

ANNUAL

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2005

HANDGUNNER[®]

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EXCELLENT

Colt's Cadillac Sixgun



Turns Gold

In 1836, Samuel Colt started the Colt Company with the first practical working single action sixgun, the Paterson revolver. A great improvement over the single shot pistol, the Paterson was eagerly accepted — especially by those on the Texas frontier. Colt and his Paterson began several traditions at Colt. One of these was building great sixguns; that is the upside. The downside is a long history of mistakes and bad decisions on the part of several generations of Colt executives. Of course, I realize sitting at my typewriter it is much easier for me to look backwards than it was for the Colt executives of the 19th and early 20th Centuries to look forwards. The fact that Colt will soon be celebrating its 175th Anniversary says something about the fortitude of the company.

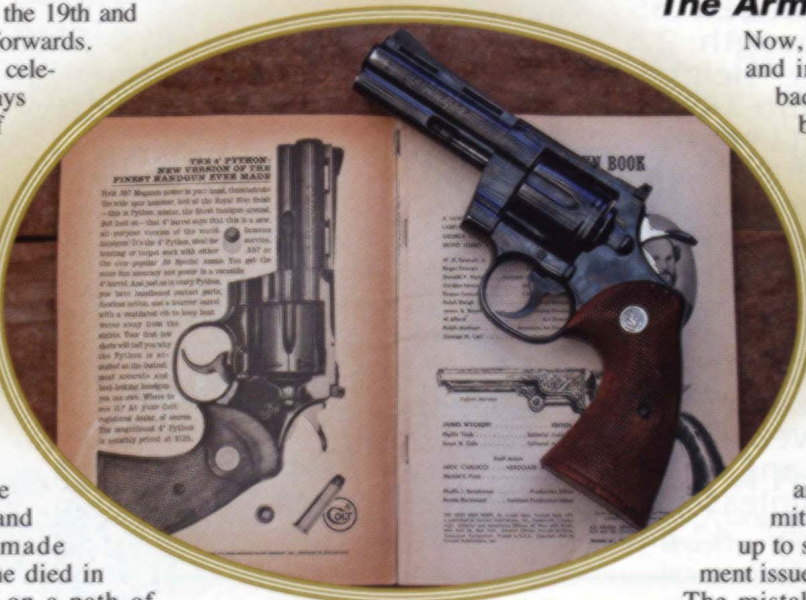
The Paterson was a success, but Sam Colt turned it into somewhat of a failure by going bankrupt. When Sam Walker came to him with a new design it was necessary for Colt to acquire the services of Eli Whitney Jr. to build the 1847 Walker. However, the Walker, the Dragoon, the 1851 Navy, the 1860 Army and a large federal contract made Samuel a rich man. Before he died in 1862, he sent the company on a path of

ignoring revolvers firing fixed ammunition, which had arrived with the first Smith & Wesson Model #1 .22 Tip-Up revolver in 1857. Sam Colt knew shooters would always prefer to load their own ammunition using powder, ball and cap. This carried over to the next leaders at Colt until they were stunned with the arrival of the Smith & Wesson Model #3 American .44 in 1869 coupled with the nearly immediate issuance of a government contract for the new large bore single action firing fixed ammunition.

The Army Understood

Now, Colt had to play catch-up and in the process made a very bad decision. Remington had been building single action revolvers with a top strap since the 1850s, while Colt's were of the open-top style with no top strap. Instead of looking at the Remington and using their much stronger design, Colt basically took their 1860 Army cap-and-ball revolver, fitted it with a cartridge firing cylinder and an ejector rod, and submitted it to the Army tests set up to select a new official government issued sidearm.

The mistake made by Colt was cor-





Three to choose from: 4", 6" and 8".

Colt Python

Type: I Frame, Double Action Revolver

Caliber: .357 Magnum

Barrel Length: 2.5", 4", 6" and 8"

Height: 5 5/8"

Weight: 38 ounces — 4" bbl.

Overall Length: 9.25" — 4" bbl.

Cylinder Capacity: 6 rounds

Front Sight: Ramp Type

Rear Sight: Adjustable for windage and height

Sight Radius: 5 5/8"–4"

Grip Description: Checkered service stocks for 2.5".

Checkered TGT stocks for 4", 6" and 8".

Black rubber Colt/Pachmayr grips also available

Safety: Safety bar blocks hammer

Rifling: 6 groove, left-hand twist, one turn in 14"

Finish: Blue and nickel available in all sizes.

Stainless steel is available

only in 2.5", 4" and 6" barrel lengths.

rected by someone much wiser in the United States Army who sent Colt back to the drawing board with the request that several changes be made in their design including the incorporation of the top strap and the caliber change from .44 Colt to .45. The result was one of the great (the greatest?) single action sixguns of all time, the Colt Single Action Army. Thanks to the government a very bad decision on the part of Colt was turned upside down.

Colt was also the first company to provide a practical double action revolver with the Models of 1877 and 1878, and also the first to provide double action revolvers with a swing-out cylinder and a simultaneous ejecting rod. They did not stop there. In the late 1890s, Colt brought forth the New Service, one of the great double action revolvers of all time. Fast forward to the early 1930s. Colt experimented with a new cartridge, the .41 Colt Special, chambering it in two revolvers and then deciding not to market it. Five years later, Smith & Wesson introduced the .357 Magnum, and as they say, the rest is history.

At about the same time, Elmer Keith offered to share his modernized custom Colt Single Actions with Colt, the purpose being to upgrade the standard Colt Single Action with adjustable sights and stronger springs. Colt declined the offer and, 20 years later, Bill Ruger, who certainly read all of Keith's articles as a young boy, introduced a truly modernized single action sixgun. If Colt had listened, perhaps, just perhaps they would be where Ruger is today.

Going, Going, Gone

In 1941, Colt as all other manufacturers, stopped production of their civilian firearms to switch over to wartime materials. This meant Colt ceased producing both the Colt Single Action Army and New Service, while Smith & Wesson had to shut down the .357 Magnum as well as the 3rd Model Hand Ejector .44 Special and the .38/44 Heavy Duty. The great difference in the two companies was shown in the late 1940s when Smith & Wesson resumed production of their pre-War sixguns, while Colt did not.

The Great Resurrection

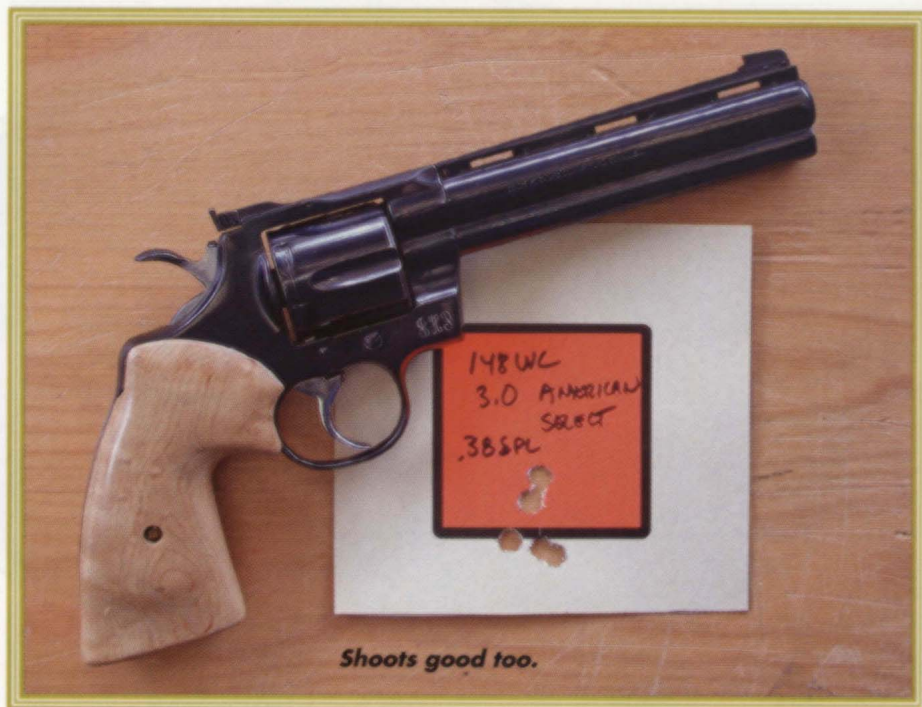
By the mid-1950s, Colt was prepared to make a great decision, bringing back the Colt Single Action Army; and even went so far as to upgrade it to the New

Frontier with adjustable sights and a flat-topped frame in 1962. Give them two great big plus marks for this! Unfortunately, the New Frontier disappeared in 1984 and I certainly cannot understand why they haven't brought it back. The 2nd Generation Single Action Army stopped in 1974, and then reappeared in 3rd Generation form with a few strange changes. Both the hand and ratchet on the back to cylinder were changed for "easier assembly", the full-length cylinder bushing was dropped (it has since been returned), and the barrel threads were changed. The last one is the hardest to understand since there were well over 400,000 Single Actions in existence with the original threads many of which were, and are, candidates for new barrels.

With the coming of the great popularity of Cowboy Action Shooting, Colt decided to get into the market with a lower-priced alternative to the Single Action Army, the Colt Cowboy. The test gun I had was very accurate, however the Colt Cowboy was not only priced much higher than the Vaquero it had to compete with, it also did not have the, *je ne sais que*, call it the finesse of the Vaquero or the Italian replicas. The Cowboy was a good idea carried out poorly.

Let's Get Positive

Okay — we have beaten up on Colt's past enough! The present and future looks much better and we can now get positive. To the credit of Colt, the current president, retired Marine Lt. Gen. William Keys, is working hard to improve quality and make the Colt Single Action Army a real choice for not only cowboy action shooters, but every day sixgunners as well. For many years before



his arrival, Colt refused to offer a full lineup of the Single Action; now we have all three standard barrel lengths, 4¼", 5½", and 7½" offered in both blue/casehardened and nickel-plated finishes, as well as seven chamberings, .45 Colt, .44-40, .38-40, .32-20, .38 Special, .357 Magnum, and lo and behold, the .44 Special is back!

Keys has also expressed the desire to bring back the New Service, a decision I definitely applaud. I hope he will also look seriously at the fact Colt introduced the first modern pocket revolver with the Detective Special in the 1930s, followed by the Cobra and the Agent, and now they do not offer, nor have they offered for many years, a

pocket revolver. Also the company of the .22 Colt Woodsman does not now even offer a .22 of any kind. We can hope Colt will keep going forward and correct both of these situations in the future.

The Wonderful Year, 1955

Let's flash back to 1955, the truly wonderful year of 1955. Something very special had to be happening at that time. McDonald's opened their first franchise in 1955 and Gunsmoke began its long run on TV that year. Tennessee Ernie Ford had us all singing 16 Tons; everybody had to go to the movies to see Battle Cry, Mister Roberts, and Blackboard Jungle; Robert Ruark wrote his epic novel Something of Value; and both the Chevy and Ford V-8s were poised to become classics.

It was also a great year for sixguns. Ruger introduced the first .357 Magnum Blackhawk; and Smith & Wesson's contributions were the 1955 Target .45 ACP, the .357 Combat Magnum and, just before the year ended, the .44 Magnum. Colt was also affected by the great things happening in 1955, and as a result gave us their greatest double action sixgun ever. Some sixgunners, and they will get no argument from me, will call it the greatest double action revolver — period. It is the .357 Python.

A Family Of Snakes

One of the most interesting things about the Python is the fact it is now celebrating its 50th Anniversary, while the above mentioned revolvers are either long





gone or replaced by improved models. The Python was so good from the beginning, it still remains and has not needed improving changes. In fact, it is the only remaining double action .357 Magnum from the middle of the 20th Century as both the Highway Patrolman and S&W .357 Magnum are also both long gone.

Whether with people or six-guns, I still prefer names over numbers, and Colt has had some great names for their sixguns. Someone at Colt came up with a brilliant marketing idea in 1950 by choosing the names for their revolvers from the world of snakes. So we had the Cobra, a lightweight Detective Special, introduced in 1950; the beautiful little Detective Special sized Diamondback .22 and .38 Special in 1966; the Viper, a 4" barreled Cobra in 1978; the King Cobra, a most excellent .357 Magnum, in 1986; and Colt's first and only .44 Magnum, the Anaconda of 1990; and of course that greatest of all snakes, the Python of 1955.

The Python Family Tree

The roots of the Python run deep all the way back to 1889 with the introduction of the New Navy Double Action Self-Cocking Revolver chambered in both .38 Long Colt and .41 Long Colt and designated as a .41 framed sixgun. If you think there is really something new under the sun, consider the fact the 1889 New Navy came with a six-shot speed loader. In 1908 the New Navy became the Army Special, which in turn became the Official Police in 1926. The Officers Model Target version goes all way back to 1904. From the early part of the 20th Century well into the middle of the century the number one handgun shooting sport was not cowboy action shooting, IPSC, PPC, Long Range, Short Range Silhouetting or even hunting; revolvers meant paper punching, bull's-eye shooting, stand up on your own two feet and shoot at a black mark on a piece of paper.

The Officers Model Target featured non-glare adjustable sights, a nonglare frame top, checkered trigger, backstrap, and grips, a heavy barrel, and hand honed action. By the 1950s the Officers Model Target had become the Officers Model Match and was the definitive target-shooting revolver. At that time, Smith & Wesson, with its old pre-war long action, was making what many consider the finest double action type ever offered. However, the Colt Officers Model had such an effect on bull's-eye shooting, Smith & Wesson shortened up their action to better compete in the target arena with the Colt. As a result,



S&W was Colt's top competitor in the early years of the .357 Magnum.



Colt tried to springboard from the Python with the Anaconda. A nice sixgun, but it died a natural death

Cobra

Python

Anaconda

the great double action of the pre-war Smiths was lost forever.

The Python Arrives

In 1953, Colt decided to improve the Officers Model Match. Most shooters will agree improvements rarely are, however Colt eventually hit a home run with this one. The idea in this case was to make the Officers Model Match heavier and better balanced, all to accommodate target shooters. The OMM was fitted with a heavy under-lugged barrel complete with a full-length rib. The prototype turned out to be too heavy for a target pistol, however someone, Al Gunther was the man in charge of the project, wisely decided to make a few changes winding up with the figure eight shaped Python barrel with a ventilated rib to cut weight, a ramp front sight, fully checkered target grips, and chambered in .357 Magnum as an outdoorsman's sixgun rather than a .38 Special target pistol. Someone made all the right decisions in this case.

The Python started life as a superbly finished 6" sixgun; the finish was then known as Colt Royal Blue and it was the most beautiful blue finish ever found on a production revolver. The price in 1955 was \$125. It would soon be offered in a nickel-plated version as well as a 4" barreled sixgun for peace officer use, and then later with 2½" and 8" barrels. With the coming of stainless steel, Colt's Python took on a silver snake look, and was also offered at one time as a Hunter Model with an 8" barrel and a Leupold LER pistol scope attached to the barrel using the ventilated rib. Today, the Python remains in production in both

blue and stainless steel versions.

L-U-S-T Is A 4-Letter Word

Most of us, at least the dedicated shooters among us, go through periods of time when we actually suffer trying to come up with the necessary dollars to buy a particular firearm. I've been around a long time and there have been many of these instances as there always seems to be so many great sixguns and so little time and

money. Never, before or since, have I wanted a sixgun as much as I wanted a 4" Python. When I saw that first advertising consisting of nothing but a full-sized picture of the 4" Python on a white background with nothing to detract from its beauty, the lusting began! I wanted that Python so much it hurt. At that time, I was working in a tire factory at night, going to school full-time during the day, and trying to support my wife and three little babies. Money was definitely short.

However, one day I stepped into the company store and there it was! In all its beauty and attraction personally calling me was a 4" Python. I think I signed up to pay \$5 a week, and the first Python was all mine. After graduating from college, I started teaching and worked several hours each night at a local gas station; it was not the best of times nor the best of neighborhoods and that Python served me well riding in my front pocket. We were never robbed. That was 40-plus years ago and today my "Golden Years" eyes prefer longer barrels so the 4" Python has now been replaced by an easier shooting 8" version; and, in preparation for this article, Editor Roy Huntington suggested I send it off to Cylinder & Slide to have Bill Laughridge tune it up and bring it back to perfection.

Python Sixgunsmiths

A little background is necessary here. The Python is a sixgun requiring a master's touch when it comes to tuning, and over



The no-frills "Trooper" (left) was the poor-man's Python, but it just wasn't the same!





A family history, with the Python being the result.

the years only a handful of sixgunsmiths have been considered worthy of being able to really do the work to make a Python sit up and sing. Three such masters come immediately to mind, the late Fred Sadowski; Jerry Moran, long retired from pistolsmithing; and retired State Peace Officer, Reeves Jungkind. Several years ago one of my dearest friends was dying from cancer; and as he lay in his bed, he said he wanted to leave one of his sixguns to me. My choices were his Freedom Arms .454, his .41 Magnum Super Blackhawk custom-built by Jim Stroh, and his plain-Jane Colt Python tuned by Fred Sadowski. I chose the latter as the first two where still possible to acquire, however there would be no more Sadowski-tuned Pythons. I've never regretted that choice as this 6" Python, willed to me by dear friend Jack Pender, is as sweet as a sixgun can be. When I told the story to Roy Huntington, he suggested I turn my 8" Python over to Cylinder & Slide for the same treatment.

We can now add Bill Laughridge to the list of master Python-tunesmiths. The 8" Python has been around for awhile and needed a few special touches. Cylinder & Slide slightly chamfered the cylinder, polished the chamber throats, straightened the yoke, re-cut the forcing cone to 11 degrees, recess crowned the muzzle, eliminated the end shake, tightened up the fit of the factory grips, and Super-tuned the action. When this particular Python was sent off to Cylinder & Slide it had a 3Lb. single action pull and a 12Lb. double action. After tuning, the resulting pulls measure 2Lb. mated up with 7Lb. respectively. Whatever over-used phrase one picks, silky smooth, slick as the proverbial glass, ... it isn't good enough to describe the double action

Cylinder & Slide has given this Python. Cocking the hammer on a Python has always been one of sixgunnins' greatest pleasures. That still remains matched up with an incredible trigger pull and a superb double action. In addition to all of this, Cylinder & Slide also offers a reproduction of the Elliason rear sight found on many Pythons as well as replacement front sights available as a Patridge, undercut Patridge, or improved ramp style.

They Make Taffin Good!

Pythons have always had a great reputation for accuracy. Some have surmised this is due to the fact the hand pushes against the cylinder ratchet keeping it locked in place as it fires. Maybe so, however I think the greater

credit goes to the Python barrels, which, are not only excellent quality with a 1:14 twist, but also bored very tightly. I have never encountered a Python, whether one of the older ones or one of the newer stainless-steel models or anything in between that was not a great shooting sixgun. In fact, when I tested the first stainless-steel Python years ago, the first five shots cut one ragged hole at 25 yards. Pythons can still do this; I can't.

However, a Python can even make me look good! My eyes were already at the senior level in high school when the Python was born. However, shooting the Cylinder & Slide tuned 8" Python with 125-grain JHPs at 25 yards resulted in five-shot groups of $\frac{3}{8}$ " from Black Hills 125 JHPs and 1" with Speer's 125 Gold Dot .357 Magnum loads; and with the lightened double action pull it still sets off CCI primers. Shooting an 8" Python double action is almost like having a sixgun controlled by radar as that long barrel hangs oh so nicely on target. Since we have been fogged in, I was shooting at the indoor range and using a B27 target turned backwards to give me a large white area. The groups were so tight shooting double action another shooter came over to see what in the world I was shooting. Yep, a Python sure makes a guy look good.

So, it is Happy Birthday, Happy 50th Anniversary, Happy Golden Anniversary to the Colt Python. May it live to be 100!



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