

# THE ULTIMATE OUTDOORSMAN

**The Smith & Wesson .38-44 Outdoorsman Was A .38 Special On The Big N-Frame. Hamilton Bowen Took This Magnificent Classic And Rechambered It To .45 Colt.**



By Roy Huntington  
Photos by Ichiro Nagata

**F**ew things in life are just right. Not “almost right” or “pretty close” or “well, I’d change that one part” but exactly, precisely correct. You’re looking at one of those very things.

It is a thing of beauty, grace and elegance called the .38-44 Outdoorsman, rechambered to .45 Colt but retaining the classic lines of this, the ultimate N-frame. The Outdoorsman is the most serious, most sensuous, most stirring of any model to ever exit the doors of 2100 Roosevelt Avenue. It is the fightingest revolver, if I may coin a term, ever conceived.

Hamilton Bowen, custom gunmaker extraordinaire, has elevated the Outdoorsman to a true combat weapon by delicately converting it from .38 Special to a big bore. Bowen kept those flowing lines, making a grand thing even grander. The touch of a file here, carefully applied polishing there and a deft hand on a lathe and mill combine to make the sum very much greater than the parts.

Roy Fishpaw, gripmaker to the gods, worked his magic with seasoned elephant ivory, crafting a set of Magna grips wherein even an experienced fingertip gets lost trying to find the seam between steel and ivory. They are one with the gun, as much a part of it as the deep, pre-war blue finish.

All of which is a minor miracle in and

of itself. This is a rare bird in an age of scandium and titanium. Bowen’s creation offers nothing “high-tech” whatsoever. If you can’t tell what is so tantalizing about the Outdoorsman just by looking, you might as well go clean your Glock because this article is not for you. Don’t forget to put your polymer wondernine back into its polymer holster while you’re at it, and pass this magazine along to someone with better taste, please.

## **First, Some History**

In the early 1930s, period gangsters like Pretty Boy Floyd, Ma Barker, John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde found the heavy gauge steel of the cars of the day turned their getaway vehicles into virtual armored cars. The standard police





Speed," it gave troopers a chance against those BARs and Thompsons. Well, sort of a chance.

There was no denying, however, that Smith had come up with something special indeed. The Outdoorsman, or .38-44 Heavy Duty as it was known, won the hearts of lawmen and sportsmen alike. I'm sure, too, it wasn't just for the fact it was a comfort to have those couple of pounds of steel in the hand at critical moments. It was a most handsome revolver and bespoke a quiet authority on the hip and in the hand. Confidence *can* be bought and Smith & Wesson sold it over-the-counter.

In its original guise, the .38-44 Outdoorsman was essentially a Third Model Hand-Ejector and was offered in a standard barrel length of 5". Special orders could be placed for a 4" or 6" barrel or a nickel finish. Except for World War II, production continued from the '30s until 1966. At some point the model designation was changed to the Model 23 and it came with adjustable sights.

Our project gun is no Model 1917 and, indeed, it is something that didn't

exist in this form in its heyday. While Smith & Wesson did build some fixed-sight .38-44 guns in .45 ACP and .44 Special, the .45 Colt never saw the light of day except in the rare custom gun.

This was one of those life long dream-gun deals. I've always admired the fixed sighted Smiths, particularly N-frames. The Model 58 didn't quite fill the need. The frame was right, but that fixed sight heavy barrel, sort of a "biggie-sized" Model 64, was too clunky for me—and, apparently, for a lot of other people too. Smith discontinued the Model 58.

Then came Bowen. The Tennessee gunsmith has made a nice business out of turning Model 58s into a version of an Outdoorsman by machining all the "clunk" out of that barrel and carefully recontouring all the bits and pieces. The large .41 Magnum-sized cylinder makes rechambering easy, but in my opinion it's not the real thing.

The slightly longer cylinder makes the action a bit heavier to pull. Imagine how a Model 67 in .38 Special feels in relation to a Model 66 in .357 Magnum. That slightly longer cylinder seems to slow things down during speed work.

Besides, why go to all that trouble when you can have the real thing?

I said that it's not a 1917 and I mean it. As nice as those revolvers might be, the

weaponry, a .38 Special M&P revolver, simply bounced its lead slugs off as the squeal of tires and thud-thud-thud of a Tommy gun spelled the end of another bank robbery. What to do?

S&W turned to their heritage and brought the classic Triple Lock into the 20th century by molding it into a fixed sight, heavy duty fighting handgun built to take a heavily loaded .38 Special, designed just for the purpose of taking on the gangsters. Precursor to the .357 Magnum, this new load sped a 158 gr. hardened lead roundnose bullet at an honest 1,175 fps, courtesy of Remington. Called the "Hi-

subtle contour changes between a 1917 and a .38-44 are the difference between a stamped out triggerguard and a machined steel one on your '03 Springfield. We're talking apples and oranges here, folks.

The gun shown here was gathering dust in a used gun display in a neighborhood gunshop. Immediately, its siren song came to me. A checkbook lightened by \$250 (a good deal, I thought) made me the proud owner and I wasted no time calling Bowen.

Bowen is known for his willingness to experiment with revolvers. I mean, this is a guy who 1917'd a Ruger Redhawk, complete with lanyard ring. He knew what I had up my sleeve. Bowen is the kind of guy who would figure out how to put a big block Chevy into a Yugo and it would look factory.

I was concerned about the barrel situation on the .38-44 since I didn't want to lose those wonderfully fluid lines. Mountain gun barrels were out, 1917 barrels weren't right and I wasn't up to a completely custom job.

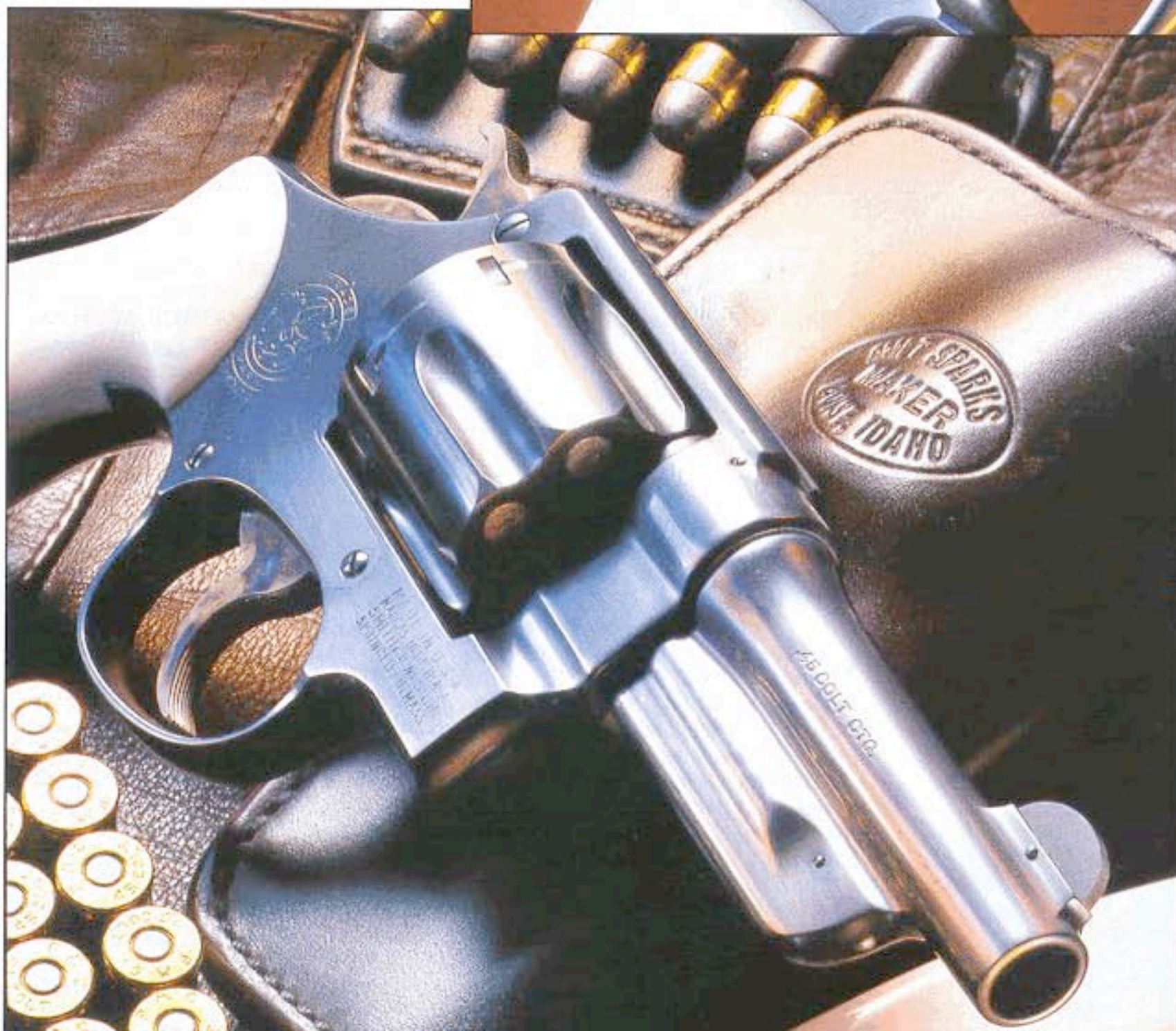
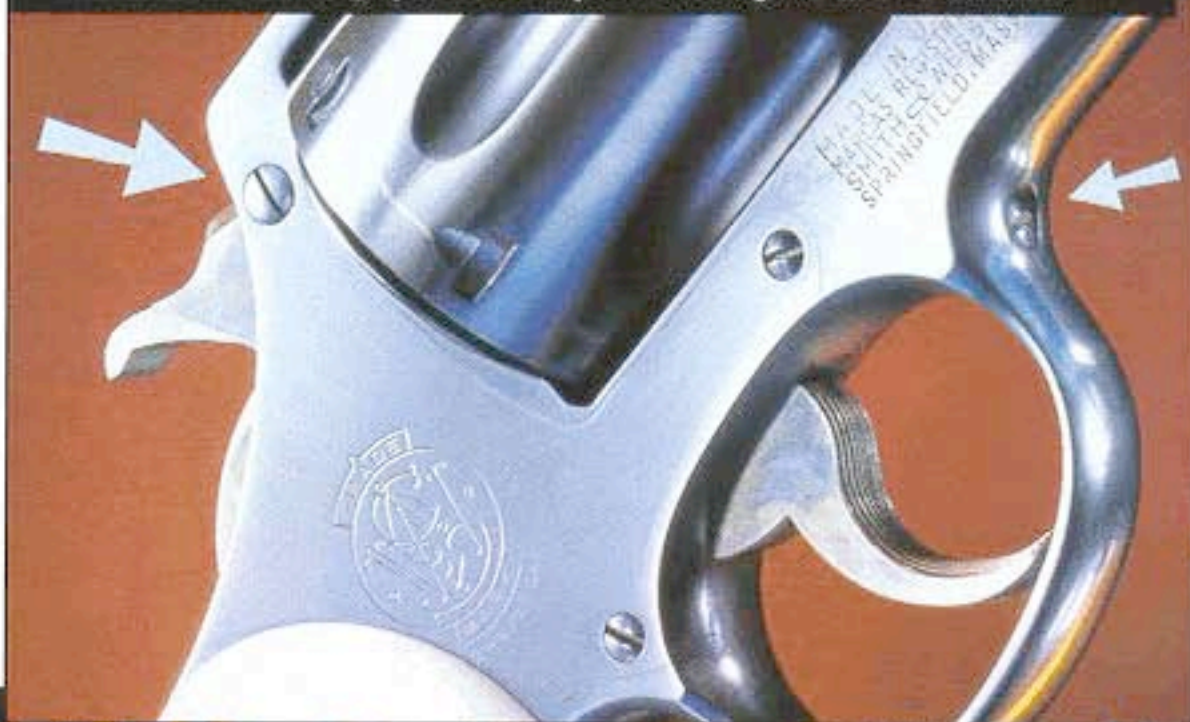
Bowen simply said, "Heck, let's rebores and re-rifle the existing barrel, take off the caliber stamp and turn it into a .45 Colt barrel." Indeed. Why not? Off

went the barrel to revolver Mecca.

There remained lots to do, however, because the old girl had seen lots of holster use, been banged around a glove compartment or two and had probably rested, not very well oiled, in a sock drawer for a long time.

Bowen put the talents of his shop to

**Indicated are the two additional screws on a "5 screw" Smith. The fifth is hidden under the grips. Current production guns are "3 screws."**





work with a hand polish to 600 grit finish, action work, a final blue that's deep enough to crawl into, a specially pinned front sight with serrations, case-hardened hammer and trigger and all the little touches it took to make it look, well, perfect. Old world craftsmanship in the new millennium. Imagine that.

From there the gun went off to Fishpaw, owner, operator and sole craftsman at Roy's Custom Grips. About the grips, there was not much discussion—ivory or no grips at all. Fishpaw is very careful about everything he does and he told me to be patient. I told him I was. Soon a short note informed me the grips were done and, as he said, "I think they turned out well and hope you feel the same when you see and feel them." I did.

Even Bowen phoned when he got the grips and gun back and said, "I've seen some seriously nice grips come from Roy's shop, but these are spectacular." I know. They were so beautiful and fit so well it almost hurt to think about it all. But I did anyway.

Thad Rybka, Jerry Haugen and Milt Sparks supplied some appropriate leather. Thad's for "adventuring," Jerry's for "serious social work" and the Spark's holster on the insane chance I'd ever want to use this work of art in a match.

### **At The Range**

Did I shoot it? Yes. Do I carry it? Yes, again. Is the beautiful bluing getting worn? Yes. Promise you won't hate me?

The slightly short cylinder means I have to watch the OAL of my .45 Colt loads. Longish factory loads might stick out just enough to catch on the forcing cone. It seems Black Hills cowboy loads fit the cylinder nicely so I had it regulated for them.

Recoil is mild; those beautiful grips fit just right and the overall impression I get when I shoot it is that I'm simply not worthy to own such a thing of grace and beauty.

It points naturally, feels slightly heavy in the hand and slips into and just as easily out of a well-worn piece of leather on the hip so as to make even the



## **THE CRAWFORD "KASPER"**

Pat and Wes Crawford, the father-son knife making team from Arkansas, are renowned for their superlative workmanship and savvy designs in the genre of "tactical folders." Usually specializing in no-nonsense materials like titanium, ATS-34 and G10, the Crawfords are also capable of creating some truly eye-popping blades featuring exotic handles and blades. In the example here, we see an ivory handled version of their "Kasper" model (named for knife expert Bob Kasper who designed it). In size, heft and form, the Kasper is a perfect mate to the Ultimate Outdoorsman, or any beefy revolver for that matter.

For a free catalog, contact Crawford Knives, 205 North Center, W. Memphis, AR 72301; phone: (870) 735-4632.

most stalwart Indiana Jones a happy man. I keep looking for an errant Middle Eastern swordsman.

Shall we bother with group sizes? First of all, who cares? Do they list 0 to 60 figures for a Rolls Royce? I don't think so. Suffice it to say, the .4525" chamber throats shoot everything with an air of forgiveness I find appealing. If that turbaned pig sticker was 25 yards away, I could probably shoot him in his right eye.

Recoil with the mild .45 Colt loads is like an old friend. Just enough of a bump to let you know this is no .38 Special, but not so ugly you hesitate to pull that long action through again. As a matter of fact, it's difficult to resist the urge.

Which brings up an interesting conversation I had. A Glockenspiel acquaintance of mine said, "Don't you feel at a disadvantage armed with that antique?"


I begged him to explain if he were joking or not, as I hadn't actually believed my ears. I finally had to explain that actually, no, I didn't feel I was at an untoward disadvantage and that if he would care to stand off a few yards I would shoot at him a bit until he got tired of it.

Okay, not really. Only kidding there. Didn't really say that. But I thought it.

Funny thing, big revolvers. Prior to its appearance, there was a certain level of confidence I could experience with only

one handgun. If you take an old pre-war commercial Colt 1911, one of those perfectly assembled, slightly blue-worn kind of guns, slap a magazine full of hardball into it, rack the slide and snick the safety on, you feel— no, you *know*— you have a friend in your hand.

Interestingly enough, this big Smith does the same thing. Load those fat .45 Colts into those cavernous holes, gently close the cylinder and hear it click into place and wrap your hand around those ivories and... guess what? Another capable friend in the hand. Is it all in my mind? I'm sure. But then again, isn't everything?

This combination of blue steel, case hardening, handwork and ivory is quite fetching and is somewhat minimalist in its final guise. There's not, as the classical composer once said, "too many notes." Many custom guns end up overwrought and porky, but in this case, as Bowen remarked, "When you start out with a pretty sexy gun going in, it doesn't take much to turn out a pretty luscious piece." Bowen's  modesty becomes him.

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