

# versatile, POWERFUL...

By Ross Seyfried

**This 19th-Century Revolver Cartridge Still Holds Its Own, Offering Both Accuracy and the Power To Stand Up to Big, Tough Game Like Cape Buffalo.**

A black and white photograph of a man with short hair and sunglasses, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and a dark belt. He is holding a revolver with both hands, aiming it towards the right. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# .45 COLT

**S**ometimes it is a misfortune to be the first born. In the case of the .45 caliber Colt revolver cartridge, when considered in the family of powerful hunting rounds, this is true. It was born in a time of black powder and balloon-head cases, and that is where a good many "experts" would like it to stay. But stay it won't. Even while shrouded in mystery and confusion the ancient .45 has excelled. It is, in my opinion, the most versatile and with the exception of some extreme wildcats, the most powerful revolver cartridge available.

Here we are going to get in depth, exploring all four levels of the .45 Colt from black powder to five-shot superpower. I will try my very best to eliminate all of the confusion and explain clearly what loads to use and which guns to use them in.

Recently I received a most welcome care package from a friend. It contained 25 original balloon-head Western .45 Colt cases. While all .45 Colt users are supposed to cower in fear of the omnipresent balloon-head cases, the truth is that they are so rare few shooters have ever seen one! With them I shot a full 40 grains of FFFg Goex black, demonstrating the original magnum cartridge revolver. This load was even more powerful than makers of the day thought prudent. They dropped the charge to 35 grains for civilian use very quickly. Be that as it may, using a 7½-inch-barreled revolver and 260-grain Keith bullets, the 40-grain load chronographed a rather spectacular 1,037 feet per second! The shots printed into just over two inches at 25 yards. I liked it and found the load very pleasant to shoot.

With that introduction we must pause to look at the great difference between those old balloon-head cases and the modern ones that are available to us. I receive letter upon letter pointing to the "weakness" of .45 Colt brass. Similar statements often occur in modern books, articles and manuals. You can look at the



**Two sources of loading data and their respective guns: Venturino's Shooting Colt Single Actions and EMF Hartford function at the blackpowder level, while Hodgdon's manual offers data compatible with the Ruger Bisley.**

photos of the sectioned cases to see the physical difference between the new- and old-style cases. Let us leave the subject by saying that the modern .45 Colt case is as strong and handles high pressure as well as any revolver case in existence... and perhaps better than most belted magnums! There are slight differences in the ultimate performance of various brands of .45 Colt brass, but it cannot be noticed until we get to the ultimate power levels in the last chapter.

With the hocus-pocus and snake oil of .45 brass myths behind us, we are free to move along to the next three levels of Colt performance. Just beyond real black powder and Pyrodex is perhaps the best known one for the old .45. This is the nitro loading, but one considered "safe" for all existing revolvers. Pressures here are kept low, usually below 16,000 c.u.p., perhaps even lower than those generated by the original black-powder loading. They are achieved by using relatively fast powders, often the mid-burning rate shotgun propellants or standard pistol powders. The aim is to roughly duplicate the original black-powder ballistics,

driving a 250-grain bullet at between 800 and 900 fps. The lighter bullets achieve higher velocity, with the little 185- or even 200-grain ones breaking the 1,000-fps mark.

All of these loads are very mild and gentle to shoot, but one should not immediately dismiss them as underpowered. All tend to be somewhat more powerful than standard .45 ACP ball ammunition, a round that many see as a great powerhouse in an auto pistol and a standard "man stopper." I do not shoot this kind of load very often. I suspect I will more in the

future as I begin to learn to "drive" the old-style guns in preparation for hunting with black powder. But for now my real interest lies in the pure power and performance of the modern "nitro" .45 Colt.

As we enter this realm that tends to embarrass even the .44 Magnum, we need to be aware that the once broad spectrum of guns and loads is rapidly coming to a point. We have raised the pressure limit to 30,000 c.u.p., still 25 percent lower than standard for the .44 Magnum, but nearly twice the acceptable limit for "normal" .45 Colt ammunition. The only source of this aggressive data is the *Hodgdon Data Manual*, 26th Edition. It is listed in Chapter IV, "Silhouette Loads." The pages of data carry the following statement: "WARNING: These loads are for use only in modern firearms designed to be used with high pressure loads. DO NOT USE ON OLD WEAPONS DESIGNED FOR USE WITH BLACK POWDER OR LOW PRESSURE LOADS." This disclaimer leaves many wondering just what kinds of arms will safely handle these 30,000 c.u.p. loads. The best definition comes from the two makers of commercial ammunition who load to this level. The 4-W company loads a .45 Colt

+P and labels their box, "WARNING: to be used in the following firearms only; All Ruger Single Action models, (Freedom Arms) Casull, Winchester 94 Angle Eject, Thompson Contender, Colt Anaconda." (Included are the five-shot conversions on Ruger Redhawk and Single actions) While the excellent Hodgdon manual lists many propel-

**Original black-powder .45 Colt round (left) shown with latest super-power version utilizing a 360-grain wide flat nose (WFN) bullet.**

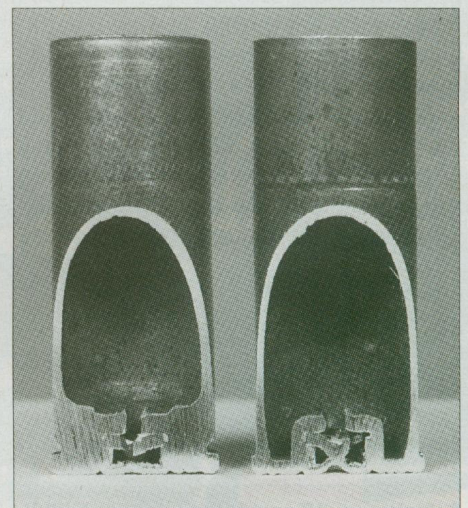


lants, including the very fast pistol powders, I recommend that you stick with the very slow ones. At this loading level we want powders that keep us out of trouble, that do not allow double charges and other mischief. Also, we are using this loading level to achieve performance and that in my opinion begins with 300-grain bullets. With bullets weighing 300 grains or more the powder choices become very simple. Winchester 296 and Hodgdon H-110 very much head the list, followed by IMR-4227 and IMR-4759. If we could get data for VihtaVuori N-110 at the 30,000 c.u.p. level is would perform perfectly also. Unfortunately, Hodgdon did not test it and VihtaVuori insists on leaving the Colt at black-powder specifications.

When we step up to 30,000 c.u.p., what do we get for our trouble? In essence, you get the very finest all-around hunting handgun available. The 300-grain bullets can be delivered at something over 1,300 fps and the 325-grain ones will be going between 1,200 and 1,300 fps from a 7½-inch barrel. (Each inch of barrel more or less, will add or subtract about 30 feet per second) The 4-W load is clocked at 1,600 fps from a 16-inch rifle barrel. When we use the correct bullet design and material these "paper numbers" begin to



**This Clements five-shot Ruger Bisley conversion is shown with a target shot at 50 yards using full-power 360-grain WFN bullets.**



**Sectioned modern Federal .45 Colt case (left) is shown here with a vintage balloon-head version. The difference in strength is very apparent.**

# .45 COLT!

translate into absolutely spectacular game-taking ability.

Another great boon to this level of .45 Colt performance is the relatively new availability of factory ammunition. The 4-W load mentioned earlier uses a 328-grain LBT, LFN bullet. The box claims 1,300 fps and my 7½-inch Ruger Bisley chronographed an average of 1,318 fps! Gardner ammunition loads a 325-grain LBT, LFN bullet that chronographed 1,236 fps. Both loads are simply outstanding, with the Gardner having a slight accuracy edge in my guns. While they may not be available in every hardware store, both are as close as the UPS truck and telephone.

We now reach the apex of the pyramid—rarefied air and rarefied performance. Here we must give credit where it is due to John Linebaugh. He, in my opinion, did not invent, but certainly did give legitimacy the process. Linebaugh understood that performance came from reality. Reality that used heavy bullets at moderately high velocity and sane loads. Sane loads with Winchester 296 and Hodgdon H-110 powders. He also demonstrated the five-shot Ruger revolver and its extraordinary capability.

The five-shot superpower .45 Colt is simply a magnificent thing. It is as close to a universal handgun as one might imagine because it is able to fire: black powder, nitro-for-black, “.44 Magnum-power” and loads that reach right up to the true heavyweight champion, the .475. Most of the shooting that I do with my “five-shooters” use loads from the .44 Magnum power level. As I mentioned earlier, these loads are still pleasant to shoot and easy to control. I reserve the full-throttle five-shot capability for serious hunting, times when I really want to strike a heavy blow.

At the five-shot level, using any bullet weighing less than 300 grains is simply playing. Three hundred grain bullets, on the other hand, become interesting. They now have enough sectional densi-

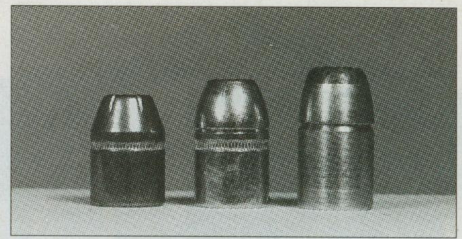
ty to perform well on impact and enough mass to offer resistance to the slow powders. This resistance begins to translate into efficiency. With 7½-inch barrels it is quite possible to break 1,500 fps using conventional jacketed 300-grain bullets. Actually, I feel that the 300s are still a bit light, with a 325-grain bullet providing the ideal all-around weight. Velocities between 1,400 and 1,500 fps are common depending on the gun and barrel length.

As I am writing this I have been shooting a new five-shot Bisley from a maker who's work I had not previously tried. The gun is a Clements. It features a Pac Nor barrel and made-to-fit-the-frame cylinder with line-bored throats. Its fit and finish are first rate, with all of the accuracy I could prove holding the gun in my hands. It would often give me groups in the three-inch range at 50 yards and would of course be capable of much more from a good rest. The Clements guns represent a good value, with the full five-shot conversion on your gun costing \$995.

Beyond lies the perfection of the revolver. The latest iteration of the five-shot Bowen guns is so good that they are almost impossible to fault. New technology including special grinding equipment and single-point boring instruments produce barrel-cylinder alignment that approaches tolerance. The timing and lock-up of the guns is absolute. When this is combined with Pac Nor barrels, rifle-like accuracy is the result.

Along with the great precision, a new addition has added to the overall reliability of the system. A weak link on the Ruger single action is its loading gate. It is held in position only by spring tension, combined with the case heads in the cylinder. Should the gun be fired without all five holes being full it is possible for the gate to jump out of its recess and tie up the gun. The new Bowen guns feature cylinders with recessed case heads. With this system the cylinder itself holds the gate in place.

While one could also argue that the gun is stronger with the cylinder supporting the case heads, it would be moot. The regular guns with case heads unsupported are essentially invincible. Hamilton Bowen more or less jokes at the fact that they have fussed and worried over the perfection of the five-shot .45 to the extent that it takes the effort of his three-man shop a full week's work to make a single gun. A person who knows fine guns will not laugh. The Bowen five-shot .45 is a masterpiece, a jewel of the gunmaker's art. We only wonder how they make them and only charge about



**Some jacketed .45-caliber bullets include, from left, 250-gr. Hornady XTP, 300-gr. Speer plated jacket and 325-gr. Golden Bear.**

\$1,500 for the work! A similar conversion can be had on the Redhawk for those who prefer double action.

With the guns and power levels defined it becomes important to worry about bullets. The blackpowder power level does not care too much about bullets. Almost anything will work, but a more or less 250-grain slug with a good flat point will do the best job on game. Do not trust expansion at this level. A handgun bullet that is fragile enough to expand will either fly apart or get too large to penetrate properly.

When we increase the velocity and power to the .44 Magnum-type loads, bullets become more important. We now have enough velocity to tear up a fragile bullet. Again, large diameter expansion is a mistake. A handgun lacks the momentum to push a large mushroom very deep. Now the Speer Plated Jacket, 300-grain bullet becomes a perfect off-the-shelf choice. This is a tough, flat-point bullet that performs well. If it expands, the overall diameter is minimal, if it does not it still is very effective. The 325-grain LBT, long flat nose is very close to perfect. It has plenty of penetration for elk and enough slap to cause a whitetail to quit very quickly. A bullet that I have not used, one that would be extremely effective on lighter game would be the wide flat nose with a weight between 300 and 325 grains. It will offer increased “slap” on impact and be visually more effective on deer-sized animals.

As we consider bullet choices for the more powerful versions of the .45, we should consider a safety factor that can be built into our ammunition. As the power increases, so does the length of the cylinder in most cases. The Colt cylinder will only accept ammunition that is shorter than 1.660 inches. Good working ammunition will be at least .030-inch less than that. If we choose bullets with a nose length (length of bullet out of the case) of at least .400 inch for our more powerful loadings, the ammunition will not fit the Colt-type cylinder. The stock Ruger cylinder will accept bullets with .450-inch noses. As we move up to the five-shot superpowers, the cylinders can use and the guns are



**Selection of .45 cast bullets: 260-grain Keith, 310-grain Keith, 325-grain LFN/LBT, 350-grain LFN/LBT, 360-grain WFN/LBT. Bullet far right is a 412-grain WLN/LBT. This bullet is generally too heavy for best results.**

best fed with bullet noses .500-inch long. With this system, should you own more than one kind of gun, ammunition of greater power than the gun is designed for cannot be readily used. My favorite 325- and 360-grain LBT bullets feature dual crimp grooves, creating .450- and .500-inch noses. Both bullets can be tailored to either "stock revolver" or to the five-shot power levels and guns. The long ammunition has more powder space and will not fit most regu-

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## DIRECTORY

### **Bowen Classic Arms**

(Send \$3 for a complete catalog of revolver work)  
Dept. GA, Box 67  
Louisville, TN 37777

### **Cast Performance Bullet Co.**

(Cast bullets, LBT design)  
Dept. GA, 12441 U.S. Hy 26  
Riverton, WY 82501

### **Cimarron Arms** (Colt reproductions)

Dept. GA, Box 906  
Fredricksburg, TX 78624

### **Clements Custom Guns**

(\$1 for brochure of custom revolver work)  
Dept. GA, 60338 Hatly Road  
Amory, MS 38821

### **EMF** (Colt and Remington reproductions)

Dept. GA, 1900 E. Warner Ave.  
Santa Ana, CA 92705

### **Gardner Ammunition**

(325gr. LBT, .45 Colt Ammo)  
Dept. GA, 3973 Vanstone  
Milford, MI 48382

### **Golden Bear Bullets**

(High performance jacketed handgun hunting bullets)  
Dept. GA, 3065 Fairfax Ave.  
San Jose, CA 95148

### **Hodgdon Powder Co.** (#26 Data Manual)

Dept. GA, Box 2932  
Shawnee Mission, KS 66201

### **Hunter's Supply Inc.**

(Source of 4 W, 325 gr. +P ammunition)  
Dept. GA, Box 313  
Tioga, TX 76271

### **Lead Bullet Technology**

(Custom Bullet Moulds, catalog \$2)  
Dept. GA, HCR 62, Box 145  
Moyie Springs, ID 83845

### **MLV Enterprises**

(Venturino's *Shooting Colt Single Actions*)  
Dept. GA, Box 914  
Livingston, MT 59047

### **Starline Brass**

Dept. GA, 1300 W. Henry St.  
Sedalia, MO 65301

### **Uberti USA Inc.**

(Colt reproductions)  
Dept. GA, P.O. Box 509  
Lakeville, CT 06039

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lar cylinders. One can also choose case brands that help eliminate conflicts.

Federal cases have always been the standard for the five-shot maximum loads. In my recent tests they still have a very slight edge in ultimate performance. An edge you can only detect if you go beyond sane loads. A recent change in the Federal case can be noted. A new head stamp has a dash between the F-C, while the old case appeared F C. These very latest cases may not be quite as tenacious as the originals, but I had to go beyond any maximum working load to detect even the slightest stickiness as the cases were ejected from the cylinder. A relative newcomer to the .45 Colt case world is the Starline. I found them to be equal to the late run Federal. Winchester .45 Colt brass is slightly less resilient. With full maximum loads some slight sticking can be noted with the WW case. I reserve and use Winchester cases for the ".44 Magnum" level loads. Using the WW head stamp is one way to keep these loads separate from the turbo-charged ones loaded in another brand.

Bullets for the five-shot guns leave the door wide open. My general use bullet is the 325-grain LFN, driven at just over 1,400 fps. A wide nose LBT of this weight would be very attractive and I should have one made some day. My personal heavyweights are 350-grain LFN and a 360-grain WFN. They have answered across the world for almost any imaginable kind of game. The heavier bullets become more efficient, offering almost as much velocity as the 325-grain ones. I routinely use my 360-grain WFN at speeds ranging from 1,350 to 1,400 fps. This bullet cast with a pure lead soft nose and a hardened base will hit things like big hogs, elk and heavy deer so hard you almost won't believe what you see. In the fine guns gas checks are optional. I get perfect results with or without. However a bullet with a gas-checked base leads a bit less and is overall more forgiving. If we consider bullets heavier than 360 grains, they need some stern consideration.

There, in effect, is almost everything I know about the grand old and new .45 Colt. From Colts, Keith bullets and black powder, to Bowen/Rugers, LBTs and nitrocellulose. With them I have taken ton-buffalo and shot one-inch groups at 100 yards, climbed the mountains, roamed the plains of Africa, hunted seriously and plinked rocks. Archaic thinking aside, there really isn't any handgun job the .45 Colt cannot do.