

A GOOD GUN GONE 53

By Peter Caroline

A while ago, one of my shooting buddies – let's call him Sam – bought an old Smith & Wesson revolver at a gun show. It was a .455 Mark II Hand Ejector 2nd Model, a gun that S&W made for the British and Canadian armed forces from 1915 to 1917. It looked quite a bit like the later Model 1917, but with a 6-1/2" barrel and, of course, without the U.S. government markings. Quite a few of these venerable N-frame guns were brought back into this country after WWII, and many were converted to .45 ACP by milling the face of the cylinder to accommodate half-moon clips or .45 Auto Rim cartridges.

I had occasion to try out this pistol shortly after Sam bought it. It seemed to be in good operating condition although the finish had a great deal of patina. And, as it turned out, it was a very decent shooter, although removing the empties from the half-moon clips was a major pain.

At the next range session of our shooting group, Sam was on the firing line with his S&W. I was several slots away, testing a new 1911, when I heard a commotion. I cleared my pistol, and wandered over to see what was going on. It was a disaster. Sam's S&W had the topstrap blown clear off, about 1/3 of the cylinder was missing and the barrel was bent down at a slight angle. One fired cartridge was blown wide open. The barrel was clear of obstructions. Obviously, the gun was beyond repair, useful only as a classroom demonstration of "What Can Happen." Fortunately, nobody was injured by the mishap.

So, what caused what seemed to be a perfectly usable gun to blow up? With an elderly gun, there's always the possibility that the steel was fatigued and just let go. In this case, there were some faint discolorations on the broken edges, and a crystalline appearance to some of the newly exposed surfaces. Metal fatigue? Maybe. And maybe it had some help.

The ammo may very well have been the culprit. Of the three loaded cartridges remaining in the cylinder – all reloads – two comprised 230-grain moly-coated lead roundnose bullets ahead of 6.0 - 6.1 grains of Unique. The third was a bare lead, 230-gr. roundnose with 5.4 gr. of Unique.

Are these excessive loads? It depends...on what reloading manual you read and, perhaps more important, in what handgun you intend to

use the loads. Alliant, the makers of Unique, recommend a 5.0-gr. load behind a 230-gr. lead bullet as an appropriate target load. This should result in about 790 f.p.s. velocity, and pressures below 12,000 p.s.i. This is recommended as a reasonable starter load in a number of manuals. Six to seven grains would be okay for a modern .45 ACP revolver or semiauto in good condition.

But what about a 90-year-old revolver of unknown provenance? This is an area where you have to tread very carefully. Okay, most of us don't have the money or the facilities to have a bargain gun show purchase Magnafluxed. So we proceed with caution, using either factory target loads or **very** conservative reloads. Some years ago, I acquired a 1910-vintage S&W .44 Triple Lock Target Model. It was in superb condition,

and I couldn't resist the urge to shoot it, so I referred to Ken Waters' *Pet Loads* book for loading information. Mr. Waters has a great deal of respect for elderly hardware, and his loads reflect that concern. The Triple Lock turned out to be a terrific shooter, but I've since retired it; I have more modern guns that can

always be replaced if a load somehow goes awry.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn here. Some old guns are perfectly okay to shoot; others are strictly wallhangers. It takes a good gunsmith to tell the difference. Obviously, older guns have a much smaller margin of error than modern guns. Ask yourself, can the gun be affordably replaced if the worst circumstance comes to pass? Can **you** be affordably replaced? Resist the urge to try out +P loads in that old wheelgun. Start at the lowest recommended load in the book. And make sure your reloading manual is up to date. The 1953 Lyman Ideal Handbook recommended 7.2 gr. of Unique with a 230-gr. lead bullet for the .45 ACP. That was in the days before sophisticated testing equipment or voracious liability lawyers!

Another suggestion: Never assume that, if you set your powder measure for *X* grains of whatever powder, it's going to stay at that measurement forever! It's prudent, not paranoid, to check your powder weight every 100 loads. That's a handy figure because you have to stop every 100 rounds to replenish your primer magazine.

Old guns are fun to shoot. But as the roll call sergeant used to say on *Hill Street Blues*, "Be careful out there!"

