

CLASSIC HANDGUNS: The Smith

By John Marshall

The Smith & Wesson Model 60 revolver was an epoch-making development. It was the very first production stainless steel handgun. While it would seem common today, in 1965 most handguns were made of carbon steel, and came blued or sometimes plated for rust resistance. The little stainless Model 60 was therefore revolutionary, starting a trend that continues today. Stainless handguns, and in particular stainless revolvers, are commonly encountered as we enter the 21st Century.

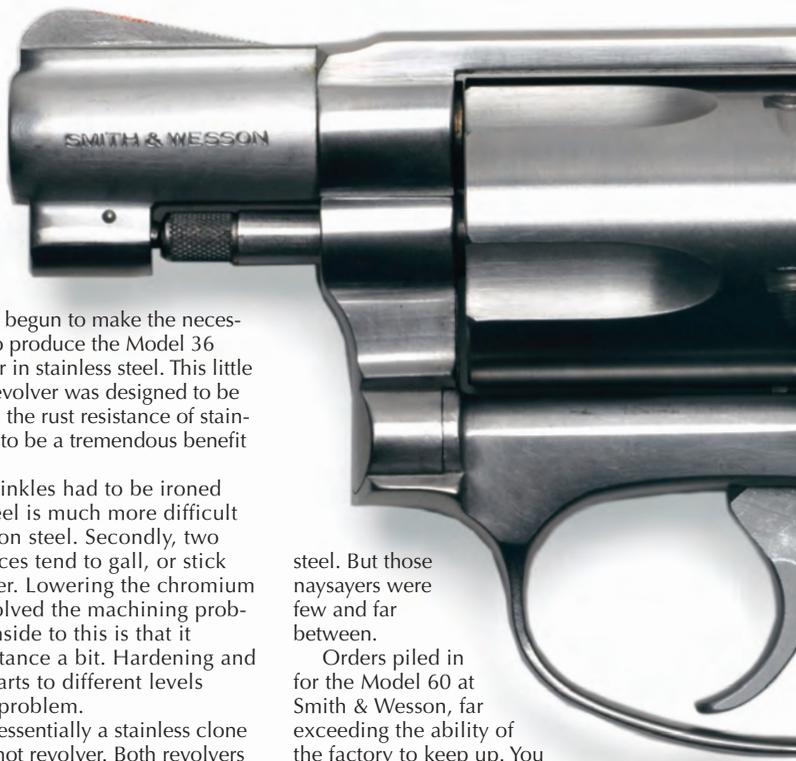
Following the fatal heart attack of Smith & Wesson president Carl Hellstrom in 1963, William G. Gunn was appointed to that post. In 1964, under Gunn's leadership, plans were begun to make the necessary tooling changes to produce the Model 36 Chief's Special revolver in stainless steel. This little five-shot .38 Special revolver was designed to be carried constantly, and the rust resistance of stainless steel would prove to be a tremendous benefit and sales multiplier.

Some technical wrinkles had to be ironed out. First, stainless steel is much more difficult to machine than carbon steel. Secondly, two stainless mating surfaces tend to gall, or stick when working together. Lowering the chromium content of the steel solved the machining problem, although a downside to this is that it reduced the rust-resistance a bit. Hardening and tempering adjacent parts to different levels improved the galling problem.

The Model 60 was essentially a stainless clone of the Model 36 five-shot revolver. Both revolvers were swing-out cylinder J-frame double-action .38 Specials, with a two-inch barrel and an external hammer for single-action cocking. The Model 60 in its original version weighed 19 ounces.

The first production began in May of 1965, and 39 revolvers were completed by late summer of that year. The Model 36 was originally announced at a conference of the International Chiefs of Police, and Gunn decided that the Model 60 would be introduced in the same way. In October 1965, the new stainless Chief's Special was announced to the world. Production serial numbers began at 401,754. The little revolver took the firearms press by storm, and many articles were written about it. Samples were dunked in fresh and salt water, subjected to simulated rain, and buried in wet dirt for long periods of time. While

stainless steel will rust under extended extreme conditions, it is far superior to carbon steel or nickel-plating in resistance to corrosion. The diminutive revolver showed its superiority in all tests and got the ringing endorsement of virtually all gun writers who could get their hands on one. A few die-hards claimed that this model's trigger was not as smooth as the Model 36, and that its vaunted rust resistance was not much better than plated carbon



steel. But those naysayers were few and far between.

Orders piled in for the Model 60 at Smith & Wesson, far exceeding the ability of the factory to keep up. You were considered very lucky to snag one. I was one of the lucky ones, and got one almost right away. Although Arizona had not yet become a concealed carry state, many of the first ones showed up as open-carry field "kit guns" in this state, and police undercover agents clamored for them. Sadly, I let my first one go in a trade after a few years, not realizing that I had what would become a prime collector's item. Those

The S&W Model 60 production stainless