the Smith & Wesson Model 1

of the round sideplate as well as painstaking and laborious insertion of the lockwork parts through its small underlying cavity. Accordingly, the design was modified to provide for first, a straight-cut sideplate, and then a larger irregular sideplate. The frame had flat sides. It retained the square butt and unfluted cylinder. This is known to collectors as the Model 1, Second Issue. They were made from 1860 through 1868. Serial numbers ran from 11,672 to 126,361, with a total of 114,689 being made. The revolver illustrated is one of these and by its serial number it was shipped from the factory in August of 1866. There were only a few minor changes during this issue’s production life. Interestingly, 4,402 of these guns with casting or cosmetic flaws but which were mechanically sound were stamped “2D. QUAL’TY.” They sold for $2 less. Perversely, these now bring higher prices on the collector market. Unscrupulous individuals have since faked these markings, so beware. Although the two-tone finish of its predecessor was standard, these second issues could be had fully plated with nickel, silver, or gold. Engraving was also an option. Two of them were actually manufactured with solid silver frames, but don’t hold your breath looking for one of them!

Following the Civil War, handgun sales dropped, and S&W looked to update the Model 1 to make it appear more modern and desirable. It was re-designed in early 1868, and is known today as the Model 1, Third Issue. It was made completely of wrought iron, dispensing with the cast brass frame. It had a rounded and pointed “bird’s head” grip, a round ribbed barrel and a fluted cylinder. The finish could be had in blue or nickel, or a nickel frame with a blue barrel and cylinder. Seven were marked “2D. QUAL’TY” for small defects. A shorter-barreled model was also made; the barrel length on that one measured 2-11/16”.

Here, the maker’s name was shifted to the left side of the barrel due to lack of space on the rib of the short barrel. Production began gradually in 1868, with manufacture in that year numbering only 392 units. However, in 1869, yearly production swelled to 10,000, and in 1870 it was 20,000. The reason for this increase was that S&W expanded into the international market, kicking off its wares at the Paris Exposition of 1867. As other manufacturers jumped on this bandwagon and the Rollin White patent expired, sales began to taper off. In 1882, sales were so slow that production of the Model 1, Third Issue came to a close. The serial number range for this issue ran from 1 to 131,163, and that was the total of these made. In all, a grand total of 257,523 Model 1s of all issues were manufactured.

It should be made clear that these are now very old guns originally designed to fire cartridges loaded with black powder propellant. Under no circumstances should they be fired with modern .22 Short rounds containing smokeless powder. These cartridges will fit, but are definitely dangerous to fire in old guns of uncertain strength and often deteriorating condition. They are but collector treasures, and should never be considered as shooters.

They were small guns, and really not all that effective. Famous mountain man Jim Bridger once remarked “Yep, I’ve seen that kind, but never handled ‘em. I was afeared I’d break it.” Still, the little guns launched Smith & Wesson as a powerhouse firearms manufacturer.

Collectors’ eyes light up when one of these S&W Model 1s turn up now and then, and values have continued to escalate in recent years. The First Issue is of course the most desirable and rare; it commands four-figure prices in almost any condition. A First Issue, first variation (with the flat latch) was recently sold in the $40,000 range. While not quite as significant, the Second and Third Issue guns are still quite desirable, valuable and historic. All qualify as true classics and milestones in the firearms world.

Acquiring one or more of the Model 1s should be a high priority for any collector interested in the history of firearms.