

Colt Single Action Army

with only five cartridges, keeping an empty chamber under the downed hammer. This was a smart safety measure, and is still recommended today for the SAA and its close clones.

In the years through 1940, the SAA revolver was offered in 36 documented calibers. In addition to the .45 Colt, other popular calibers were the .44/40, the .38/40, .32/20 and .22 Rimfire. You could get a Colt SAA in virtually any handgun caliber from .22 Rimfire to the monstrous 476 Eley. Early in the 20th Century, you could get a SAA in .44 Special or .38 Special. After 1935, the .357 Magnum was available.

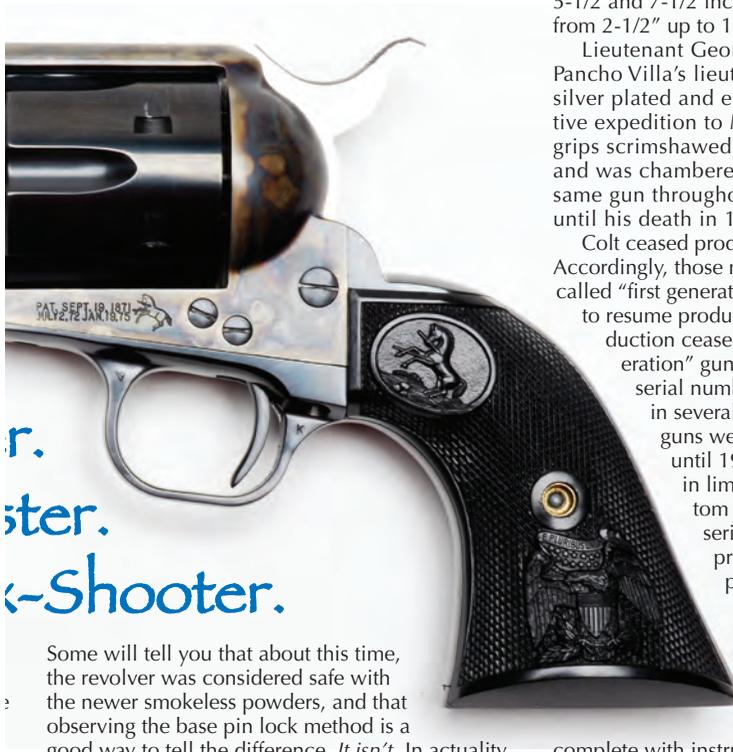
Few modifications were made to the revolver over the years. In 1894, a transverse spring-loaded bolt replaced the screw-in cylinder base pin lock.

Buntline" had allegedly and disputably ordered some long-barreled guns for five famous western lawmen including Wyatt Earp. Long-barreled SAAs have thus become known as "Buntline Specials." Lawman Bat Masterson favored a shorter barrel, equal in length to the end of the ejector rod housing (4 7/8 inches). In 1878, he ordered a nickel-plated SAA with ivory grips direct from Colt made just that way. Grips were usually one-piece wood, but after the turn of the 20th Century, two-piece grips of black hard rubber became standard. The standard finish was a case-hardened-and-colored cylinder frame, with barrel, cylinder and grip frame finished in blue. Plating, engraving and a variety of other grip materials could be had on special order. Standard barrel lengths were 4-3/4, 5-1/2 and 7-1/2 inches, but virtually any length from 2-1/2" up to 16" was available.

Lieutenant George S. Patton, Jr. killed two of Pancho Villa's lieutenants with a 4-3/4"-barreled silver plated and engraved SAA during the punitive expedition to Mexico in 1916. It had ivory grips scrimshawed with his intertwined initials and was chambered in .45 Colt. He carried that same gun throughout WWII as a general officer until his death in 1945.

Colt ceased production of the SAA in 1940. Accordingly, those made from 1873 to 1940 are called "first generation" guns. Demand forced Colt to resume production in 1956, and again production ceased in 1978. These "second generation" guns had "SA" as a suffix to the serial number. Colt simplified production in several ways, and "third generation" guns were in production from 1978 until 1984. Now they are only made in limited numbers by the Colt Custom Shop. Third generation guns' serials have SA suffixes, then SA prefixes, then serials with S as the prefix and A as the suffix in 1993 and later. The SAA illustrated is a third-generation gun made in 1980, in the comparatively uncommon .44 Special caliber. It is still unfired in its original box complete with instruction manual.

The Single Action Army has a proud history of service over the years. My maternal grandfather carried one when he rode shotgun on the Wells Fargo stage between Tombstone and Bisbee, Arizona, at the turn of the century. He packed that same gun during the labor strife in the mines in Bisbee in 1917. The Peacemaker served him well. SAAs still render faithful service in private hands today. Strong, reliable, graceful and functional, the Colt Single Action Army is a timeless classic handgun.



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Some will tell you that about this time, the revolver was considered safe with the newer smokeless powders, and that observing the base pin lock method is a good way to tell the difference. *It isn't.* In actuality, it wasn't until 1900 that Colt certified the SAA for smokeless powder. If the gun is in good shape and has a serial number above 192000, it's officially considered "smokeless safe."

A flattop target model came out in 1888, and in 1894 the "Bisley" model was introduced, named after the famed English shooting range. It featured a more vertical grip design and a lowered hammer for easier thumb-cocking. Short-barreled "Storekeeper" or "Sheriff" models had barrels with no ejector rods. Dime novel writer "Ned