

CLASSIC HANDGUNS: The

By John Marshall

Colt Python. Those two words conjure up an image of quality, elegance and craftsmanship equivalent to that engendered by the words Ferrari, Mercedes-Benz and Rolls Royce in the automotive world. Although no longer made, the Python was and remains the pinnacle of fine revolver manufacture by Colt Firearms.

Before we examine why the Python has such formidable mystique, it would be good to examine its beginnings. For this, we have to go back to 1908, when Colt introduced the Army Special. This revolver debuted the same frame and action, which were to continue in the Colt line for many decades. It utilized a large V-spring, which powered most of the revolver's inner mechanism. Today such springs are anachronisms, largely supplanted by coil springs in modern revolvers. That Colt stuck with such an antiquated design through most of the 20th Century is a tribute to the design's basic soundness. The V-spring action eventually was to find its apex with the Python revolver.

Following World War II, Colt found itself in severe financial difficulties, as it no longer had wartime contracts to maintain its cash flow. Due to equipment and personnel problems, the company was not able to re-establish its handgun manufacture until several years after the war. It had to re-think its lines, and dropped several previously popular handguns including the New Service and Single Action Army revolvers. In the 1950s, Colt decided to refine some of its revolvers. The old Officer's Model target .38 Special revolver was improved and became the Officer's Model Match. The rising popularity of the .357 Magnum cartridge prompted the company to beef up the Officer's Model Match revolver to withstand increased pressure. This new revolver was called the Colt .357 Magnum. This gun was designed for the police and personal defense markets.

But the .357 Magnum wasn't really competing very well against Smith & Wesson's fine products. Their .357 Magnum (Model 27) and their less-expensive Highway Patrolman (Model 28) were dominating the police, sport and self-defense markets. Colt's product wasn't, well...very sexy. In addition, that extractor rod hanging out in space was vulnerable to bending and disabling the revolver. And that old action was a bit stiff and it stacked at the end of the double-action pull. What was needed was a new revolver that could go toe-to-toe with Smith & Wesson and beat or surpass their products on all counts.

Numerous gunsmiths had been working over the Colt .357 Magnum for years, honing the action and installing heavier barrels, many of them ribbed, ostensibly for heat wave dispersion, but also giving the revolver a very...sexy...look. Many of these customized Colts were making strong inroads on the target circuit. Colt noticed this trend and decided to one-up the best of the custom products. The new revolver was christened the Python, and it almost immediately created a sensation on its introduction in 1955.



It was a more or less conventional six-shot double action .357 revolver with a swing-out cylinder. But gone was the slender barrel. In its place was a heavy, 6" barrel, topped with a ventilated rib. Under the barrel was an integral shroud which ran the length of the barrel and which nearly completely enclosed the extractor rod, protecting it from damage. The first shrouds were hollow, but Colt soon made them solid to add forward weight to the gun. The wide hammer spur of the Officer's Model Match was retained, but with a twist. The firing pin was moved from the hammer to the frame, where it was struck by the flat-faced hammer.

The old V-spring action was hand-fitted and polished at the factory to give a smooth pull likened to running your oiled finger across glass. It was equipped with a fully adjustable target rear sight. The finish was "Colt Royal Blue," so deep and clear you could almost swim in it. The same checkered target grips used on the Officer's Model Match were utilized. Quality control on the Python was intense, and many hours of hand labor went into making it just right in all respects. Tolerances were held razor-fine on chamber and barrel dimensions, so the revolver handled both .357 Magnum and .38 Special cartridges with

"Pythons have now become status symbols equal to fine luxury automobiles."