

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

The Workhorse by Smith & Wesson

By: Jim Taylor

The double-action sixgun known today as the S&W Model 10 has been in production since 1899. It has undergone evolutionary changes that resulted as engineering and tooling changed, but the basic gun remains. And it has always been the "anchor" of the S&W line. Known originally as the .38 Military and Police Model, it is built on what now is known as the "K" frame of the Smith & Wesson series of frames. Since its inception its purpose has been a "duty" gun... one that would be used in what is tenderly known as "close range interpersonal confrontations". It has been cursed by some, praised by some, and ignored by many. Yet it is a solid performer and will do its duty in the hands of someone who knows what it is to 'see the elephant'.

SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

Production began during the Spanish-American War. The government contracted with S&W for 3000 .38 caliber double-action revolvers. 2000 were to go to the Navy and 1000 to the Army, but the war was over before even one revolver had been built! Oddly enough, the government did not cancel the contract and the first guns were delivered in early 1899. Chambered for the .38 Long Colt, the sixgun was known as the .38 Hand Ejector, Military and Police Model. Built with a 6 1/2" barrel, the military version had walnut grips. The civilian version sported hard rubber grips and a 4" barrel. Neither had a lockup at the front of the ejector under the barrel.

IMPROVEMENTS/CHANGES

The first improvement was made in 1902 consisting of a front lockup under the barrel and an increase in the diameter of the ejector rod. It could be had chambered for the new .38 S&W Special or the .32-20 cartridge. Nearly 13,000 of these were produced in the next 2 years.

The next change took place somewhere between 1903 and 1905. The first guns had been made with a round-butt configuration. The newer ones were made with a square butt which standardized the grip frame and increased the control of the gun for target work.

The Model of 1905 continued the series, but now the gun was available in either round or square butt and with 4", 5", 6" or 6 1/2" barrels. It was still offered in either 38 Special or .32-20 calibers and could be had with a blued or nicked finish.

Various other minor changes were made in late 1905 affecting only finish

and barrel length. In 1908 some minor changes were made internally. The last variation, the Model of 1905 4th Change, continued in production from 1915 until 1940 when production changed due to the War effort.

WORLD WAR II

In 1942 the Victory Model was produced. It had a gray sandblasted finish and all serial numbers were preceded by a "V" along with a whole new numbering series. A change was made to the Victory Model in 1944 with the addition of an improved hammer block. The improved guns were marked with "VS" before the serial number.

CIVILIAN PRODUCTION

When the War was ended the contracts with the government were cancelled and Smith & Wesson resumed civilian manufacturing. The same serial numbering sequence begun in the war was continued, but the serial numbers had an "S" preceding them.

In 1947 S&W introduced the new "short action", replacing the old "long action". Anyone who has ever used the old guns and shot them a lot was not real happy about the change. Even today the old "long action" guns maintain a standard by which every other Double-Action revolver ever made has been judged. None ever came close. And while the present "short action" guns are very finely-made, they do not have that feel... though most shooters today know nothing about the old guns.

Around a million of the Military and Police Models, in all their variations, were produced between 1899 and 1948. In 1948 the "S" series was stopped and the "C" series began. Since that time a number of changes have taken place including a renaming of the production line. Early S&W revolvers had 5 screws. Four fastened the sideplate and one (through the trigger guard) retained the cylinder stop plunger. Then the top screw on the sideplate was eliminated and the S&W became a 4-screw. Later the frame was changed and the cylinder stop plunger screw was eliminated and the S&W became a 3-screw. In 1978 the barrel pin was eliminated. Recently there have been changes in the firing pin design. The evolution continues.

MODEL 10

The designation "Model 10" was made around 1957. The various changes to the Model 10 are reflected in the Model number changes: 1959 10-1... 1961 10-2 ... 1962 10-4 1962 10-6.... it continues... and there were lots of spin-offs: the Model 11 also known as the .38/200 that was built for the British, the wonderful K-38 Masterpiece, the Model 15 (K-38 Combat Masterpiece), the K-32 and K-22 series, the Model 19 .357 Magnum to name a few.

DUTY GUN

The Model 10 in our family is a 10-8 made in the late 1970's. I purchased it through the Dept. of Corrections when I worked as CSO in the State Prison. This was our issue gun. Sporting the heavy 4" bull barrel, the size and weight makes it a nice work gun. We were issued the Remington 125 gr. JHP loads ... the early 'scaloped' loads, which worked pretty well. The only felon I ever saw them used on was stopped with one shot and while it was not a lethal wound, it durn sure took all the fight out of him.

This gun quickly became my wife's favorite and after I quit working at the prison she adopted it as her own. The only modification we made was to take all the serrations off the trigger using a Dremmel Tool. Those sharp little ridges were hard on your finger if you were shooting in competition that required quit a bit of shooting. Your shooting finger just got "chewed up". Smoothed out, she could shoot all day long and never have a problem.

Shooting in Combat Matches she took her class quite often, shooting against ladies armed with high-capacity 9mm's... mainly because she rarely missed. At one point in the 1980's her time on the "El Capitan" scenario was a flat 10 seconds. That is the one where you have 3 silhouettes and you stand with the gun holstered, your back to the targets. At the whistle you turn, draw, fire 2 on each target, reload, fire 2 on each target. Her normal time was right at or just under 10 seconds for the whole 12 shots.

The grips on the gun were made by the late Deacon Deason of Bear Hug fame. I cherish them for they not only fit your hand extremely well; they were a gift from an old friend now long gone over the Great Divide. Before we put those on the gun Twyla used it with the factory wood grips and a Tyler T-Grip adaptor. We tried other types and styles but nothing fit her hand quite as well. And it showed in her scores. She shot all her good times using the ugly factory grip with the Tyler T-Grip. It worked then. It still works today if a person needs it.

A MAN-STOPPER?

The .38 has been cussed by many (including my hero's) as a poor man-stopper. While I personally prefer larger calibers, the .38 is by no means a powder puff. I don't know anyone who wants a .38 bullet through his stomach, let alone the lungs, or anyplace else for that matter. Years of shooting critters has taught me that there is no magical death ray in a sixgun. It all comes down to bullet placement. If you are not confident in your gun and your ability you will not be able to put that bullet where it needs to be when the stress is on. Because they can be shot so cheaply, and because they are mild as to report and recoil, the .38 is a good caliber for those who want a defense gun but who are not "into" guns. Practice is the key to proficiency... if you don't practice you are setting yourself up to come in Second Place... which can be 6 feet under.

As a side note: After the New York Police Dept. adopted tactical training for their officers the kill ratio between cops and felons tilted massively in the cops favor. And this was with the old 158 gr. lead round-nose ricochet prone bullet. Teaching people how to act in lethal circumstances is hard... and it is not something one can learn just by reading a book.

With today's choice of bullets and ammunition there are some very good self-defense loads available that I would not hesitate to use. I prefer bullets of at least 125 gr. weight. If you have to shoot through coats and sweaters and fat and what not it is nice to have a little weight on the projectile and the 140's give a great alternative. Since you are not going to get magnum velocities, you need bullet shape, construction and penetration going for you.

Knowing my preference for the .45 Colt, would I carry a .38 Special? Sure. No problem. Do I prefer to? No... but I do not feel 'under-armed' if I do carry one. A person just needs to know their limitations.

YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER

The .38 Special has been long established as a commercially successful round, and the guns that use it are very popular. Not because of it's Instantly Massively rack-up-the-body-count performance, but because it is mild and easy to use. The guns themselves are pretty fool-proof, and the Military & Police Model is one of the best. Over 100 years of service now are behind it and it still going strong. If you are looking for a good sixgun, or know someone who is wanting a gun for protection but has not used a gun much and needs to get started learning how, you could do a whole lot worse than the old Smith & Wesson workhorse.

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