

THESE OLD SIX GUNS

by Paul W Abel

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During my stay on this earth, and especially during the past sixty years, I have had the privilege and the opportunity to own a pretty good number of handguns. My Great Grandfather gave my first real guns to me. He gave me three firearms: I became the proud owner of an H & R .410, a Crescent Arms pump 22 LR, which was a Remington clone, and an H & R nine shot, four inch barreled 22-caliber revolver. To load or unload the revolver you had to push a little lever located under the barrel on the front of the gun's frame and hold it in while you removed the cylinder pin. The cylinder then could be removed from the frame and you used the same pin to punch out the spent cartridges. It had a brushed or dipped nickel-plated finish and black hard rubber grips. It shot very well. He made me a holster for the pistol out of an old cowboy boot top. I think I was eight years old when I took possession of that pistol. I sure got a lot of training with those guns for he was a pretty good shooting coach. I still have the revolver along with both the rifle and shotgun, but the handgun's holster didn't make it this long.

Since that period in my life, good handguns have occupied space on my hip almost constantly and still do. For almost forty years a revolver, mostly a Smith & Wesson model 19 chambered in .357 magnum saw me through some pretty tight situations. I have carried other Smith & Wesson revolvers in other calibers from time to time. I have carried: Smith's Military & Police .38 Specials, the 38-44 Outdoorsman, the S&W model 29 in .44 magnum or .44 special, and on other occasions I carried a Smith revolver in 45 ACP or 45 Long Colt. Sometimes I carried a semi-automatic, a Colt, as a primary pistol loaded with 45 ACP's. They all worked well but I always seemed to come back to the "K" framed model 19 revolvers.

I usually carried a backup handgun. More often than not that was another model 19 in a home spun shoulder rig under my jacket. A Colt Combat Commander in 45 ACP was another gun that served that purpose very well. I was lucky in the fact that I never did have to bring the Commander into action during my almost 40 years in Law Enforcement. It was a great comfort knowing that either backup gun was there. The second model 19 always had a little advantage over the 45 as it used the same ammunition as the primary. On some rare occasions I carried a little Model 36, S&W Chief in 38 special as the backup in the summer time in an ankle holster inside my right boot or in a hidden inside the pants holster. I used the heavier calibers most of the time though because if you had to use the back up, the chips were really down and you were in real deep stuff. At that occurrence I really wanted something equal to or better than the primary handgun. I guess I was lucky in the fact that the primary model 19 usually did the trick without having to use the backups. A good backup pistol can be of great comfort if the going gets rough.

In 1959 my good friend the late Captain Dan Combs of the Oklahoma Highway Patrol was putting on a large number of shooting exhibitions around the state per year for schools, civic groups, and law enforcement, using both live and blank fire ammunition. The programs are correlated with gun and traffic safety, drug and alcohol abuse, and anti-violence in the schools with a little country, mom, and apple pie thrown in for good measure. I practiced with Dan almost constantly. I was the firearm instructor for the Shawnee Police Department. I almost lived

down on that range. Dan was down there, too, every time he could get away. I learned a lot from Dan Combs. In fact it was through him that I was privileged to meet a number of other real pistoleros and exhibition shooters.

Bill Jordan was an Assistant Chief of the U.S. Border Patrol and later the Law Enforcement Representative for NRA. D. A. "Jelly" Bryce was a member of the FBI and a former member of the Oklahoma City Police Department. Elmer Keith was a top shooter, hunter, and writer. He was the real pro with both the .357 and 44 magnums. Combs, Jordan, and Bryce were as good as they came both in handgun shooting and fast draw. Elmer Keith was a shooter at the top of the list with any gun. Sadly, I didn't get to spend nearly as much time with Mr. Keith as I would have liked to. These guys were all quick and accurate. Hanging around with the likes of them, a little of their talent just had to rub off onto me--not much, but maybe a little bit.

Combs and Jordan could draw revolvers--both carried Smith & Wesson's mostly model 19's--in around one tenth of a second and hit what they were shooting at. Bryce favored the 34-44 Outdoorsman in either .38 or .44 Special and he was undoubtedly the fastest human I ever saw drawing a handgun from under a coat. He also could shoot a model 12 Winchester pump shotgun faster than most folks could fire a semi-automatic. I've seen him empty his pump, loaded with five rounds, before many very good shooters could get off three shots with the auto's. I had the privilege being coached by all of these pros. I believe I was taught by the best.

I was working the midnight shift for Shawnee Police Department and just before I got off shift at 7:00 AM. I got a call from Dan Combs informing me he was on the way to my house. I got home and found Dan and my wife having coffee and waiting for me. Dan said that he had a big problem but I could solve it for him. He said that there had been a mix up in his exhibition scheduling. He was slated to put on an indoor, blank fire, fast draw program at the Seminole, Oklahoma High School at 11:00 AM that morning. I said that didn't seem too tough. He said he was real glad to hear that because he also had to be in Guymon, Oklahoma at 2:00 PM that afternoon. Now, that is near two hundred fifty miles away. There was no way he could make both programs. He said that he needed me to do the show at Seminole for him so he could make it to the Guymon program. He said he had already told the Seminole High School Principal that I would be there in his place. I curtly advised him that he was out of his ever-loving mind because I had never done anything remotely like that before and was not about to start on that morning.

After Dan did just some arm-twisting, I finally agreed to do the program at Seminole. I guess he was pretty sure that I would do the show for him. No way was I going to replace Dan Combs. Heck, nobody could do that. I could do most of the stunts that he did, but doing it in front of a crowd of kids and teachers for the first time in my life was to be one of the hardest things that I have ever done. Dan left one of his prop kits with me and I had all of the necessary guns and holsters that would be needed. He handed me a pretty good supply of .357 magnum blanks. Now all I needed was some moral support. I called Alwin Walker an extremely close friend and shooting buddy of both Dan and myself. I sort of demanded that he make the trip with me. He said to pick him up and he would hold a gun loaded with real bullets on me while I did the program. I figured I was going to need just that.

I confess, as the show started I was scared to death. I would have rather fought a dozen wildcats than to walk out onto that stage. Actually the show went off better than I thought it would. I lost most of my stage fright and didn't miss a shot. It was not exactly like what Dan would have done, but it was well received. I actually not only felt relieved at having it over with, but there was a certain amount of satisfaction in the fact I knew I could do it.

The lecture part of the show went well and I was able to get the information we wanted to convey out to the kids--and even kept their attention! The hour-plus show was over before I knew it.

I used a pair of the model 19's, one Ruger old model Blackhawk also chambered in .357, and my Colt Combat Commander in 45 ACP. They worked without a hitch. About two weeks later I got another call from Dan wanting me to do a live ammunition program that he couldn't make at Lawton. This was to be a first for me too because I had to do a lot of aerial shooting with both rifles and shotguns. Some of the rifle targets got real small, grapefruit down to little white seedless grapes. I thought what the heck and agreed to go if my Chief and my boss Joyce would give me the time off to do it. They did, and that started a twenty-year plus run with Dan and I both putting on a large number of programs all over this state and several others each year.

It got pretty hectic trying to work a regular shift of five days per week and put on near one hundred programs per year. My Chief Bill Martin, and later Smith & Wesson underwrote and financed my part of the programs. OHP did the same for Dan. In fact it got to the point that he was doing nothing else but the shows. He truly was the goodwill ambassador for the Patrol and the State of Oklahoma. On the live ammunition programs both Dan and I utilized all types of handguns along with several different calibers of rifles, shotguns, and even submachine guns. Folks like to see and hear the sub-guns go. Hell, we liked them too. The program is fun to do and I like to think it is worthwhile. There were not many exhibition shooters of that era that used the whole array of firearms except Dan, Jelly, Bill, and I. Most of the others pretty much stuck with one firearm and shot either handguns or rifles or shotguns on their shows but not all of them. A few shooters like Herb Parsons from Winchester would combine rifles and shotguns.

The guns are used to drive home the points we want to make in the lecture--and they tend to leave a lasting impression. I have had grown men and women come to me and say " I saw your program in 19__ , at some school or event". They say they never forgot what they saw or what we said to them. In some cases they have stated that what they learned from the programs kept them from going astray. During all of the years that I put on the shows, I have for the most part used the same equipment. The old model 19's are still hanging in there and shooting fine. I do believe that they are going to outlast me by several years. In the programs or on duty neither of these guns ever failed me.

I was putting on a live ammo show for the Oklahoma Hunter Safety Clinic at the Norman, Oklahoma Police Range several years ago and we had around a thousand kids and another one hundred fifty or so parents and instructors in attendance. I did that program for thirteen years straight until one of the sponsors became afraid that some kid might try to copy one of the stunts and shoot him or her self. That never ever happened, but I guess that it was with in the realm of possibility. The programs later became politically incorrect and sort of went by the wayside.

Today, however, I'm getting more and more calls to put the programs on in the schools and for civic groups, etc. I'm now doing several each year. I guess political winds change.

On an occasion during one of the sequences at the Hunter Safety show the stud pin that the revolver's hammer cams upon sheared off where it comes through the left side of the frame. The other end of the pin is embedded into the side plate on the right side of the gun, which still held it pretty much in place. It had a little wobble but the gun still worked. I knew when the breakage occurred as the trigger pull suddenly became much harder than it had been. The gun never misfired or malfunctioned. I completed that sequence and two others with the gun broken--that is dependability.

Over the years I have fired somewhere near a half of a million rounds through each of these two old guns. I have replaced the internal parts in one of them twice and the other one has had the same operation on four occasions. One gun has been reblued three times and the one that I carried as a first line piece has been refinished five times. Both are in need of another bluing treatment as they now give the appearance of having been badly abused. They say you can wear out the barrel or the rest of the gun by shooting them. I guess that could be true. So far, the barrels in both guns are perfect.

I credit a lot of this fact to having shot mostly lead bullets in both of the guns. They have had bushels of magnum blanks run through them, which can cause erosion. Thousands and thousands of live .38 Specials and .357 hotter than hell Keith magnum loads were fired through both revolvers by the buckets full for years. Keeping the guns clean and giving them the T.L.C. that they deserve is what has kept them going. If I had fired all jacketed bullets instead of lead (especially as hot as I load them) the guns would probably be toast by now. The jacketed bullets deteriorate the barrel much quicker than lead.

I still shoot both guns a lot. My old standby, the one that I always carried, finally broke the trigger stud pin a few months ago. Guess what--it still functioned and never misfired. It's fixed now. I took it over to H &H range in Oklahoma City and let Chris Versels and Robert Rigsby, two very accomplished pistol smiths replace the stud. It works fine and should be good for another half a million rounds. I just hope I am. If I had to put on a uniform again and go back on the street as a Law Enforcement officer, you can bet that old gun would be in my pouch-type holster and its twin brother would be right handy too. I have never felt under gunned with either or both of these revolvers or the .357 magnum caliber, and I never will. I'm looking forward to harvesting another nice Whitetail Buck with one of them next fall. In the meanwhile they will continue to get plenty of use and attention as I still practice a little and pet them almost every day.

I do love these old six guns.