

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

Elmer Keith's Semi-Wad Cutters

By: Jim Taylor

I was 15 years old that summer... the time sticks in my mind even though it was nearly 50 years ago.... Dad had gotten me my first 'big bore' revolver, a Ruger .357 Magnum 6 1/2" Blackhawk. He had also picked up a couple bullet molds for me, one of which was Elmer Keith's 173 gr. Semi-Wad Cutter (SWC) - Lyman #358429. Having been a fan of all things "Elmer" this became my favorite bullet in the sixgun. I used it for hunting, target shooting, long range plinking... you name it.

With its heavy front and rear bands and long nose the bullet was stable to extremely long ranges, even if not driven at top velocity. I tried a number of different loads with it and settled on 14.5 gr. of 2400 and a Small Rifle Primer. We did not have a chronograph in those days but this load would crack a Ford car rim at 200 yards, sometimes shooting through it. I figured that would do.

My first .357'd coyote fell to this bullet and load. We used to shoot at a spot north of Phoenix where a large flood control dike had been put in years before. (This dike ran across a good portion of what is now Paradise Valley for quite a few miles.) It was a good location, great backstop, and we could shoot 500 or 600 yards if we so choose. Dad pulled the car near the backstop to set up some targets and as I got out of the car suddenly there was a large coyote looking at me from the top of the dike. My pistol came up and WHAM... Mr. Coyote bit the dirt.

Over the years I found that what Elmer said about these slugs was no exaggeration. They worked like he said they would.

Later on when I started shooting the .45 Colt's I obtained the Keith SWC bullet for it also. The first mold I got was the Lyman #454424. My mold cast this bullet right at 260 gr. out of wheel weights and it has always been a good performer. I have driven it full-length through deer on occasion. Out of the 454 Casull at 1530 fps, deer hit with it exhibited many of the same symptoms as when hit with a high-velocity rifle load. And the bullet has proven accurate over the years to distances beyond 1/4 of a mile.

With the Keith design the front shoulder serves purposes. It helps the bullet line up in the chamber and barrel and it cuts nice clean holes in paper targets! Such shooting was common in the early parts of the last century. It still is with those who want to know exactly how well they are doing. (it may not be as satisfying as hearing a metal target clang... but you durn sure know where the bullet went). Getting as clean a hole as possible is a great aid if you are shooting for score, which some IOFA's still do on occasion!!

At standard revolver velocities (we are talking of years before Ruger or Freedom Arms et al) a full wadcutter was the accuracy bullet to use if you were shooting targets. But they are lousy for any type of long-range shooting. (I am not talking of running them 1600 fps. I am speaking here of running them at velocities safe in a S&W Model 10 or an old Colt SAA. Say 850 to 1000 fps) Even bullets of a wide blunt design like the LBT WFN lose accuracy at distances when compared to bullets with the Keith-size meplat (such as the LBT LFN). They just do not have the aerodynamics to fly well.

I once set a 5 gallon bucket full of rocks at 300 yards on a nice open hillside. Then I proceeded to shoot at it with various bullets and loads using my Freedom Arms 454 Casull.

- The 350 gr. LBT WFN would not stay in a 10 foot circle at that distance when fired at 850 fps.
- Neither would the 330 gr. LBT WFN.
- The LBT LFN's of all weights that I had were very accurate at that velocity.
- So was the Keith 260 gr. SWC. If I did my part the bucket got thumped regularly.

When I kicked the velocity of the 330 and 350 gr. LBT WFN's up over 1400 fps they shot more accurately. To get top accuracy from the 350 gr. bullet I had to run it around 1600 fps. This was outside the parameters of the test. What I was trying to see was the accuracy of bullets at velocities such as were normal in the early part of the 20th Century. Or what you would get from a .38 Special or Colt SAA or some other firearm that was not intended for extremely high pressure high - velocity loads.

Tests run using my Ruger .357 Magnum and a S&W Model 10 and full-wadcutters only confirmed what other had written years before. Full-wadcutters are not normally good

The Keith SWC's in .357, .41, .44 and .45 all work well at extended ranges. They also perform well as game bullets and as target bullets. I got good accuracy over a wide range of velocities with the Keith bullets. Fast or slow they shot well. They are pretty much an "all-around" bullet.

The nose of the bullet - or "meplat" to get technical - is the working end of the bullet. The flat part is what is the most effective at disrupting tissue. The meplat of the LBT LFN is approximately the same diameter as the Keith bullet (as is the meplat of the SSK 270-451, another bullet I have fired through a number of critters). Wound diameters and disruption seemed to be similar in all the animals I shot with these bullets, when the bullets were fired at comparable velocities.

On occasion I have observed fluids being blown out of the animals shot with the Keith bullets.. I was about 50 yards out in front and off to the side when Dad shot a Whitetail through the head from behind. His shot was slightly at a downward angle. The bullet entered between and behind the ears and exited the lower jaw just under the teeth. At the shot I saw a "spray" fan out in front of the deer for about a foot and half. His load was the Keith .44 SWC (Lyman #429431) over 18.5 gr. 2400 ..fired in a .44 Magnum single action.

I shot a large Javelina sow at about 70 yards using my old Ruger .45 and the Keith SWC (Lyman #454424) over 18.5 gr. 2400. The hit was a little too far back, just behind the diaphragm. At the shot there was a large fan-shaped spray off the other side of the pig. The spray went up about double the body height and was as wide as the pig was long. The sow started shaking all over violently, took 2 or 3 steps and collapsed.

I don't know if others have ever observed something like this but I am sure some must have. And I am sure it does not happen just with the Keith bullets. I have only seen it twice and both times just happened to be when they were in use.

Over the years people have copied, changed and sometimes boogered up the original design. The original Keith design has a wide, flat-bottomed grease groove. And it had 3 bands of equal width: front, middle and rear. It also had a beveled crimp groove. It has a fairly long nose. And it is a flat-base, plain-base bullet. The RCBS .45 KT mold and their .44 KT mold come very close to the originals, at least in the copies I have. The Lyman design was changed to a rounded grease groove, which, while it works OK (and I have shot a lot of them) was not *original*. Is it important? Probably not... unless you are a nostalgic old codger like me. I have used the Lyman design... still have a mold in fact... and it is a good accurate bullet.

Are the Keith bullets better than _____? (you fill in the blank with the name of your favorite bullet)



No. They work. They work well. But if I am going to shoot bullets heavier than Keith designed I will go to LBT or bullets like that for the simple reason.... **ultra-heavy Keith designs put too much bullet back into the case and cut powder capacity - for me! It's a personal preference** of mine. I have shot the Keith designs in weights up to 350 gr. in the .454. They were accurate. I just prefer a bullet that seats out further.

When it comes to standard weight bullets though, for most uses I will stick with Elmer's designs. They are accurate further than you can see. They give you plenty of power for most anything that walks crawls or flies. And they are

pure "Elmer". My reasoning is based on nothing less than nostalgia and a preference for things that are "Old School".

The #429421 .44 bullet is the only bullet that I handload in my .44 Special. There two reasons: (1) it is very accurate and (2) more importantly, it is the only bullet mold I own for the .44. The First reason is the reason for the Second reason. For what I do with the .44 Special I just do not have a need for a different bullet.

Elmer Keith once wrote me that a friend of his had shot 7 Black Bears off a dump in Montana. All were shot using a Ruger .44 Magnum single action loaded with the Keith #429421 over 22 gr. of 2400. All were broadside shots. All were one-shot kills. No bullets were recovered. All gave complete penetration. You can't do better than that.

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