

Exclusive Web Extra: The Perfect Mountain Revolver?

An 'Enhanced' S&W Model 29

By Hamilton S. Bowen



Hamilton's "Perfect" Mountain Gun! Note the attractive "skinny" barrel and Magna grips.

The grand old Smith & Wesson M29 revolver was the first and arguably the most important big-bore, hi-performance revolver ever made. Until it arrived, there weren't really any revolvers and munitions out there for serious sportsmen. Over 50 years later, the gun and cartridge combination is still out there doing the Lord's work. Oh sure, many and more powerful revolvers and cartridges have arrived since 1956, but none will ever supplant the classic M29 in the hearts of True Believers.

Smith & Wesson hasn't been sitting on its hands all these years and has introduced numerous variations on the first M29 that have enlarged upon the basic theme. In 1978 the introduction of the stainless M629, nothing more than a stainless M29, teased the public. The M629-2 saw heat-treated yokes, the M629-3s added the longer stop notch, the anti-recoil bolt lock and then the M629-4 saw the addition of the "drill and tap" frames with their round-tang rear sights. The dash-suffixes in Smith & Wesson model parlance denote engineering changes to the basic models.

Along the way, Smith & Wesson added two significant models of particular interest to outdoorsmen, the M629-2 Mountain Revolver and the M329 PD. The original Mountain Revolver (subsequent versions were referred to as "Mountain Guns") represented a departure for the Springfield firm, with the tapered, sprightly 4" barrel reminiscent of the graceful M27s. Upping the ante, the M329PD was a radical leap forward in contemporary revolver engineering with its scandium frame, titanium cylinder and airy handling.



Square butts offer more control and use ability over the standard fare round-butt grip common today.



A subtle hint of contour at the junction of frame and barrel adds measurably to the lines.

Dum-De-Dum-Dum

But an ominous trend surfaced in the M629 models starting with the Mountain Revolver in 1989 — round-butt grip frames. Smith & Wesson design engineers evidently got it into their heads they needed smaller grip frames to accommodate a more flexible grip design for more shooters. Fair enough, but when round-butt grip frames are fitted with the smaller wood grips some of us prefer, they are an abomination and antithetical to fine handling in a revolver — at least to my paws. In time, this plague would infect nearly the entire product line of the immortal Springfield firm.

The loss of heel material causes a couple of problems and makes shooting well in field positions problematic. The heel gives your hand yet another (and critical) memory point enabling you to grip the gun more consistently from shot to shot, vital to good accuracy. More importantly, the heel helps prevent the gun from pivoting in the hand which, in turn, prevents muzzle droop, a leading cause of vertical shot stringing when firing offhand.

For a serious field gun, where concealability is not an issue, these are serious flaws. These guns were not meant to be deployed at shooting ranges or off rests, but by hunters who must shoot from improvised rests, or off their own hind legs without any artificial aids, as the gods intended.

The factory realized this and tried to offset the problem by going to rubber grips. While I fancy the Hogue

grips on some guns, there is no substitute for a nicely fitted set of wood grips which didn't come out of a mold. Molds simply lock into place a set of specs and shapes that might not suit every paw or application. True enough, custom wood grips can overcome some of the sins of round-butt grip frames, but not all.

Yes it is possible to wrap a section of wood around the heel to create the external contours of a square-butt gun but this, in turn, causes two new problems. There is a thin section in the grip panels which is prone to break, and leaves a rough transition point from wood to metal — which is prone to grate on your hide. Like any problem, if you throw enough time and money at it, you can solve it. The solution, seen on the occasional pre-war I-frame S&W, is to cut a step in the lower part of the round-butt back strap so that a thicker section of wood can remain. With proper shaping and blending, it is an elegant cure. It's also extremely difficult to execute well and would leave even the most seasoned custom grip maker screaming and running for the nearest exit. So, what to do?



The "perfect" Mountain Gun (bottom) descended from the M29 (top), the factory Mountain Gun and the M329 PD

The Obvious

Luckily, like many shooters, your obt. svt. has a pretty firm grasp of the obvious and a simple solution offered itself. Why not make a square-butt Mountain Revolver? Some years back, we (Bowen Classic Arms Corp.) had converted a .44 Mtn. Gun to .45 Colt and added a standard target-style M629 barrel to the gun, leaving an orphan .44 Mtn. Gun barrel in the used parts hopper. No trouble to round up a garden-variety M629, screw on a barrel and live happily ever after. Well, not quite.

The M629 was introduced back when M29s were falling prey to heavy use in the shooting field and new-fangled heavy-bullet ammo. The stainless guns weren't really any harder than the blue ones in terms of durability. But, along about the "-4" variation, Smith & Wesson had combined all of the improvements — heat-treated yokes, anti-recoil lockwork, deeper locking notches, etc. — that brought the N-frame .44 into the Twentieth Century and made it a much longer-lived gun.

Alas, round-butt grip frames also started creeping in, and by the "-5" models were largely standard fare. The trick was to find a M629-4 in the narrow production window where it was manufactured with the adult-

sized grip frame. So, the hunt was on. In due course, a likely victim turned up and work began.

The original barrel was removed and the Mountain Gun tube installed. These barrels are not always available at the Smith & Wesson parts department so some scrounging may be in order to find one. The M629-4 cylinder needed the black powder cylinder chamfer applied, a feature brought back with the Mountain Revolvers. It is a bit of subtle refinement harkening back to the black powder era and was probably devised to help keep powder fouling from stalling a gun. It certainly helps preserve your leather by breaking the sharp edges at the front of the cylinder.



The Garrett "Defender" load with its 310 gr. cast bullet trundling along at 1050 fps is still a formidable load compared to the usual 240 gr. JSP loading.

Tid-Bits

Many older adjustable-sight Smith & Wesson revolvers fitted with the skinny-rib barrels — such as the M15s, M24s, M27s and others — have a couple of small bevel cuts on the nose of the receiver which make for a much more visually pleasing transition from the receiver top strap to barrel rib. While the un-beveled top straps look fine with the wide-rib, target-style barrels, their use with the slender ribs on the lighter barrels looks, to my eyes, unfinished and unrefined. While the production Mountain Revolvers and Guns don't have this feature, we were at liberty to do as we pleased and added this improvement.

Fitting a white-line front sight blade, a sop to aging eyes, was the only other significant modification. Most S&Ws have respectable trigger pulls and actions right out of the box, especially the late-model guns but, like most, this one still stood to benefit from the effort and was duly tuned.

The combination of square-butt and light-weight barrel yield appreciably better handling, and I can use traditional wood grips in most any style. Not as light as the glamorous M329, it is a far more comfortable gun to shoot, especially with 300 gr. loads that tend to find their way into the chambers. The Garrett 310 Defender load is especially well-suited to this gun with its lower velocity. Not much that roams around East Tennessee farms is likely to survive a solid hit.

With the magna-style wood grips on the gun, it isn't fun to shoot extensively with these loads, but the gun

handles so much better with Keith Brown's grips I can live with that. While this is a serious working gun, it just doesn't have that much real work to do and a box of 50 Defender cartridges goes a long way. For fun, .44 Special cast bullet loads are the usual fare.

While not a terribly significant piece of work, this homemade Mountain Revolver is now exactly as I wanted it. I now have a light, fine-handling, rugged working gun, an unobtrusive companion for roaming about the farm. Other than the barrel installation, which any competent gunsmith can do, there is nothing to it. But, sometimes, the simplest jobs turn out to be the most satisfying. I'd encourage you to plan your own version of your perfect mountain gun.



In Thad Rybka's handsome holster, the gun rides securely and unobtrusively



Even though it is not engraved, nobody need be ashamed of a blue Mountain gun at a bar-be-que when stored in lovely carved Rybka leather.

For more info: Keith Brown Grips, kbgrips@classiccarvedgrips.com; Paul Persinger (Ivory grips), (915) 821-7541; Thad Rybka (holsters), 2050 Canoe Creek Road, Springville, AL 35146; Garrett Cartridge, www.americanhandgunner.com/garrettcartridge