By John Marshall

The Smith & Wesson Model 39 9mm pistol was a significant classic if only for the reason that it was America’s first double-action semiautomatic pistol. As such, it was the ancestor of a large family of Smith & Wesson double-action pistols in many calibers and sizes. It also prompted the design and manufacture of competitive DA pistols by other companies in the United States and abroad.

The story of the Model 39 begins in 1946, when Carl Hellstrom was elected president of Smith and Wesson. He had previously held the post of production manager, and was widely regarded as a competent “idea man.” In addition to an objective of improving the company’s production capabilities, he wanted to develop new models to expand the S&W line. Until then, the company had manufactured but a few semiautomatic pistols. These were of the pocket pistol genre and had been out of print for many years. Hellstrom was aware that the U.S. government was considering making the .45 1911A1 pistol obsolete and substituting a 9mm pistol to conform to European standards. Accordingly, he charged Joe Norman, S&W’s chief designer, to develop a double-action pistol that could compete with the Walther P.38 pistol used by Germany during WWII. In 1948, Norman and his team produced a prototype pistol with the serial X-46. It was a double-action 9mm that combined the Walther DA concept with the Browning tilt-barrel cammed locking system. It utilized a four-inch barrel and an eight-shot single-stack magazine. The pistol incorporated a rear sight adjustable for windage only and a magazine safety. If the owner didn’t want a magazine safety, it could be easily removed. Both steel and aluminum-frame pistols were produced and tested. In July 1953 the factory sent samples in both double and single-action to Springfield Armory for evaluation. Unfortunately for S&W, the Army cooled on the idea of replacing its stock of 1911A1 pistols, and no military contract was in sight.

The decision was made to put the aluminum-framed 9mm double action onto the civilian and police market. On December 4, 1954, the first guns were completed. Not yet sure that a double-action pistol would be received well, the company also produced and made parts for some single-action guns. A couple of single-action guns were sent to some government and police agencies for testing. As some interest was shown, the January 1956 catalog introduced the 9mm single action (later called the Model 44) and the double-action (later called the Model 39). Prices were $65 and $70 respectively. Interest in the single-action gun was nil, and only 10 were ever built. These are fabulously expensive collector pieces today. The Model 44 was removed from the S&W catalog in 1958.

As the 9mm was not a widely available cartridge in those years, the Model 39 was not a particularly big seller. In 1957, only 426 pistols were produced. Beginning at about serial number 2000, the model number began to appear on frames. About this time, at serial number 2200, a longer safety lever was incorporated, making it easier to thumb the safety on and off. Sales gradually increased over the next several years. Early in the 9mm program, the company had forged