the .38/44 Heavy Duty, which arrived in 1930 complete with an enclosed ejector rod housing and served as the platform for the .357 Magnum five years later. Today Bowen Classic Arms turns these pre-war style medium bore sixguns into a .45 Heavy Duty that Smith & Wesson should have made but rarely, if ever, did.

This little big, or big little sixgun is especially difficult for me to send back. Fortunately, or unfortunately, Hamilton trusts me to do just that very thing.

Hamilton corrects this by starting with a pre- or post-war .38/44, re-chambers the cylinder with the tight throats all too often lacking on .45 Colt revolvers, re-bores the original barrel, tunes and tightens the action, re-case colors the hammer and trigger, hand files and polishes the entire sixgun before re-bluing, properly marks the barrel, installs a serrated front sight, installs a period style lanyard ring, and then provides the perfect touch with ivory stocks by Roy Fishpaw.

Using my hand load of a 250 gr. RNFP bullet over 7.0 grs. of WW231 for 800 fps, this resurrected Hand Ejector places five shots in 7/8" at 20 Yards. If the Bisley Model is hard to return this one is nigh impossible.

The surface of Bowen Classic Arms has barely been scratched, however his Esteemed Editorship only allows me so much space. More information can be found at Hamilton's website. Hamilton both literally and figuratively has written the book on The Custom Revolver. It's also available on the Web site and is a wealth of information about custom sixguns.

For more info: Bowen Classic Arms, www.bowenclassicarms.com.

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