

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

Skeeter's Bullets

By: Glen E. Fryxell

This article reprinted with permission of
Glen E. Fryxell and Sixguns.com

Skeeter Skelton was a handgun man. He was a lawman, an outdoorsman, and a competitive shooter, but the bottom-line is that he was plain and simple a gun-crank whose favorite form of blued steel slid into a holster. At one time or another he owned and/or shot just about every variation on the handgun theme in existence; Colt SAA's, Lugers, S&W's, 1911's, Ruger Blackhawks, Pythons, and more. He loved his .45 Colts, and .44 Specials, the .32-20s and .45 ACP's, his flat-top .44 Magnum and the ever-popular .22s. But he positively doted on the .357 Magnum. Whether this was because of his extensive experience as a lawman, or because he lived most of his life in the desert southwest where many of the hunting "chores" (javelina, turkey and jack rabbits) were readily handled by the .357 Magnum, or simply because he was an eminently pragmatic man, it really doesn't matter. The sermon from the scrub oak was the same, Skeeter Skelton was positively enamored with the .357 Magnum. Nor was he shy about declaring his preference in projectiles; while he generally preferred plain-based bullets for his big-bore shooting, he was resolute in his preference for gas-checked cast bullets in the .357 Magnum. After trying out a variety of different cast bullets, Skeeter settled on the Lyman 358156, a GC-SWC designed by Ray Thompson, and its hollow-pointed kid brother (the 358156 HP).

Skeeter was also one of the more knowledgeable handloader's of the last 50 years. He performed many experiments and tried lots of combinations to see what worked and what didn't. But given an option, his sweat-stained pragmatism lead him focus on two of the best all-time pistol powders, Unique and 2400. This logic saved his readers from having to buy dozens of different powders to assemble his preferred handgun loads, but it also has its limitations.

One of the more popular question in gun shops, discussion boards and magazines, is "If you could only have one gun.....". Well, once upon a time back in the early 1960s, an editor asked Skeeter this question, and phrased it from a unique Cold-War perspective, "If you could only have one gun with which to survive nuclear holocaust, what would it be?" Hmmm.. Skeeter argued that both gun and ammo would need to be small and easily transported (preferably by horseback) since he would want to "weather the storm" in the mountains, it would need to be easily reloaded using tong tools (no loading benches in the rimrock), it would have to shoot bullets cast over a campfire, it had to be powerful enough for both self-defense and hunting, but frugal enough that a valuable stash of components would outlast the hostilities. His conclusion was logical, the .357 Magnum.

The kit that would go along on such a trip included ingots of bullet metal, a brick of primers, a pound or two of powder, an appropriate tong-tool, gas-checks, spare brass, a small cast-iron lead pot and ladle, a pair of mould handles and one bullet mould -- the 358156 HP (he argued that standard SWC's could be cast by using a shortened spud, or

by dropping BB's into the cavity). All this was packaged in a small Army surplus canvas backpack that was easily grabbed on a moments notice. One of the most knowledgeable handgunners of the smokeless era had chosen these two bullets (the 358156 SWC and HP) to feed and defend himself and his family for "the duration" in the event of nuclear holocaust. While the editor's scenario may be viewed as a bit extreme today, Skeeter's was not a trivial decision, nor was it a trivial endorsement.

I feel that part of the reason that Skeeter was so adamant about GC bullets in the .357 was due to his choice of powders. Both Unique and 2400 have fairly high nitroglycerine content, which leads to relatively high flame temperatures, and in high-pressure small bore cartridges (where expansive cooling doesn't kick in as quickly due to the lesser expansion volume), leading can be a real problem with plain-based bullets. However, GC bullets are not the only solution to this problem). But Skeeter worked up his loads in a simpler time with a much more limited powder selection that we enjoy today. Unique and 2400 delivered the ballistics that he wanted and did it in a highly reliable fashion, so that's where he hung his hat (and his gas-checks).

We've had a lot of very good powders come along since Skeeter did those campfire experiments and I wanted to see how some of the newcomers stacked up against his landmark loads. The 358156 SWC's I used were cast from wheel-weight alloy with about 2% added tin and water quenched as they fell from the blocks. They weighed 161 grains thus cast, after being checked and lubed. The 358156 HP's were cast of similar alloy, but allowed to air cool after casting. They weighed 153 grains checked and lubed.

Test loads for Lyman 358156 GC SWC-HP
153 grains checked and lubed
Velocities

Powder	Charge	3"	6"	8 3/8"
W296	16.3 gr	1125	1312	1360
2400	14.0 gr	1141	1307	1357
AA #9	13.0 gr	1080	1196	1231
AA #7	10.5 gr	1088	1273	1301
HS-7	10.0 gr	1115	1267	1278

Test loads for Lyman 358156 GC SWC
161 grains checked and lubed
Velocities

Powder	Charge	3"	6"	8 3/8"
W296	16.3 gr	1175	1324	1343
2400	14.0 gr	1177	1350	1368
AA #9	13.0 gr	1056	1226	1222
AA #7	10.5	1122	1202	1262
HS-7	10.0	1088	1221	1267

Three guns were chosen for this evaluation: a 3" CS-1, the S&W 686 that was made for the US Customs Service back in 1988, a 6" Classic Hunter 686 made in the same year, and an 8 3/8" S&W 586 dating from 1984 (this gun is a varmint hunter's delight!); all are guns with well-established accuracy capabilities. Most of the accuracy testing was done with the Classic Hunter, comparison tests were run with the others; velocities were collected using all three guns.

All loads shot reasonably well in that 10 shot groups generally hovered just under 2" at 25 yards, with very few over that mark. As expected, 296 and 2400 were the velocity leaders, but it came as a pleasant surprise that they were the accuracy

leaders as well, with 10-shot groups generally running in the 1 1/2" range at 25 yards for the full-sized guns and somewhat larger for the 3" snubby. The most accurate load tested was the 358156 HP loaded over 16.3 grains of 296 sparked with a CCI 550 primer at 1 1/4" from both the 6" Classic Hunter and the 8 3/8" 586. Both 2400 and 296 drove either of these bullets to 1300-1350 from the full-size revolvers and 1150 fps or so from the snubby. These were numbers that the other powders flirted with, but generally fell just short of. Skeeter liked to load his 2400 .357 Magnum loads a little stiffer than those shown

here, but today's 2400 seems to burn a bit hotter than that of earlier days, so I'll stick with the 14.0 grain load. Either way, a cast HP at 1300+ fps is a deadly load.

Yeah, a lot of powder has gotten burned since Skeeter originally worked up his .357 Magnum loads for the 358156 back in the Cold War era of the 1950s. We have lots of options now that he didn't have, but none of them are decidedly better than what he finally settled on (some are just as good, but none are better). Good pair, the 358156 and the .357 Magnum. Seems I've read that somewhere before... Vaya con Dios Esquiter.

- Glen E. Fryxell

Warning: All technical data mentioned, especially handloading and bullet casting, reflect the limited experience of individuals using specific tools, products, equipment and components under specific conditions and circumstances not necessarily reported in the article or on this web site and over which The Los Angeles Silhouette Club (LASC), this web site or the author has no control. The above has no control over the condition of your firearms or your methods, components, tools, techniques or circumstances and disclaims all and any responsibility for any person using any data mentioned. **Always consult recognized reloading manuals.**

[The LASC Front Page](#) [Index to all LASC Articles](#)

[Glen E. Fryxell Article Index](#)