By Jerry Ahern, photos by Sharon Ahern

The derringer is a firearm type rich in associations with America's past, yet well suited to today's defensive shooting needs. The derringer of which we think most often, what we picture in our minds at the mention of the word, is the Remington over/under derringer in .41 Rimfire. Produced from 1866 until 1935, the original guns enjoyed a great deal of popularity, even among the ranks of law enforcement. Although the Remington derringers are often portrayed as the primary weapon of the riverboat gambler or “soiled dove,” the little guns were also used as backup guns. Various stories are told about the legendary ineffectiveness of the .41 Rimfire cartridge. My favorite involves someone firing at a wooden telephone pole, only to have the bullet bounce off. In some respects, these little guns may well have been more potentially dangerous to the shooter than the “shootee,” since the original Remington derringer incorporated no manual safety system.

Over the years, I've fired more than my share of derringers of the modern variety. When my old friend Jan Libourel helmed (then-Petersen's) HANDGUNS Magazine, I served as the publication's de facto derringer tester. This was a dubious distinction since I tested derringers ranging in caliber up to .44 Magnum – and that hurt. The reason I was so “lucky” was because some derringers are chambered in .45 Colt and .410. The wise legislators in California determined that a gun so chambered is a sawed-off shotgun. This is, of course, crazy; but, it is California, after all.

I've owned and used derringers. For a number of years, I carried a .45 Colt/.410 derringer on a very regular basis. Indeed, among larger calibers, the combination of .45 Colt and .410 is the ideal choice, I think. The reason for that is what is referred to as “the freebore effect.” The .45 Colt cartridge is shorter than the .410 shotshell. The actual length difference is significant. A .45 Colt Silvertip is exactly one and one-half inches long, while .410 buckshot loads – those most commonly made especially for use in such pistols – are two and one-half inches. What that means is that the bullet fired from the Colt case has to travel the distance of one inch before engaging the rifling, rather than jumping right into the rifling. This freebore effect seriously reduces perceived recoil. Hence, it is much more pleasant to fire a .45 Colt round from such a derringer than to fire an identical derringer made in .45 ACP – no freebore effect with the .45 ACP round because the gun isn’t chambered for .410.

If I roamed the woods a lot, I’d have use for .410 shotshells in a handgun. Some will argue that .410 shotshells – either the special ones or the standard variety – are suited to anti-personnel use. Winchester has, for years, offered a .410 that is loaded with three 000 Buck pellets. Winchester also produces a slug load. Two and three-quarter-inch 00 Buck loads are also available and certain derringers are chambered to take these. The standard .410 certainly wouldn’t be pleasant to be shot with, but it might also have very little serious effect when it comes to ending an attack.

The modern derringers of Bond Arms (bondarms.com), although reminiscent of the Remington pattern derringers of yore, are considerably more effective and safer to handle and carry than the .41s. I’ve known Greg Bond for a number of years. His Bond Arms Derringers – “Made in Texas by Texans,” as he likes to say – are serious defensive handguns, whether used against the kind of snake that slithers or the kind of snake that walks on two legs and pretends to be human. The guns come in a variety of calibers, 14 in all, but have a vastly wider potential when one considers combinations with shot cartridges and the like.

The guns can be had with gold-filled engraving or plain, with exotic grips or extended grips, with interchangeable barrel units or with just a single caliber. Because of the precision manufacture, if you buy one of the Bond Arms derringers now and decide months or years later that you want an additional barrel set, the gun does not have to be returned for fitting. Additionally, a wide range hol-