

S. & W. 357 MAGNUM

# MASTERING DOUBLE-ACTION REVOLVERS

*It takes time and practice, but learning fast, accurate double-action shooting is one of handgunning's most rewarding experiences.*

*By Ross Seyfried*

**D**id you ever wonder why they call double-action revolvers double action? Actually, I expect you know that it means there are two ways to make them go bang. But based on what I see in the shooting journals, almost everyone ignores the second firing method known as double-action shooting. While it may be ignored and more difficult, this is the “speed king” of handgun shooting. It is also probably the most efficient way to hit moving or aerial targets. But it isn’t just fast; DA shooting can be extremely accurate and when mastered may offer the most *consistent* hits of any method of firing a handgun.

Before I get lost in the details I will define double-action shooting. Basically it means that you pull the trigger, without first bringing the hammer to the cocked position. Normally the trigger movement is quite long, possibly an inch or more. The weight of the pull is usually much heavier than the normal single-action pull of 2 to 4 pounds. A double-action pull usually requires 8 to 15 pounds of force at its peak.

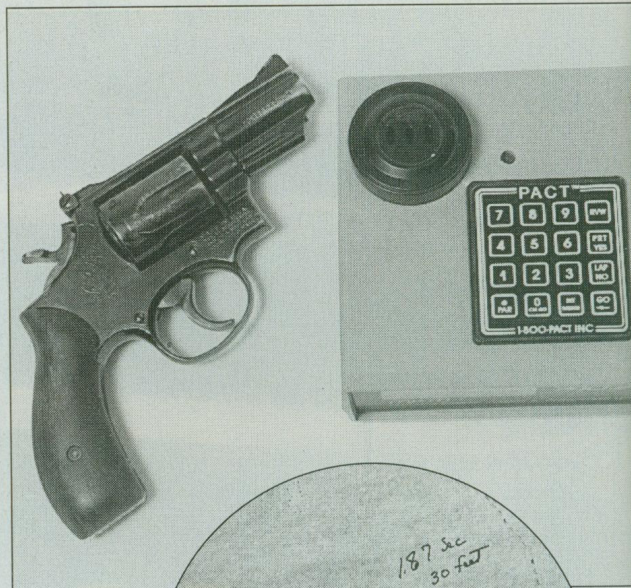
Most DA revolver lockwork employs a secondary lever or sear. This spring-loaded lever engages and cams the hammer back as the trigger is pulled. It is like rolling a ball up a ramp with a sheer drop at the end. You push the ball until it meets the drop and then it falls over the edge. The double-action trigger lifts the hammer until it reaches the apex of its travel (full cock with single action) and then without perceptible hesitation the hammer falls. Single action in the same light would be a ball propped at the brink of the cliff and the trigger would pull out a small stop that would send the ball falling.

With a DA revolver, up to six shots can be fired in rapid succession by simply pulling the trigger. Some of the fastest shooting ever recorded has been done with double-action revolvers. But remember, speed is a relative thing. It can range from the blinding speed of firing a gun-full in a few parts of a second to the very deliberate hit in a second or more. In every case it is the combination of relative speed and accuracy that makes double

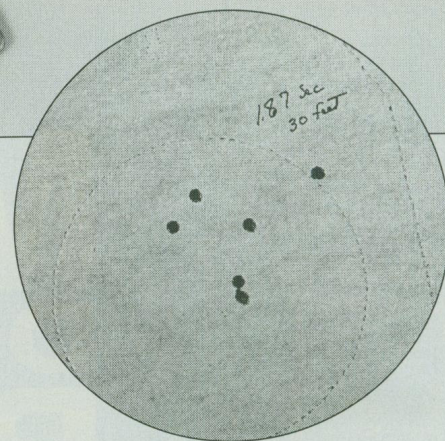
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action shine. I had originally intended to talk about both revolvers and the autos here. However, the pure DA autos and the selective kind are in their infancy. I just haven't been able to put enough miles on the autos and therefore will leave them for some future story. However, if you have one of them, most of the basic methods and techniques for revolver shooting will surely apply. Shooting the autos that require a DA first shot are another critter altogether.

*The PACT timer is useful for rapid-fire double-action shooting. It gives a start signal and records each shot and the total elapsed time for the string. It's shown here with one of the author's favorite DA teachers, a 2½-inch S&W Model 19 .357 Magnum, and a target fired in 1.87 seconds at 30 feet with that gun and mild .38 Special loads.*



*The strain screw on the mainspring of Smith & Wesson revolvers is sometimes backed out to give a lighter double-action pull. However, this procedure should be avoided, as it often results in misfires.*



The principles for firing the first DA round will be much like revolver shooting, but the sudden switch to single action makes a difficult "gear change." Also the plethora of safety/decocker devices often gives these modern miracles an attitude—or at least they offend this user. With this in mind we will set out to shoot the double-action revolver double action.

Getting the best advantage out of DA may require some modification of the way you grip your gun. Most masters of DA shooting, both past and present, favor a very high grip. That is, you get your hand as high up on the grip frame as possible. This in effect decreases the angle between wrist and barrel, giving the recoil less leverage to use against you. We use exactly the same principle when shooting the autos at speed, crushing the web of our hand up against the beavertail grip. When shooting DA we generally want to avoid the kind of handgun stocks that have a lot of filler behind the triggerguard. Many of these force you to hold the gun as much as a full "finger" lower than the gun's frame will allow. Shooting masters Elmer Keith and Ed McGivern both favored standard grips on their Smith & Wessons. These were the Magna style that covered only the sides of the grip frame and did not put filler in front of the frontstrap behind the guard.

There are times when the placement

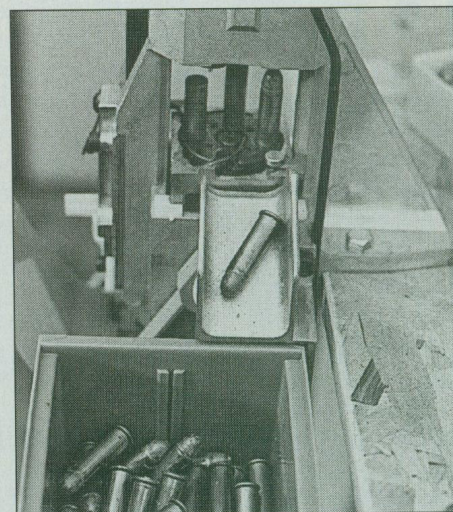
of the thumb on your gun hand is in question. That is, should it be held straight forward, "high" or curled down? In slow single-action shooting there may be a discussion, but when DA is employed I agree with the masters that the thumb should be curled down, actually making contact with your second finger. We really want to have a maximum grip on the gun when we have to control the long trigger movement and multiple recoil.

Keith and McGivern shot with one hand. They did things that few others have done, but I can't help but believe that the addition of the second mitt will make hitting easier under most circumstances. If you wanted to learn DA shooting with one hand before employing a two-hand grip, it might pay dividends in the long run. Making your gun hand really behave itself, without help, and then adding the supporting hand could ensure perfection of the basic techniques.

When it comes to placement of the trigger finger many students new to the DA game will want to put their trigger finger well into the guard, contacting the trigger at or even past the first joint. This will feel better in the beginning because your trigger finger will be weak and unaccustomed to the work you are asking it to do. Again the masters of DA shooting placed the pad of their finger on the trigger. This offers the balance of delicate touch and leverage. In the end, af-

ter you have built up the muscles and taught the nerves their job, the end of your finger will prove best.

With the basic grip and trigger-finger placement you are ready to begin to learn the art of double-action shooting. Trust me, you won't master it in a week-end. To get really good you are going to have to practice and practice. You will realize what I meant when I said your trigger finger would be weak when you



*Double-action practice can burn up a lot of ammunition, so the author uses a Dillon 550 progressive reloader to turn out handloads. It produces a loaded round with each pull of the handle.*

started. It will tire quickly and feel sluggish, but after a few ten thousand practice pulls it will come around. Possibly more than any other kind of shooting, double action thrives on dry-firing. You can almost master DA shooting in your living room.

Before you start clicking we have to think about safety. Double-action practice may lend itself to a gun accident more than any other form of shooting. The revolver begs you to grab it and click the trigger. If you don't do everything right, sooner or later it will go bang instead of click. The more you practice the more familiar you will become with the gun. As familiarity increases, so does the chance to make a mistake.

Perfect safety can be achieved by absolutely adhering to two principles: know that your gun is unloaded and assume that each time you pull the trigger it is going to launch a bullet. First, each and every time you touch the gun be sure to open the cylinder and look at it hard to see that there is no ammunition in it. If you have a momentary mental lapse, go ahead and check the gun again. Second, to the end of assuming it will fire when you pull the trigger, always practice against a known backstop. That is, dry-fire against a brick wall, chimney or big solid tree. Don't line up the sights on windows, regular walls or anything else that could bring the bullet to a questionable stop. By using the first rule you won't have an accidental discharge; by using the second no harm will come when you do.

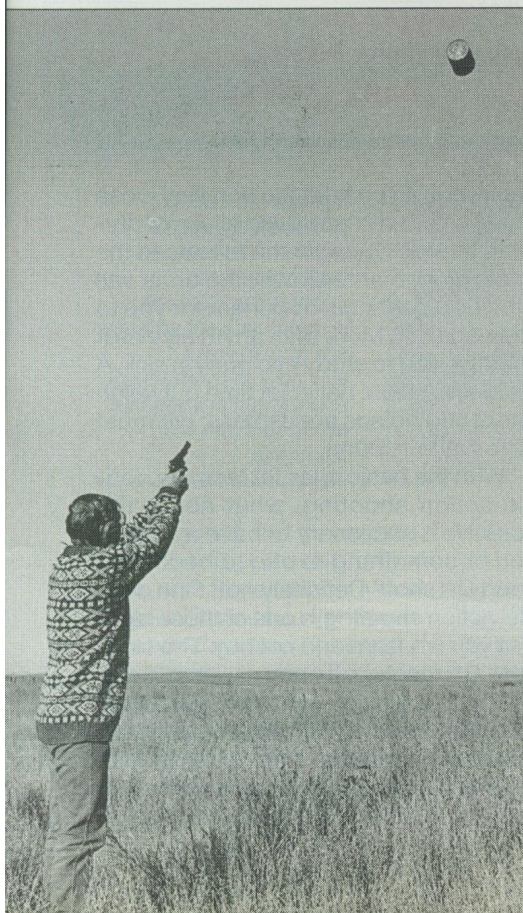
Like fast draw, double-action shooting is something you learn slowly. Nothing is served by clicking the gun fast at first. In fact, early attempts at speed will imbed bad habits in your nerves and muscles that may haunt the rest of your effort. To begin, grip the gun with a correct one or two-hand grip, align the sights and pull the trigger right through to the hammer fall, without a pause. All the while strive to maintain a perfect sight picture. (Do not try to pull the trigger to the edge of the cliff and then finish the pull, as if it were single action. This plan is only glorified single-ac-

tion shooting and defeats every advantage of double action.)

Stroke the trigger straight through with a smooth motion that may last half a second or more. The results will be bad at first, but don't be intimidated—you will win in the end. When the hammer drops, reverse the process, releasing the trigger almost as slowly as you pulled it and continue to work toward sight alignment. The careful trigger release may seem a waste, but later when you are in a hurry the movements practiced now will help you to keep the gun on target. Also the slow release is a sort



**For double-action shooting the author prefers the smaller K-frame S&W guns like the Model 19 .357 Magnum (top) to the larger N-frames like the .44 Magnum Model 29 (bottom). However, others have found the larger-frame guns more satisfactory in this application.**



**Left to right: Light-recoiling cartridges like the .22 LR, .32 Long and .38 Special are ideal for double-action practice.**

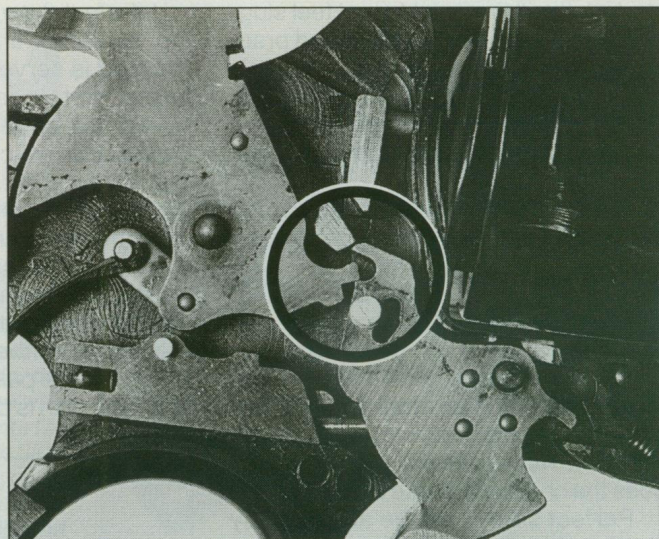
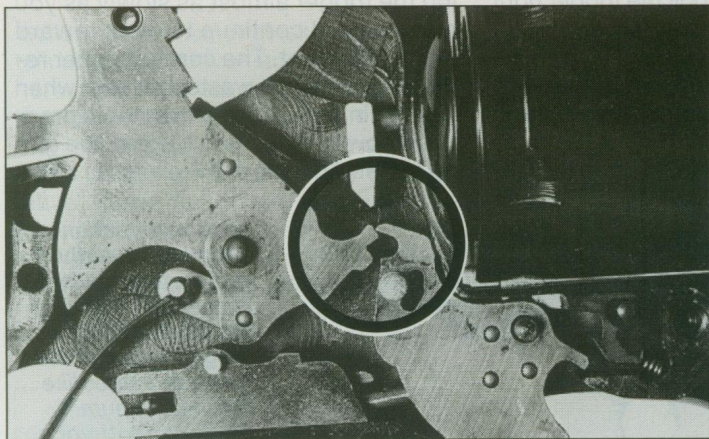
**Aerial shooting using double action is a real challenge. Elmer Keith was able to hit a gallon can six times before it hit the ground. This should be attempted only in an area where it is certain the bullets will fall safely.**

of isometric exercise for your hand. The great DA shot will in my opinion have a brutally strong grip. Like the chicken and egg, enough practice to be a good DA shot will make his grip powerful and he will need the powerful grip to be good.

At first the gun and sights will wobble around wildly. You will wonder how it could be possible to hit anything with DA shooting. But with practice that slow trigger pull will start to feel comfortable and the load on the springs will actually begin to dampen the gun's movement. When the gun starts to stay on target for the entire slow pull, begin to work the action a bit more rapidly. Right now your goal should be to pull the trigger through with a quick snap and have the sights stay in perfect alignment, even when the hammer slaps down. When one "shot" is going perfectly add a second, later a third. Work on shooting fast pairs and if you wish even strings of six.

At this point you are ready for the range and live ammunition. Yes, I know, you've already been there and have already tried your hand at blazing speed. Put aside the disappointment of those first trials and go back to work. Start

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*When an S&W action is cocked for single-action fire the hammer is held in position by the sear (left). When firing double action, the auxiliary sear lifts the hammer and then releases it as the pull is completed (above).*

with live ammunition just as you did when dry-firing—slowly, one precise shot at a time. When you can shoot groups right up to the gun's ability at 25 yards, begin to add a bit of speed. Actually the only difference with live ammunition is the added need to control recoil. Part of the reward in double-action shooting is that the energy necessary to pull the trigger can also be channeled to countering the recoil and returning the sights to the target.

Ed McGivern talked about a "poking motion" when he was shooting at

speed. He and Elmer Keith poked the gun back at the target, countering the recoil of the previous shot while pulling the trigger for the next. A well-trained athlete, including one who shoots, is a marvelous thing. These "poking" movements that at first seem to be deliberate efforts after the recoil soon become involuntary reactions during the recoil. Your nerves and muscles will become so trained and coordinated that they will act like a computer-driven gyro. They will anticipate the gun's movements before they happen, applying forces that will negate them. The net result of the finely tuned master is that the gun returns perfectly to the target without apparent effort.

When I was shooting the .45 autos at my best, I could rip off a pair of shots separated by something like  $\frac{1}{10}$  of a second and they would land like a pair of eyes on the target. The second shot was the product of pure trained reaction. If a shot failed to fire for any reason I would almost fall on my face. What appeared to be a savage flinch was my entire physical system balancing recoil...before it happened! The DA system lends itself even more to this kind of balanced action/reaction. It is more difficult to master but gives even greater versatility.

If you become serious about DA shooting your ammunition supply is going to need some help. Here there is almost no substitute for one of the good progressive reloading machines that give you a loaded round each time you pull the handle. RCBS has a good automatic

*The late Elmer Keith was expert with both double-action and single-action revolvers. Here he gives an early Model 29 .44 Magnum a workout DA-style.*

machine and Dillon offers a wide range of progressive reloading machines.

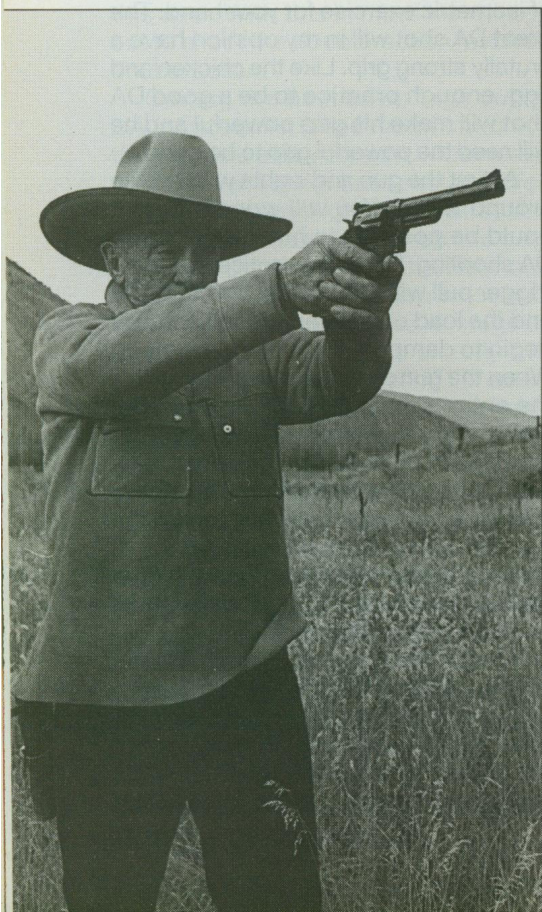
Another tool that is a fun and fascinating aid to the development of your skill is a shot timer. I use the PACT. This is an ingenious electronic device that senses the sound of a shot and records it relative to elapsed time for later review. In its most basic mode the timer will give you a start signal and then record each shot. When you review the shooting the timer shows you the total elapsed time for each string and the time separating

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each shot. If you hold the gun very close to the unit it will record the clicks of dry-firing as well. Once you have learned the basic movements slowly, the timer will provide a continual opponent for you to work against. More than anything else it will drive you to study and grow in skill. A word of caution: never let time outweigh hits. Loud noises are useless; we must hit to make it count.

With the basic rules for learning double-action shooting, what about the guns? Is it necessary to have a special gun or something exotic to become a good DA shot? Definitely not. Fine double-action shooting is one of those skills that you will learn and not buy. The standard DA revolver, by any of our makers, will do the job for you. The incredible shooting feats of the past and present masters were shot with more or less standard guns, though the lockwork on

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## DOUBLE ACTION

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most modern production revolvers can certainly stand some help.

From time to time I see articles in the various gun magazines titled "Tune Your Own" whatever. In my opinion these are nothing more than a cruel joke. Describing how to do a reasonable action job on most DA revolvers to a beginner is a lengthy task. Learning the proper management of the stones and emery is an even longer process. When these writers pretend to grant you an instant miracle, they are generally risking your gun and ensuring work for a gunsmith. A smithy friend used to love every one of these "how-to" stories. They kept him in business fixing the wrecked guns for months to come. I'm not say-

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ing you can't help your own action; just don't expect to gain the skills and knowledge from a single article.

A book will help. Brownells has the Kuhnhausen shop manuals for revolvers. These are small books devoted to S&W, Ruger and Colt revolvers that explain repair and action tuning. The same firm has some special Wolff springs that can do a lot for a revolver's attitude.

In general I think it is best to leave lock/trigger work to someone who has had a lot of practice. The goal is to achieve a double-action pull that is uniform, smooth and as free of "lumps and bumps" as possible. Extremely light pull weights are not necessary or even desirable. The normal factory double-action pull will usually run from 12 to 18 pounds. A good smith can often bring that down to 8-12 pounds depending on the action type. Too much reduction in pull weight often means very light trigger-return or mainsprings. The light return spring can result in a slow or faulty trigger return that will eventually slow you down. The light mainspring might result in misfires or, worse, a delayed fire. Again, a good smooth pull with ample weight combined with training your hand and trigger finger is the answer.

There are a plethora of pistolsmiths in the world, and many specialize in double-action tuning. When you select one, just be sure he understands the

principles of making the gun go bang, not just giving you a light pull. Recently I have had some Smith & Wesson guns done by Bob Lloyd (Dept. GA, 1928 Mcdowling Drive, Huntsville, AL 35803). He offers a slightly different approach to tuning. Along with the action job he offers a complete diagnosis of the individual revolver. Some 30 different measurements or qualities are quantified or qualified. This points out things that might need attention in addition to the trigger work itself. So far his return time has been very reasonable and the \$60 charge is a bargain. The finished trigger pulls are very fine.

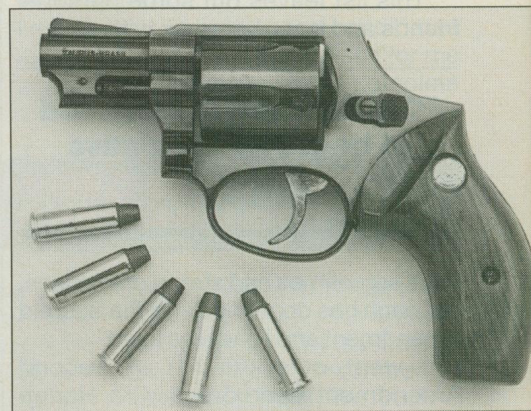
The double-action revolver with its cylinder loaded is possibly the most safe and yet the most "ready" kind of firearm. In its at-rest state the springs are relaxed and the hammer is down. There is no stored energy in the arm that might fire a cartridge. Conversely there are no safeties, flippers, drippers or droppers standing between the user and an ignited powder charge. Bringing the arm from full "at-rest-safety" to firing requires only the addition of some 10 pounds of the shooter's energy. This requires some considerable effort and movement so that an unwanted shot is almost impossible, but a hit can be the work of a few tiny parts of a second if the impulse to fire is given. After firing, the revolver is again at complete safety and at total readiness. The shot can be delivered with a high degree of accuracy, especially at the short ranges called upon for personal defense. The speed can range from fast to blinding. All of this totals what is in my opinion the perfect handgun for most people to use for personal defense.

There are those who recommend that the defensive revolver be converted to "DA only." That is, the single-action function is completely removed and the hammer spur cut away. It is an interesting point and probably has merit, but I prefer to keep the single-action function. In my wide-open part of the world I might need to keep some vermin's head down at 200 yards. Here the absolute precision of deliberate single-action fire could come in handy.

A quality of double-action shooting agreed upon by almost everyone who has achieved a reasonable degree of proficiency is hitting consistency. A precise hit, given some time, by firing single action is probably easier than double action. A shooter may make 2-inch groups at 25 yards single action, with some occasional fliers at 4 or 6 inches. However, the same shooter who has mastered the technique will probably consistently pile all of his shots into 3 inches with double-action shooting. The reason for this apparent witchcraft is simple. I have talked

about "grabbing" the shot in the past; that is, jumping on the trigger when the sights look right to make the hit. It is a very common mistake with single-action shooting that usually results in a wide miss. When you are firing double action your mind and muscles know that it is a long smooth haul from the start of the trigger pull to the shot. Even our greedy minds know better than to try to snap off 10 pounds of energy and an inch of pull just because the sights wandered past the target. Instead, the trained DA shot pushes the sights toward the target, continues the buttery-smooth pull and allows the gun to fire almost without effort. The result is a very high percentage of credible hits.

Allied to this is game shooting with the big-bore revolvers and double action. I know several shooters who take their game at reasonable ranges firing



**Designed for close-range defense, the five-shot Taurus Model 85CH .38 Special revolver has its hammer spur bobbed for DA-only fire.**

double action. Instead of the risk of jerking the single-action trigger when the buck is about to run, they trust the compressed double-action pull to put the shot home. This is a high degree of the art, but it is there for those who wish to study it. Begin on inanimate targets, then graduate to small game. During the process make note of your own limitations, learning what you can hit on demand and what you cannot. If you practice and learn the job thoroughly your chances of missing or misplacing a shot due to flinching will be lower than with single-action shooting.

Beyond the serious business of defense and hunting is the fun of shooting aerial targets and the pursuit of pure speed. At this point we have to stop and appreciate the work of Ed McGivern. His feats are described in his book *Fast and Fancy Revolver Shooting*, in which he describes the basic feat of hitting a gallon can, thrown in the air by an assistant, with six shots before it hits the ground. Our old mentor Elmer Keith set out to

prove the credibility of the feat and duplicated it easily after a winter's practice. Keith went one step further and threw his own target. Both men commented that it was much easier to do such shooting with a double-action revolver than any auto.

Here is the place where the force needed to pull the trigger begins to help you put the gun back on target. Each trigger pull is an act of recoil recovery and helps remove the temptation to flinch when the sights hit the mark. McGivern went on to hit tiny objects in the air and to do two of the most difficult feats of shooting I have ever encountered. He hit aerial targets while sighting with a mirror and he hit two targets in the air using two guns at the same time! I have tried both and can tell you that they are so difficult that I have never even pulled the trigger during my attempts. I do not know of any level of skill and coordination, in any sport or endeavor, that compares. Even Elmer Keith shook his head at these. They were accomplished by an uncommon man with an ordinary revolver and double action.

McGivern also drew the line in the sand where pure speed was concerned. On more than one occasion he fired five shots in  $\frac{2}{5}$  (0.40) of 1 second. The distance was 15 feet and the five-shot group could be covered with a playing card! The nature of his timer actually timed only four shots, starting when the hammer fell on the first, so we give him four shots in  $\frac{4}{10}$  of a second. The shots are separated by  $\frac{1}{10}$  second. Now I will tell you, that is screaming fast. Get a stopwatch and see how fast you can click it on and off and you will get a handle on the speed. Remember also, he wasn't just spraying lead. The records didn't count unless he could cover the groups with his hand.

We have one or two modern shooters who are close enough to duplicating these feats. Who knows, with enough practice you might join their ranks.

There it is, double-action shooting—standing before you like a gigantic bag of potato chips. Touch it and you can't stop. The challenge to your skills is absolutely addicting, and as you can see the goals and versatility are unlimited. I became hooked more than 20 years ago and reached a modest level of proficiency. Then I moved on to competition with the .45 auto and ultimate-power single actions. Now the very act of researching and writing this has hooked me again. This time I have a great helper, a Dillon 550 machine to crank out ammunition in unlimited quantities. I think I will start on the gallon can, something I have done before. Then I'm going to get out two guns, then...