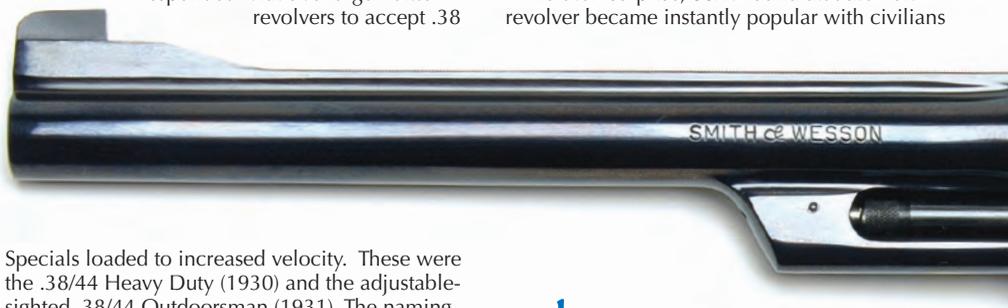


CLASSIC HANDGUNS: The Smith & Wesson

By John Marshall

During the 1920s, the most ubiquitous cartridge in the U.S. was the .38 Special. It was standard issue for most police departments, and had a huge following in the civilian market as well.

Many police departments wanted something with more power, that would allow them to more effectively combat the criminals of that era. Something that could penetrate auto bodies (back when they were made of heavy gauge U.S. steel) and have enough smacking power to do the job at longer ranges. Smith & Wesson responded with two large-frame revolvers to accept .38



Specials loaded to increased velocity. These were the .38/44 Heavy Duty (1930) and the adjustable-sighted .38/44 Outdoorsman (1931). The naming reflected a .38 Special built on a .44 frame. Still, a souped-up .38 Special was still a .38 Special, and it had its limits, particularly if used in the aging K-frame revolvers extant.

Accordingly, Col. Douglas B. Wesson, grandson of one of the founders of Smith and Wesson, got together with noted firearms experts Phil Sharpe and Elmer Keith to develop a cartridge that would far surpass the .38 Special in power. It was to have a bullet diameter of .357" (the actual bullet diameter of the .38 Special), but configured so that it could not inadvertently be loaded into .38 Special handguns with potentially disastrous results. What they developed was a case about 1/8" longer than the .38 Special, loaded with a 158-grain bullet to an original velocity of 1515 f.p.s. from an 8-3/4" barrel. Col. Wesson, being a wine fancier, knew the term "magnum" meant a wine bottle of increased capacity, and he applied the name to the new cartridge. In 1934, Winchester produced a cartridge to Col. Wesson's specifications, and the .357 Magnum round was born.

The first ".357 Magnum" revolver was produced, and it was presented as a gift to J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, on April 17, 1935. Serial #2 was given on the same date to Philip B. Sharpe, who was instrumental in the development of the cartridge.

The .357 Magnum was designed primarily as a police handgun, and it was not anticipated that civilian sales would be all that extensive. Accordingly, civilian sales were on a special-order basis

only. This deluxe revolver (which cost a whopping \$15.00 more than most handguns in the line) was offered with a choice of features. Customers could order blue, nickel or engraved finish and 23 barrel lengths ranging from 3.5" to 8.75". They had a choice of no less than 6 front sight configurations plus any King sight combination (dozens at that time), and the option of standard or Magna grips with or without a grip adapter. A "humpback" hammer was also offered as an option. Several other non-cataloged sight and grip options have turned up on extant examples.

To their surprise, S&W found that the new revolver became instantly popular with civilians

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and members of the military. Probably the most notable purchaser was George S. Patton, who ordered a blued 3.5"-barreled revolver in 1935 and had it fitted with ivory grips engraved with his initials. He wore this revolver and a Colt single action during World War II as one of the war's most celebrated general officers.

The .357 Magnum was the crown jewel in the S&W lineup of firearms. It was provided with a high-polish blue or a sparkling nickel plate. The top strap, rear sight leaf and barrel rib were distinguished by fine checkering, unique on revolvers to this day.

Each early revolver was provided with a registration card, and the owner could send it in for a fancy registration certificate. The registration number was also stamped in the crane recess of the revolver, for example "Reg XXXX." Roughly half the new owners sent in for the certificate. The revolver was provided with a blue "picture" box with a red interior appropriate to the barrel length, sight adjustment screwdriver, cleaning brush,