

With years of planning and design, plus the cost of more than one new automobile, the author and his team of firearms artisans have created what he considers the...

# WORLD'S ULTIMATE REVOLVER



This unique wheelgun's octagonal barrel features an elevation-adjustable front sight. Besides tasteful engraving, this classic-browned barrel has been fitted with a damascus sleeve. The gunmaker's name, load information and caliber/case length have been stamped onto this 5½-inch-long tube.

**R**



*Worked up from a Ruger Bisley, Seyfried's "Ultimate" revolver is truly an example of the gunmaker's art inside and out. This one-of-a-kind single action wears custom blue, browned and color case-hardened finishes; English scroll engraving and fossilized walrus ivory stocks scrimshawed with a saber-toothed tiger on one side and a huntress on the other. Internally, the lockwork has been reshaped, honed, stoned and rehardened where necessary for perfect functioning.*

**By Ross Seyfried**



*The author bagged this handsome Montana pronghorn at almost 150 yards with his Bowen "Ultimate" .475 five-shooter. Because of the freezing weather and open country, he considers it the toughest game shot he's ever made.*



**I** had studied and coveted Elmer Keith's No. 5 Colt for more than 20 years. It was an extraordinary handgun, everything he thought one should and could be. But that gun was his, with a cartridge and technology from his era. I decided to stop coveting his gun and to make my own ultimate handgun. The plan was simple: design and have made the very best handgun (by my yardstick) that ever existed on earth. Then I would pit it against the most difficult handgunning challenge I knew to prove its working qualities.

To understand the concept we must examine the word "best" by the British standard. It is very basic: when you make a best gun, no improvement is possible. The word definitely does *not* mean fancy; there is often a great gulf between fancy guns and good ones. American "gunsmiths" and buyers are too eager to equate ornamentation and price with quality. That is, our market is flooded with ordinary production revolvers, rifles and even pump shotguns covered with lavish engraving that are quite often billed as the "greatest gun ever made." Unfortunately

they forget to do anything to the arm itself, putting a million-dollar paint job on a Chevy. While this is okay if you want it, it does not fit the concept I was after. By contrast I once looked at an entire rack of double-barreled shotguns. Most were highly engraved, but the most expensive one of the lot was absolutely plain, without a stitch of ornamentation. I asked the maker of all of the guns, "Why does this one cost more than the beautiful ones?" He replied with great pride, "Sir, this one is beautiful on the *inside*." It was a competition live-bird gun, made for the highest-stake shooting game around.

So I began on a similar road to make a revolver that was beautiful on the inside, but then to make it beautiful on the outside as well. The first task was to test the concepts of grip, trigger, frame, barrel and cartridge with a similar but mostly "stock" gun. This revolver was very successful, both in taking game and in pointing out some errors that needed to be corrected. With two years of practice behind me, I commissioned Hamilton Bowen to outdo all of his past

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masterpieces. He eagerly accepted the challenge. As you watch this gun come together, with Bowen at the helm, I think it is interesting to keep in mind that he was rudely refused entrance into the American Custom Gunmakers Guild. The reason was that he worked on handguns. When I am finished I hope that among other things you will agree that this was a disservice to both the man and handguns!

The final gun needed a beginning. Where Keith started with a black-powder Colt Single Action, I would use a Ruger Bisley. The choice is not accidental. I liked the Keith No. 5, a cross-breed between the Single Action Army and Bisley Colts. Bill Ruger unquestionably studied this finest of all custom Colts before he made his "Bisley." The Ruger Bisley is incredibly close to the Keith/Sedgley masterpiece in grip, trigger, hammer and balance. Unlike the old Colt, however, the new Ruger frame is brutally strong. We have tried to hurt them with .475 and .500-bore cartridges that develop many times the

thrust of any reasonable round. With bulged and even blown cylinders the frames just smile at us. I won't say they are indestructible, but they are very close. So as a basic chassis I had the magic Keith No. 5 shape on a frame that no sane load could fluster.

Beyond mere steel we had some spiritual matters to attend to. Each Best

*Top: One of Bowen's original .475 Linebaugh revolvers was used to test the overall concept of Ross's "Ultimate" revolver before the final product was executed. Bottom: The inspiration for Seyfried's custom wheelgun was the late Elmer Keith's No. 5 Colt, made up decades ago from a Colt SAA.*

Quality Bowen revolver carries its own best quality serial number in addition to the frame number as it comes from the manufacturer. On inception of this gun I reserved BQSN 13, an apparently odd choice unless it is your lucky number. Coming from a fellow who was 13 on Friday the 13th and lived through it, the number makes a lot of sense. Things actually became a little spooky when I opened the box on the .44 Magnum that would undergo the transformation. The gun was shipped right from the warehouse, out of regular Ruger production, with only me knowing its purpose. Its number is 01313!

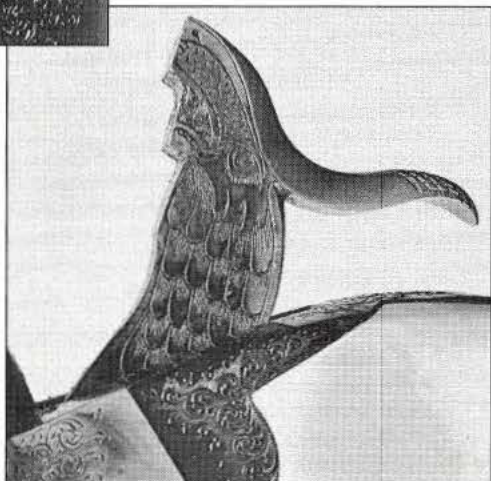
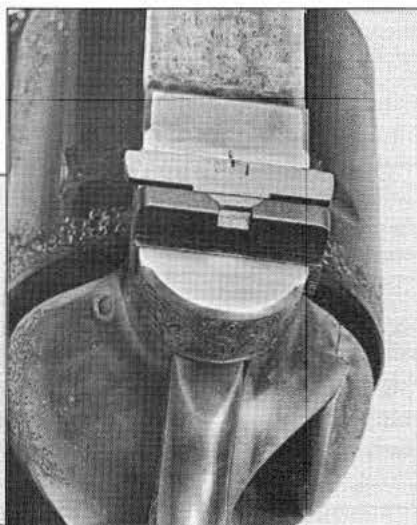
With the spirits well on our side the Bowen magic could begin. After stripping the gun to its bare components, it was measured inside and out to be sure there were no major flaws. Then it was turned over to a welder who used a TIG to fill up the "hole" in the top strap that held the original rear sight. Metal was added to provide a flat-top surface that would accommodate my sights. Then every surface of the frame and grip frame was stoned to perfection. Each screw was hand-fitted and every corner made razor sharp. What began as a reasonable Ruger fit and finish turned into surfaces that appeared to have grown together and been cut with a laser.

With every surface flat and true, and any warpage caused by the welding negated, precise measurements were taken to determine the distance from the center of the base pin to the center of the bore. Also the relationship between the locking bolt and bore was measured. These measurements would be transferred into matching dimensions on a cylinder that was individually made to fit this frame. In the end every chamber would be looking

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*Above: The gun's "lucky" serial number "013" is stamped below gunmaker Hamilton Bowen's Best Quality logo on the bottom of the revolver's frame in front of the trigger guard. Above right: This big-bore handgun has been equipped with a "fixed" rear sight that can be drifted for windage. The solid standing leaf zeroes a 435-gr. bullet at 50 yds., while the folding leaf is zeroed at 250 yds., or 50 yds. with 385-gr. bullets. Right: The original Ruger Bisley hammer was filed to the classic dolphin form, then engraved with a dragon, in the manner of some early double rifles.*



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straight down the bore. Now I had to decide on a cartridge.

The choice of which chambering was wide open, but there are really only two qualified applicants: the .45 Colt and .475 Linebaugh. The most logical choice was the .45. It was capable of great things, had readily available brass and a very nice attitude on firing. But against big, bad critters it was marginal and in that way would leave my ultimate revolver with a shortfall. The .475 would be evenly matched with Cape buffalo or the heaviest bear. I also felt that with some reverse load development it could be taught to behave nicely at the .44 Mag/.45 Colt power levels. That would make the cartridge equally suited to normal game. That "perfect" cylinder was chambered for the .475 and heat-treated for maximum toughness and strength.

This extraordinary frame would need an equally exceptional barrel to direct its bullets. Here Bowen selected Cliff La Bounty as the barrel maker. The hand-made, cut-rifled barrel was carefully lapped on completion. With one-turn-in-20-inch rifling and .465 x .475-inch land and groove measurement, it had the potential to be very accurate and to stabi-

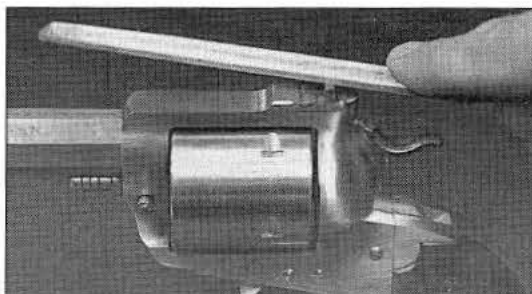
was the most miserable and mighty project he had taken on, but he handed me two 12-inch lengths of 1-inch-diameter finely figured damascus! They were literally the products of a forge, sweat, blood and tears...just like the old ones. Turning the rough stock in my lathe revealed a bold but beautifully figured pattern. Absolute perfection waiting for Bowen to fit over the rifled barrel, then to plane and file to an octagon shape. Along with the octagon barrel came a steel ejector rod housing, milled flat on the upper surface to perfectly match the corner on the octagon barrel.

The internal lockwork was to receive equal attention. First it was converted to match the five-shot cylinder. Then the mechanism was altered so that when the loading gate was open the cylinder would turn silently in either direction. With this I could reload, change loads or back up to an unfired chamber in total silence. A hardened bolt bearing block was fitted, eliminating any "play" between the frame and bolt. This in turn caused the gun to lock up dead solid, with no rotational movement in the cylinder. Other internal parts were reshaped, honed, stoned and rehardened where necessary. I specified a finished trigger pull of 40 ounces—no more, no less. That is the way it came, complete with a hidden, internal trigger stop.

With the barreled action and lockwork complete we added sights. Again I was drawing from the Keith Colts. I used a front sight that was adjustable for elevation and a rear sight that could be drifted for windage. I tried the sight system on the original experimental gun. It had proven to be surprisingly versatile. I could zero the standing leaf with 430-grain, 1,350-fps bullets at 50 yards. Then the folding sight would be filed so that the 430-grain loads were dead on at 250 yards. The same folding sight, by coincidence, would also zero 385-grain bullets with 1,500-fps velocity at 50 yards. The rear sights were regulated with the front sight in the middle of its range of adjustment. Thus, the finished sights would zero almost any load one could imagine, without the weakness and clutter of an ordinary adjustable rear sight.

The grip would retain the basic Ruger-Bisley shape, but would be slightly shortened and less flat on the sides. Bowen milled and stoned the flats of the grip frame so that he had perfect surfaces to scrape the grip slabs into. The grips had, of course, to be ivory. Again, not ordinary ivory, but fossilized walrus, thousands of years old. The material was hard and dense with beautiful color and character. It also had that

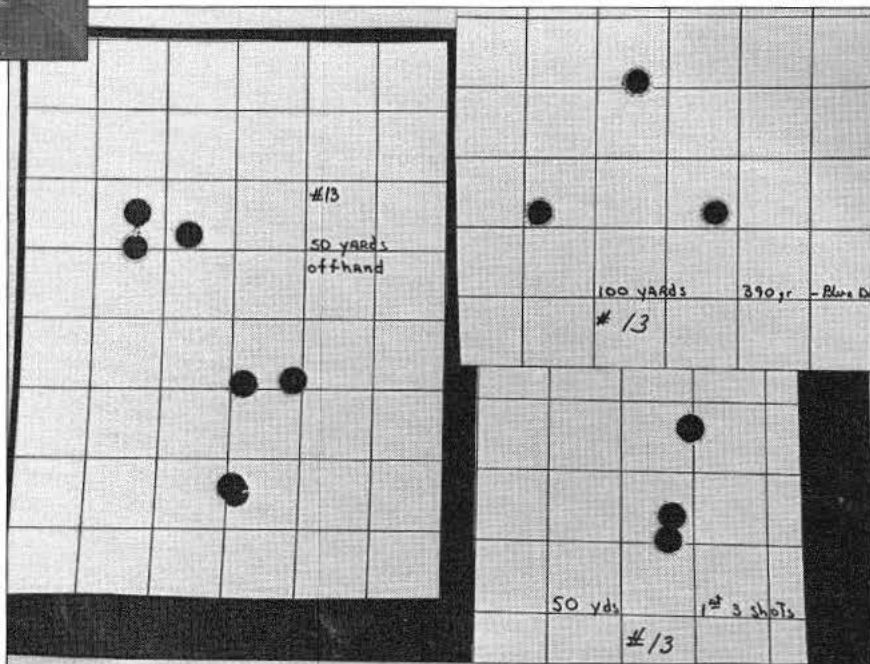
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**Left: Here's Ross's revolver "in the white" and before engraving, finishing and adding the ancient fossilized walrus ivory stocks. This five-shooter was fired in this condition to prove its accuracy capability and file the sights to final regulation. After initial firing, the rear sight was filed to its final height using the cut-and-try method, finally bringing the fixed sights to a perfect zero. The revolver proved accurate, as the results of these 50 and 100-yard targets illustrate. The author feels this may possibly be the most accurate revolver he's ever fired.**

lize the long, heavy 430-grain bullets on a 4-foot penetration path. The barrel would be 5½ inches long. Longer barrels would make hits easier, but they become ungainly. Shorter lengths would rob too much ballistic performance and not perfectly balance the grip and frame. The rifled tube itself was made from fine chrome-moly barrel steel, but the outside had to be damascus.

Yes, I suffer from a damascus fixation. No more beautiful arms have ever been made than those with finely figured damascus barrels. The idea here was to use the finest steel for strength and function and then to slip a damascus sleeve over the outside. Getting a damascus blank wasn't easy. I endured a year of procrastination from those who "would" make what I wanted. Finally, friend and knifemaker Steve Rollert came to the rescue. He said it



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matchless *feel* of ivory. It also meant that no modern beast would die, for reasons right or wrong, to make grips for the gun. My source in Alaska searched for a giant bull tusk. This would yield slabs thick enough so that we could use only "heart" ivory, discarding the bark and pithy center. The raw slabs were sent to MSSJ in Arizona for a stabilizing process that impregnates the ivory with resin, making it almost totally inert. No worry about cracking or checking in any climate. Then Mr. B., to my almost embarrassment, spent nearly 100 hours just making the grips. They are so perfect that a single hair will prevent them from fitting. It takes 15 minutes just to put them on the gun.

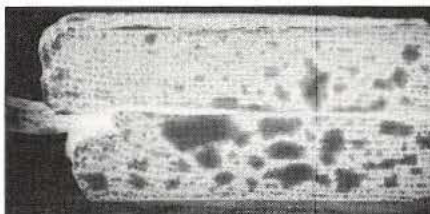
At this point I saw the gun for the first time, complete but unfinished "in-the-white." Its lines were perfection; drawing the hammer was a sensual experience. The act of cocking the hammer and feeling the cylinder lock brought to mind a pair of cobalt steel balls rolling together inside a velvet bag. The gun was aesthetically wonderful, but the moment of truth waited. Would it shoot?

There was no point in hedging—if it only handled one load it had to be the big one. I filled its cylinder with 430-grain LBT flatnose bullets driven by maximum charges of Win. 296. The loads that would break both shoulders on a buffalo, or floor an elephant. The sights were centered, but left "high" for filing to final zero. I fired its first round, standing at 50 yards. The trigger responded as if by mental command. The first bullet hit perfectly centered for windage, 6 inches high. The next two shots cut each other, 1½ inches below the first. I took two strokes with a file on top of the rear sight. The next three shots made a 1¼-inch triangle only 3 inches high. A few more licks with the file and the third group touched the top of the front sight. These three shots were ¾ inch on centers! I was having a good day, but the gun was shooting like it had eyes in the bullets. I had just fired three of the best off-hand 50-yard groups of my life...back to back. I moved to 100 yards, shot from kneeling and saw a group that almost scared me. Three inches, dead center on the aiming point. There were some very happy spirits haunting No. 13. It went back in its box and off to Bowen. He would disassemble it, check for any movement, then send its components to the four corners of the country. I had assembled a team of artists, then waited to make it look as good as it shot.

The ivory grips went to Anchorage,

Alaska, and the hands of Mary Mueller. To say that she is a master of the art of scrimshaw is an understatement. Along with her physical skills she creates the mental images that I wanted on the gun. A great saber-toothed cat would adorn the right panel. The left would be the canvas for one of Mary's very special talents. Here she would create a huntress, with eyes and even an attitude to match the big cat. To me she is "Ayla," from Gene Auel's, *Clan of the Cave Bear*.

While the ivory received its attention in the North, the metalwork went south to Texas for engraving. Jim Nixon is another master. While he can execute almost any kind of engraving, he understands that most elegant and subtle of all—fine English scroll. My instructions were simple: not to cover the gun, but to *finish* it. The results could not be better—smooth areas of bare steel set off by flowing patterns of finest scroll work. A special touch was to turn the "dolphin" form hammer, much like those



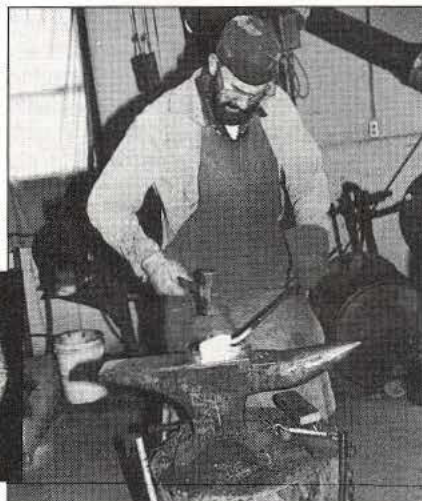
**Knifemaker Steve Rollert was commissioned to forge a damascus sleeve to be fitted over the Bowen revolver's barrel. Right: It was made in the old way, using alternating layers of soft iron and carbon steel in their raw state before being forged into the damascus barrel sleeve. Above: This is what the damascus steel looks like after several welding operations shown at nearly white-hot welding temperature.**

found on an 1860 double rifle, into a dragon. I used the barrel's surfaces to record what the gun actually was. The case length and load are there to keep some future generation from wondering.

With the engraving complete, the frame, trigger and hammer went to New York for yet another extraordinary treatment...real bone and charcoal color hardening. In itself the execution of fine, subtle English-type color is difficult, but doing it on a carbon steel frame is generally believed taboo. The normal process of heating to red-hot and quenching in water can make the tool steel brittle. Doug Turnbull's Creekside Gunshop has a very secret and special case-hardening talent. He can create a variety of color styles from the violent blues and purples found on American arms to the subtle blues, straws and browns of the best British workmen. And he can do so with or without the

normal surface hardening. Most importantly he can color the modern frames, like Rugers, without meaningful change in their Rockwell hardness.

Mr. B. blued the grip frame and cylinder while I received the frightening job of browning the barrel. I suppose it was good for me to experience some of the trepidation that I had caused others to endure. I had one shot at it, to turn metal to a rich iced-tea color, with a sharp contrast between the soft iron and the carbon steel that made up the layers of damascus and formed its beautiful pattern. I would have to apply 50 or more



coats of special acid solution, hand-carding the rust between each one. The surface had to remain perfectly smooth, the finish had to be translucent and the finest detail of the engraving had to be preserved. Here luck, rather than skill, prevailed.

The various parts again returned to Bowen for final assembly. The finished piece was all I had hoped and more. While it seems inappropriate to discuss the price of a masterpiece, some will wonder. Suffice to say there are several 1992 cars that carry a lower sticker. Madness, you say? Maybe not. In 50 years the car will at best be scrap iron by the pound. The No. 13 revolver, like a fine painting, will probably command several times its original price.

But now the time had arrived for it to become something more than high art. It was after all a modern spear, the tool of a hunter. I wanted to pit myself and No. 13 against a big, trophy pronghorn antelope buck. They are small targets, elusive and relatively tough for their size. Getting and making a shot on an old, wild buck would be a grand challenge—quite possibly the most difficult handgun game.

First I needed a very shootable load for the gun. The big .430s, or even the high-velocity 385-grain loads I normally use, are very intimidating to shoot. They would work on antelope but were unrec-

essarily powerful and difficult to apply.

While the No. 13 was away getting finished, I used the prototype gun to work up "reduced" loads. Blue Dot powder seemed to mate happily with a variety of bullet weights in the mid-velocity ranges. My goal was to make a load that used a 350-grain to 385-grain bullet at velocities between 1,000 and 1,300 fps. Virtually any bullet within that weight class, with charges of 17 to 20 grains of B.D., gave me uniform velocities and fine accuracy. I settled on a 390-grain LBT flatnose bullet. I cast them with wheelweight metal "sweetened" with 2 percent tin and lubed with SPG lube. This soft lubricant performs very well in cold temperatures. A charge of 20 grains of Blue Dot drove them at 1,246 fps and made tiny groups when I did my part. While recoil was substantial, it was very comfortable to shoot. I could shoot them from prone or any other position with minimal muscle tension. The bullets wouldn't expand, but they didn't have to be effective. The nose on these .475s is larger than the front surface of most bullets after they

have expanded. The penetration of even these reduced loads would be outstanding. It would probably take two antelope, lengthwise, to slow one down.

With a great gun and load I needed some antelope hunting of similar quality. That existed also, with Keith Atcheson in Sand Springs, Montana. A year earlier I hunted the same district with a rifle. I turned down several great bucks at less than 200 yards and then took a B&C-sized fellow at very short range. I was certain that the combination of antelope numbers, trophy quality and broken terrain would give me a chance. No. 13 was zeroed precisely at 100 yards. I practiced daily, shooting at 8-inch steel plates from 75 to 150 yards, reaching a state where I mentally kicked myself when I missed. But I also knew that there was a big difference between a target and game. The difficulty increases disproportionately when you put hair on the target. I was probably capable of long hits but really wanted a 50-yard shot.

I arrived in Montana just three days behind a winter that came a month early. My greeting was 5 degrees, wind-driven snow and antelope that had migrated to their winter ranges. Mother Nature had pitched a curve into the difficulty factor. Now instead of hunting little scattered bands, or best of all old lone bucks, I was going to try to stalk herds of 200 or more. The other hunters in camp, armed with long-range rifles, were having trouble getting close enough for a shot. It was interesting to watch these other fellows get involved in my madness. They would return each evening in the dark, slightly frozen and with genuine interest in my—or rather No. 13's—success. They had all fallen in love with the lady as well. "Did you get one?" "No." "Did you shoot?" "No." The antelope were beating me so badly that it almost looked impossible.

Fortunately I wasn't alone. I was hunting with Bill Drew, one of Keith's guides and one of the most finished handgun shots I have met. Bill grew up on the ranches we were hunting and knew the country like the back of his hand. He also knew about revolvers and what it took to take game with them. Only a week earlier Bill whacked a big 15-inch buck with his stainless Ruger Super Blackhawk. Two hits for two shots at about 140 yards in a stiff wind. He followed that by dumping a good 4-point mule deer buck with a single shot at 125 paces. He creeps around the Montana plains like a leopard, taking game and varmints almost at will.

The guys in camp had suggested that if I would shoot, my odds of success would improve greatly. By the third day I had actually drawn the hammer only to have the buck figure me out and

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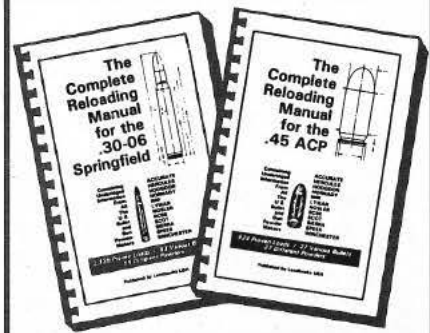
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tear off with a bleat at the last moment. On the fourth morning things went a little better. We found a "little" band of about 80 head feeding across a deep coulee. They bedded in a flat, behind a low rise, offering some hope of a stalk. The deep cut almost put us within shot. I crawled the last 60 yards, using a single tuft of grass for cover. The herd knew we were there but could not define us as an enemy. Their curiosity held them while I looked the bucks over. One buck stood out among the 15 or more trophies in the herd. The closest antelope were only 80 yards away, but the big fellow was on the back side of the bunch. Using the best visibility I had through the hat-sized clump of cover I judged the shot to be just short of 200 yards. I fired from prone, with the front sight touching the top of his shoulder and just a tweak of front sight up over the rear. The bullet went *right there*. The shot was actually 185 yards. I had misjudged and given him 6 inches too much elevation. On the plus side the gun had delivered the bullet as if it were a laser, just missing the hair on top of his shoulder.

We played with that band for the rest of the day. They really weren't spooked, having never seen us. Late in the afternoon they bedded down again, with a big slab of rock downwind. We made a long stalk, getting to the rock, with the buck still bedded 75 yards away. But with the clairvoyance of antelope they streaked away, warned by something before I had tried to shoot. This time the buck stopped far out on the plain. Bill and I had a quick agreement on 250 yards. I flipped up the leaf, centered his shoulder and squeezed off the shot. As the hammer fell I realized I had ignored the strong wind. The bullet whistled a foot in front of his chest, dead on, but my judgment error had failed the great little gun again. Two misses, even honest ones on tough shots, were playing on my confidence. I was beginning to wonder if I would be able to take a good buck this fall.

The following morning the weather was more evil than ever, with more or less blizzard conditions. We entertained ourselves, from the comfort of our 4-wheel blind, by watching Jack Atcheson Sr. lie on the plains behind a sage bush waiting for a herd to feed past him. When we assumed he had frozen to death we heard his rifle bark and the bullet hit. He had clipped a good buck at 300 yards. It was fun to watch, but it didn't give one much hope of getting a pistol shot.

We left the show and worked the verge of some hills where they met the plain. We could look at thousands of antelope on that plain, but they kept the distance at about 600 yards. Our only hope was to find a buck in that broken ground. The luck and skill it took to see him still amazes me. Bill was puzzling on something "out of place" below the big mesa, some 500 yards away. As the visibility varied with the wind, Bill had seen a black stick appear and vanish again. The problem was, there are no black sticks...it had to be antelope horn. We made a mile-long circuit, downwind, using two small moun-

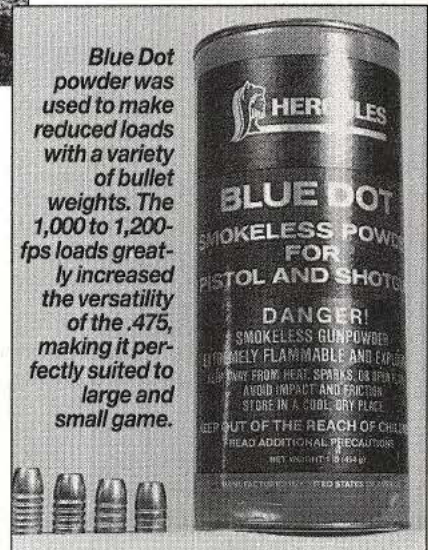


tains as cover. This put us in a position above and just on the edge of the wind from where the "stick" should be. We crawled, using a hand-held tuft of sage to screen our faces, to the edge of the drop-off. Below we could see two modest bucks, but certainly not the "stick" Bill had seen. We dropped below the hill crest again and moved another 50 yards to the left, cutting the wind even more closely. One whiff of our scent and the antelope would be gone. We crawled like badgers, now nearly in full view of ten antelope, but without a big buck in sight. I summoned my courage and moved again, crawling 15 yards to my right down a small chute, using the last bit of sage on the hill as cover. As I nosed over the rock, looking through the sage I saw him. Or rather his horns. He was bedded down either facing at or directly away from me. The driven snow had completely plastered over him. The buck was a white bump with horns sticking out. They had me pinned down; several antelope were looking in my direction. By now they should have been distant streaks, but the blizzard was creating a distraction giving me a few precious seconds to make a shot. I couldn't actually get a full view, but had to rely on range estimation through the sage.

At my very best guess it was a strong 125 yards and time to shoot. I poked the gun through the brush, focused on the sights and swore as the target totally vanished. I was trying to shoot a white bump on a white background in a snow-storm. Every second counted. They

would run soon, and through the thin Bob Allen shooting gloves the 0-degree wind was quickly numbing my hands. I tried again, with a slightly different technique. I leveled the sights beside the buck, then focused on and clearly defined the bump that represented his body and moved the sights onto the target. The last act was to refocus the sights to perfection, believe the target was under them and press the trigger. The big bullet slapped home. The buck jumped out of the snow, ran 15 yards and fell over. The range was almost 150 yards and the buck had been facing me.

*The real test of a hunting arm is, of course, in the game fields. In order to christen "No. 13" properly, Ross ventured to the frozen, windswept plains of Montana. In this vast, open country, Ross pitted his skills and his "ultimate" revolver against the wary pronghorn and mule deer. Although he felt capable of shooting at a much greater range, he had hoped for a 50-yard shot.*



The bullet hit low in his chest, exited behind his sternum, plowed a foot of ground and bounced somewhere across Montana. It was the toughest game shot I have ever made.

A few days later, after a long stalk I centered the shoulders on a mule deer at 70 yards, offhand. The bullet whistled through him like Swiss cheese and had him on the ground, finished less than 5 seconds after the hit. I probably won't hunt with this gun again. It is far too nice to risk any wear. It has nothing more to prove except to those who doubt what a grand thing a handgun can be. No. 13 represents the pinnacle of the modern handgun. While few will care to recreate it in totality, the basic design and concept are there for those who want it.