

Made on a Ruger Bisley frame by Bowen, this .500 Linebaugh SA has a Metaloy finish, a tapered-octagon 6-in. barrel, and a 5-shot cylinder.

CUSTOM SINGLE ACTION GUNSMITHING

Even though the number of gunsmiths who specialize in fine single-action revolvers is small, the quality and variety of their work is great.

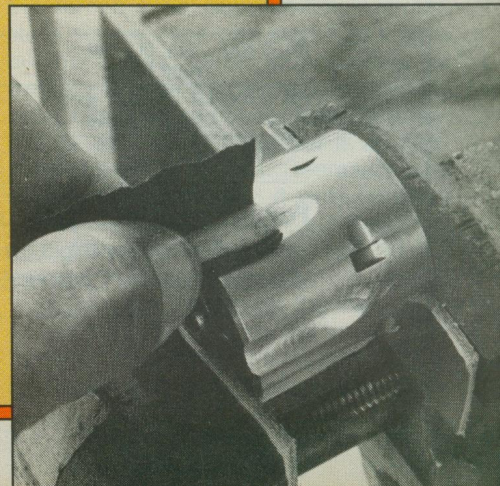
By Ross Seyfried

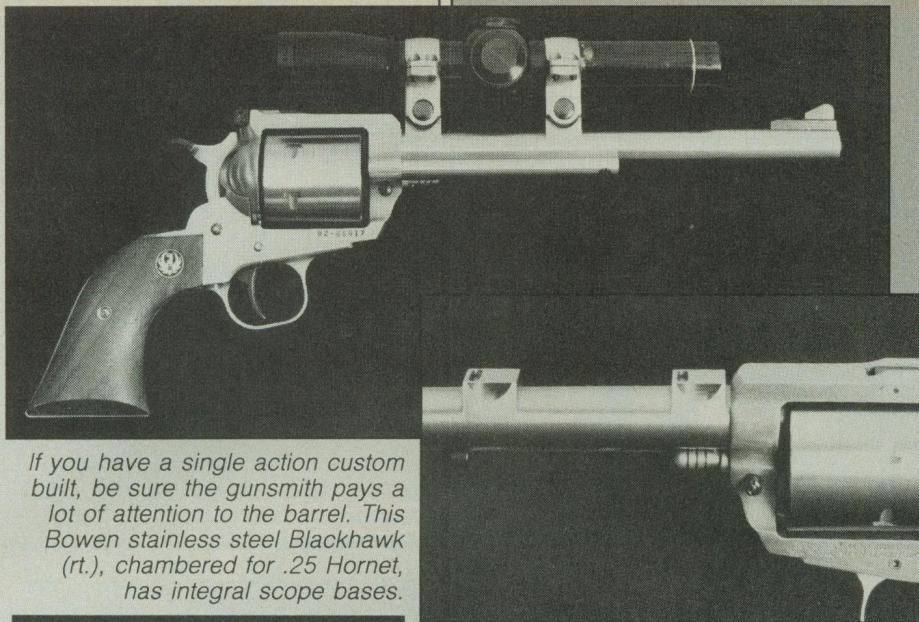
There are things that the shooters had in the good old days that make me jealous. In spite of what "the system" tells us, I am sure the hunting was better then, and if nothing else, there were a hell of a lot less people to get in your way when you hunted 50 years ago. But a shortage exists today that bothers me. It is the shortage of gunsmiths willing to do quality work the

way I want it done on a six-shooter. The late Elmer Keith had a big trunk full of incredible revolvers. Some had special sights, grips and silky action jobs. Then there were the masterpieces, with welded and modified frames, special base pins, gold bar sights and the like. When I asked where and how he got these guns the answer was always Kings, Christies, Sidgley or some other

Bowen Classic Arms can turn out a top-quality custom single-action revolver, built from a factory gun, in a variety of traditional or ultramodern chamberings.

A good gunsmith will spend countless hours fitting and finishing the various parts of a firearm. There's no substitute for handwork.





If you have a single action custom built, be sure the gunsmith pays a lot of attention to the barrel. This Bowen stainless steel Blackhawk (rt.), chambered for .25 Hornet, has integral scope bases.



The engine-turned machinework on this .45 Colt caliber Ruger's hammer and trigger is evidence of quality work, even on a basic action job.

dedicated smith who was willing to work to another man's specifications: When I eagerly asked who would make one for me, the answer was, "Don't bother. It's a lot of trouble and no one knows how to do the work."

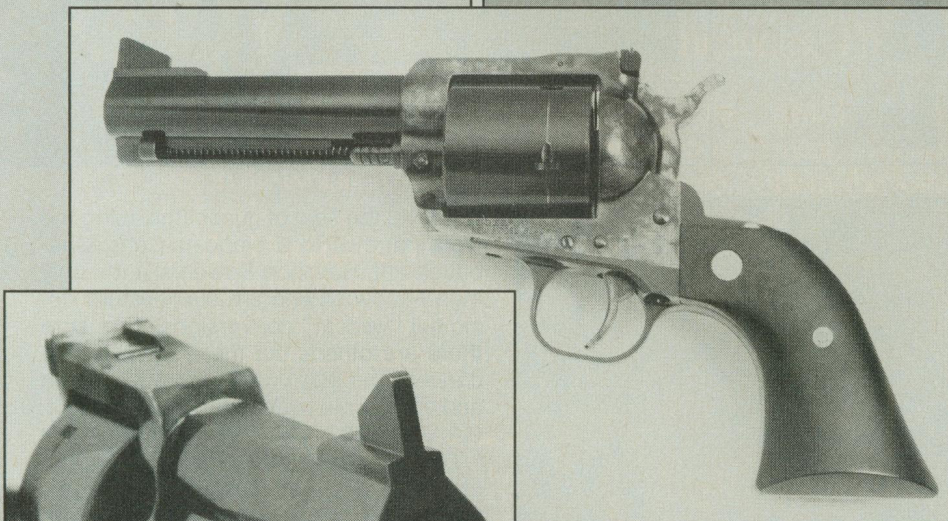
Unfortunately, economy dictates that the major manufacturers offer little or no custom work, and the fit and finish on their revolvers is utilitarian at best so that we can afford to buy the guns. If you want a custom rifle, you can get literally anything you can pay for, but custom single actions have been very neglected, but not totally forgotten. Our choice of single-action revolvers is limited as well, at least where brand name is concerned. Single action shooters of the past had their custom guns made on Colts; today we work with Rugers. With the choice of large and small frames, combined with standard single action and Bisley grip

frames, we actually have a better choice of "raw material" to work with than ever before. We can also include the Freedom Arms revolvers in those that are candidates for customizing. While they carry custom fit and finish right out of the box, they do need lock and trigger work to achieve perfection. They can also stand the addition of better sights and different barrel lengths. These features are a job for an interested and skilled single action gunsmith.

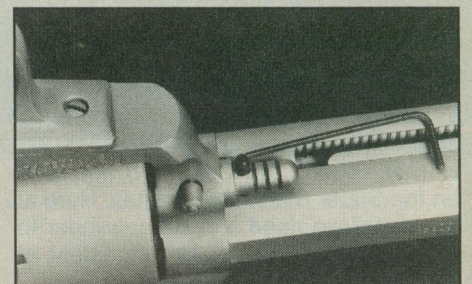
The custom single action work begins with the basic action tuning, making the revolver feel like a precise machine instead of an assemblage of parts. Any factory revolver needs to have its lockwork tuned to let you hit with it to your full potential. The silky-smooth feeling you get when you cock a tuned single action is only a sensual pleasure, but the perfect trigger release makes putting bullets where you want them infinitely easier. By smoothing the action, making the trigger release crisp and adding an adjustable trigger stop, the basic Ruger becomes a joy to shoot. While you are having the action adjusted to your liking, I think it is a good idea to have a base pin lock added. This is a simple set screw that positively prevents the base pin from jumping out of its spring-loaded catch.

Going a little beyond making the revolver nice to be around, you can start to increase the accuracy potential of the gun itself. Unless mere chance and luck intervene, normal factory revolvers will have a greater or lesser degree of misalignment between the chambers and bore. Fine target pistolsmiths like Ron Powers have discovered that recutting the barrel's forcing cone to a precise 11-degree angle goes a long way in making up for the imprecision of mass-production revolvers. This gentle leade into the barrel from the cylinder helps guide the bullets into the bore with minimum deformation. The net result is a revolver that

The work described in this article is the work of professional, competent gunsmiths, and should not be attempted by anyone else.



This .50 Special incorporates almost every Bowen feature. It has a 5-shot cylinder, bolt bearing block, special trigger pins and spacers, and as photo at left shows, an ovate barrel.



The addition of a set screw in the base pin itself secures it firmly on Hamilton Bowen's custom SAs.

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may have less leading problems, and one that will probably shoot smaller groups than it did with its rough, sharply angled factory forcing cone. With these simple and relatively inexpensive modifications, a fine pistolsmith has made the basic factory revolver more accurate and shootable. From here we enter the dream world of using the factory parts as a basic framework to make *your* sixgun.

The first part of a factory revolver that deserves attention if you want a personalized gun is the barrel. Shortening factory barrels is standard procedure on a lot of my six-shooters. I like 5½-inch barrels on my big-bore single actions, and the easiest and least expensive way to get them is to have a good smith cut and recrown the all-too-common 7½-inch factory barrel. You can also take a considerable step up in bore quality by fitting a match-grade Douglas barrel, and you get rid of the "book" standard on the outside of the factory barrel at the same time. This kind of cutting and rebarrelling is well within the talent and interest level of a host of good gunsmiths. It is entirely

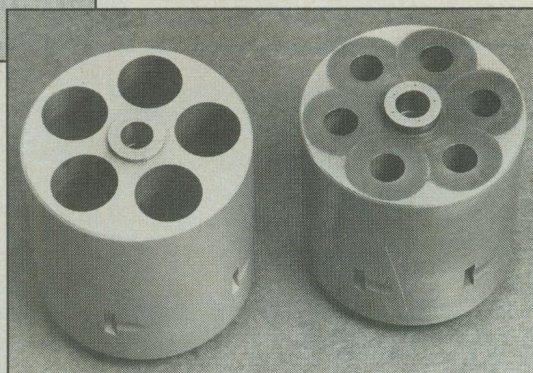


In the author's estimation, Bowen's .50 Special was one of the finest SAs he's ever held.

Today's single action gunsmiths offer cylinders in a wide variety. Shown here are a 6-shot .25 caliber, and a 5-shot .50 Special caliber.



The .50 Special is shown between a .44 Special (l.) and the .500 (r.) cartridges. The .50 Special uses bullets in the 330-grain class at 800 feet per second velocity.



Bowen crafted these SAs from factory Rugers. They are both in .45 Colt cal.



(Above and right) Bowen barrels can be had in octagon or round, like the .50 (l.) and .25 (r.).

possible that a good riflesmith in your area can be talked into doing revolver barrel work.

The next level of customization is changing cartridges using the factory frames. When you turn .357s into .44 Specials this usually entails fitting a new barrel and rechambering the old cylinder to a new cartridge. Moving up another step, we have the conversions to .22 Hornet, .30-20, .45 Colt, .475 and .500 on the Super Blackhawk frames. Here at very least we need a custom cylinder to go with the new barrel. Unfortunately, at

The late Elmer Keith appreciated custom single actions. He owned and used many during his lifelong career.



this level the field of gunsmiths doing the work narrows to a pinpoint. John Linebaugh and Hamilton Bowen are the only men I know of who are successfully doing full "wildcat" conversions. I am sure there are others, but these are the only conversions that I have personally seen and shot. Write to John Linebaugh, Dept. GA, Box 1263, Cody, WY 82414.

Beyond gunsmithing, increasing or decreasing accuracy and horsepower, there is the artistry of gunmakers. Here the finished revolver needs to be treated like the finest custom rifle or shotgun. Guns like these are the final wedding of state-of-the-art function and beauty. The result is a revolver that looks as good or better than it shoots. Right now, Hamil-

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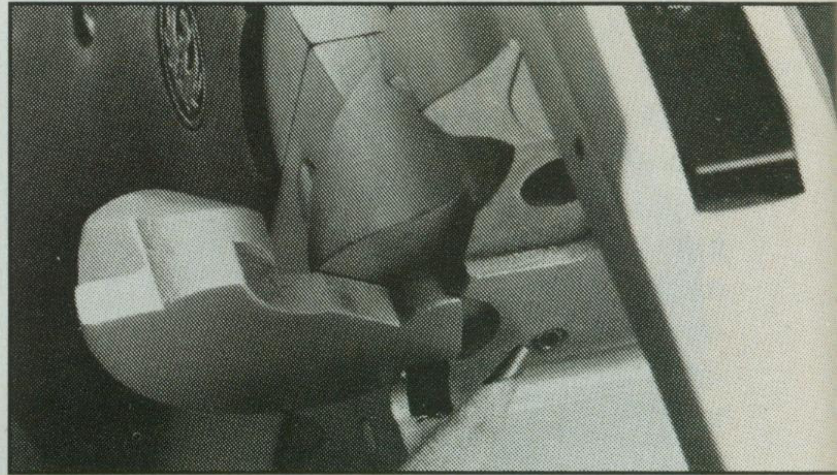
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ton Bowen is the only maker I know of who makes a complete "best quality" single action. For a detailed catalog send \$3 to: Bowen Classic Arms, Dept. GA, Box 67, Lewisville, TN 37777.

Here, again, the barrels get a lot of special attention. One of the most interesting and functional barrels is a basic tapered round barrel with integral pedestal mounts that accept Ruger rings. These bases are milled from the solid barrel steel and are done in such an artistic fashion that the gun retains sleek lines when the scope is removed and the iron sights are being used. These bases are an offshoot of a beautiful barrel contour called an "ovate" barrel. I've found it impossible to photograph and difficult to describe, but it is a "ribbed" barrel reminiscent of those found on early English single-shot rifles. If you look at one in cross section, the bottom half of the barrel is round, and from the midpoint up the sides slope into a flat rib that is elevated above the normal radius of a round barrel. The top flat can be stippled or file cut. This is the same profile used to make the pedestal scope bases. The ovate barrel leaves the gun with a flat sighting plane and the "feeling" of a rib that sets it a class above a round barrel,

but has smooth lines without any harsh corners.

You can also get beautiful tapered octagon barrels. I think these are my favorites. They can be had in a variety of diameters and weights with various glare-reducing treatments on the top flat. The



Pointer shows screw inside frame window that controls the adjustable trigger overtravel stop on a custom Bowen.

finest octagon barrels I have seen have the ejector rods fitted to the barrels so that they look like a part of the octagon itself. The normal fluting on the ejector rod housing is milled so that the housing meets the barrel flat at a crisp angle. Recently, I looked at an octagon-barrelled .500 made on a Ruger Bisley frame. It was fitted with a tapered octagon barrel, "octagon" ejector rod housing and was totally finished in gray Metaloy. It was an

extraordinary revolver. Like a BMW motorcar, its huge engine was hidden in a sleek, quiet package.

As you can see from the .500 above, the Bowen gunsmithing is not limited to action jobs and barrel fitting. These full-blown conversions get the total treatment. Depending on the cartridge and loading requirements, special cylinders are made to fit the individual frame using a five or six-shot configuration. When the cylinder is made, a special fixture is used to precisely determine the placement of bolt cuts in the cylinder, thus ensuring the best possible alignment between barrel and chambers. When you have a cylinder made, you can also have some other special Bowen features included in your custom revolver. In these guns the base pin is made from scratch to precisely match the holes in the frame. A special bearing block is fitted to the bolt. This block precisely holds the bolt in place, reducing rotational movement in the cylinder when it is locked, and minimizes the battering of the bolt slot in the frame. It is the normal hammering out of this thin, fragile slot in the frame that causes the quick loosening of a lot of factory revolvers. In this case the bearing block takes the load instead of the thin section of frame metal. Again, it is a combination of strength, accuracy, longevity and beauty that is the goal.

While I was studying the Bowen guns,

I had a chance to look at a very unusual single action. This was a short-barrelled Blackhawk revolver chambered for .50 *Special!* A Bowen customer, with a checkbook to match his imagination, had ordered this totally custom revolver. The .50 Special is a shortened version of the big .500, using the same case length as the .44 Special. It is designed to use a 330-grain bullet pushed at 800 fps (feet per second)—a sort of giant .45 ACP. The little gun had a 4½-inch ovate barrel, 5-shot cylinder, custom base pin, bolt bearing block, trigger pin spacers and lightened hammer. This light hammer reduces lock time and “hammer shake” when the hammer hits the frame on firing. The lockwork was pure silk and the trigger pull was breaking glass. Outside, the entire gun had been hand filed and stoned, making all of the rounds round and the flats flat. All of the aluminum components had been replaced with steel, honed and deeply blued, with the frame finished in beautiful color hardening. This was one of the most complete single actions I have ever held. I have always thought it a little silly to pile thousands of dollars of engraving on a \$300 factory gun that in the end wasn't a bit better than a plain model. If you were going to spend your money on engraving, this is the kind of gun that deserves such treatment. In the English

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tradition of best guns, only the finest workmanship was under the decoration.

The facet of single action gunsmithing that has almost been completely lost is the modification of the frames themselves. The famous Keith flattop Colts were all standard single actions, with their top straps welded to suit the design. They were equipped with "adjustable, fixed" sights. These guns had rear sights that could be drifted left and right for windage and front sights that could be adjusted for elevation. What has been lost is the skill, technology and desire to fill the "holes" in the frames, giving the shooter a choice of rear sights. This kind of work is common practice on autos where the slide doesn't have special strength requirements. When you start welding on a single-action frame it is an entirely different matter and must be done by an expert with extreme skill. I know of one gunsmith who has perfected techniques of "micro-welding" on firearms. Butch Searcy is one of the few gunmakers who routinely performs the

"Fine gunsmithing isn't cheap, but for the quality the cost is certainly reasonable."

old practice of cutting two bolt actions in two and welding them back together. The result is one long action and one short action. While these aren't single-action revolvers, it demonstrates a far more difficult process than getting rid of a Ruger rear sight. If you want to have a revolver frame modified with welding, Searcy's Village Gunsmiths can do the job. The most common work of this kind is "flattopping" the new Ruger single actions. The job requires filling the "hole" where the old sight was, cutting a dovetail and fitting a fixed rear sight similar to the ones found on the fixed-sighted Ruger Bisleys. Depending on what you have done, this flattop work costs about \$150. For details contact The Village Gunsmiths, Dept. GA, 2501 E. 20th, Bldg. C, Suite 6, Farmington, NM 87401.

The cost of a gun like the little .50 Special is measured in thousands not hundreds of dollars. Of course, the basic work to make your revolver a lot more "domestic" is much less. I am currently having a .32 H&R made for myself using the lovely little Ruger Bisley with fixed sights with a barrel designed to shoot .308-inch bullets.

Even though the number of gunsmiths specializing in fine single actions is small, the quality and variety of their work is great. We don't have to take a back seat to the old-timers anymore. 🐾