

Combat Handguns® Presents #55

FALL 2007

# SHOTS

## OF THE OLD WEST



# *Pair Of* **CUSTOM SIX**

**Magnificent MASTERPIECES by Hamilton Bowen and**

**BY ROB GARRETT**

*It is not often* that one gets a chance to peruse two absolutely gorgeous custom single-actions that have a combined value twice that of the Volkswagen Beetle I bought new in 1974. Connoisseurs of fine firearms would find true joy in just being able to handle one of these pistols, not to mention owning one. My pair of Single Action Army models comes from two of the finest shops in the country today. Each one has a story to tell.

## **Bowen SAA Details**

The Colt has been in my collection for about 10 years and started life as a standard third generation Model P in .45 Colt with a 5.5-inch barrel, hard rubber grips, case colored frame and blued barrel and cylinder. It was not a safe queen and had been carried on more than a few occasions and had about 600 rounds put through it.

The transformation started on Christmas Eve of 2005 when I received a phone call from a good friend who announced that his daughter was engaged. Much to the dismay of his daughter, his wife, and my wife, all of whom were listening to our conversation, our talk immediately turned to what gun to carry at the wedding!

During the next few months, we discussed a custom-engraved 1911, a slicked-up Smith & Wesson J-frame, and even tried to locate a pair of old Colt 1903 Hammerless autos. However, we kept returning to

Hamilton Bowen's website and saw the photos of a drop-dead stunning SAA Light Weight Conversion. It kept calling us until we could no longer resist.

We both liquidated some other assets to fund the project so we could continue sleeping in the same bed, and under the same roof, as our wives. Then we made a road trip to meet the man himself. Finding Bowen Classic Arms was no small feat, but when we arrived, Hamilton extended his huge hands as well as a wonderful portion of southern hospitality.

Bowen Classic Arms was born in 1980, and has become one of the premier custom shops for single-action pistols and they also specialize in big bore conversions. There is not enough space here to describe all of Bowen's work, but you owe it to yourself to visit his website. The pistol we had come to talk about was the Light Weight conversion.

Unfortunately, the pistol on the web had been sold, but we were able to view a similar conversion on a Ruger Vaquero. We were hooked. Upon returning home I completed a specific work order, wrote a check for the deposit, and then shipped my Colt to Tennessee. As it often happens, the project took on a life of its own and the budget grew over the coming months.

Bowen's Light Weight Conversion is reminiscent of a classic 1930's gentleman's pistol. The most obvious work is the gracefully scalloped recoil shield and loading gate.

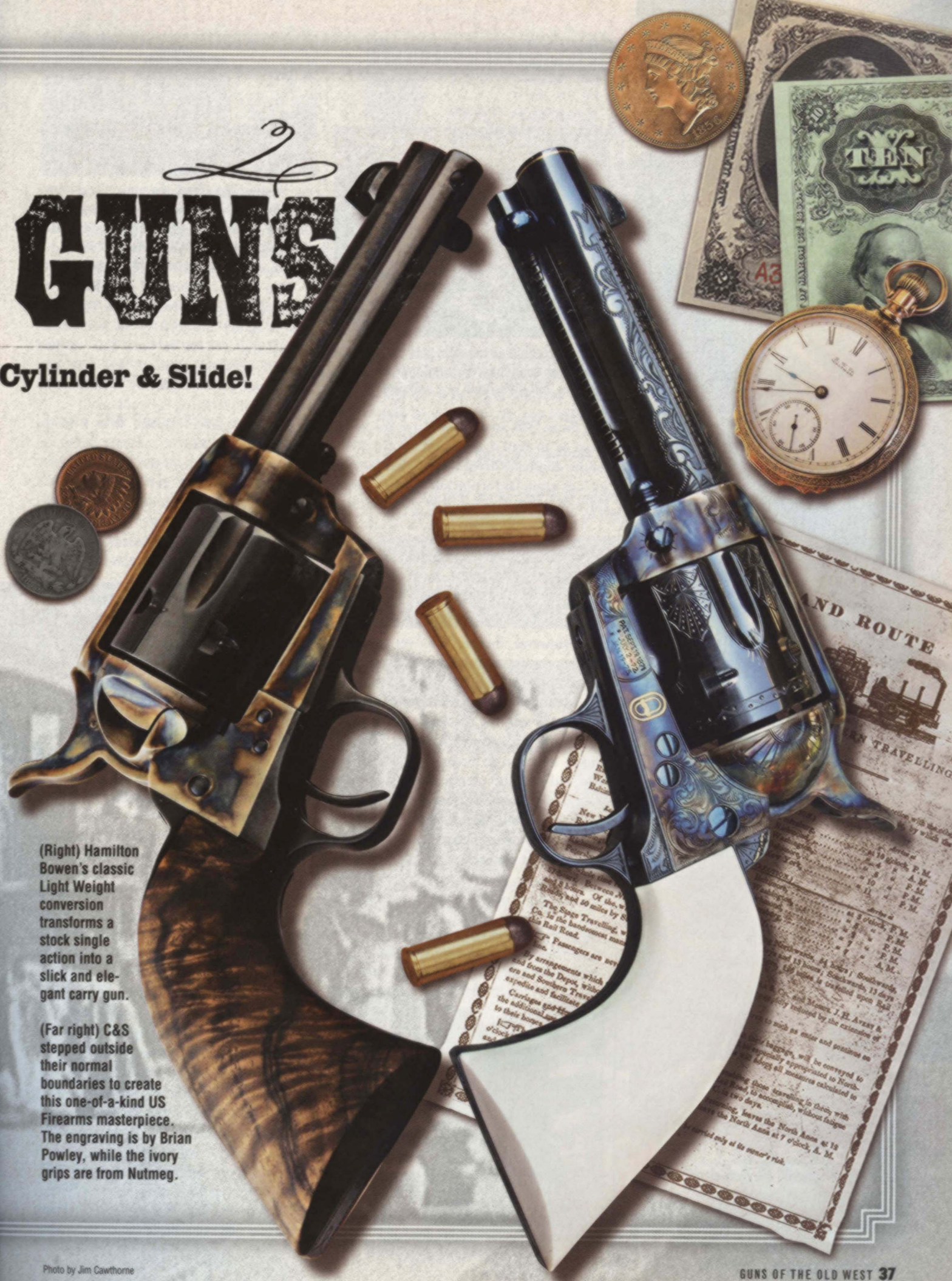


# GUNS

## Cylinder & Slide!

(Right) Hamilton Bowen's classic Light Weight conversion transforms a stock single action into a slick and elegant carry gun.

(Far right) C&S stepped outside their normal boundaries to create this one-of-a-kind US Firearms masterpiece. The engraving is by Brian Powley, while the ivory grips are from Nutmeg.





## PAIR OF CUSTOM SIX GUNS



**The loading gate on the right side of the frame has been scalloped. This not only reduces weight, but gives the LW a unique profile.**

The frame rails are narrowed and the barrel is cut to an even 4 inches with Bowen's signature dovetailed front sight. Other features include a standard action job and chamfering the cylinder to black powder configuration.

These modifications remove weight and bulk, turning the SAA into an elegant and quick carry gun. After these changes, the frame was color casehardened by Doug Turnbull. A close examination shows that Bowen has remarked the barrel in the proper "two-line" Colt markings. However, the best was yet to come.

There were several weeks of discussion as to the proper grips for the wedding pistols but, in the end, there was only one choice. We selected master craftsman Roy Fishpaw to carve one-piece grips from his choice selection of French walnut. Roy is a legend and the premier stock maker of custom wood. It was only right, given the special occasion these pistols were built for, that they were adorned with Fishpaw grips. At least that is what we told our wives.

Remember, the project grew. We both wanted to have our pistols engraved and after

**Master stock maker Roy Fishpaw created these one-piece French Walnut grips. The photographs can't do the grain and color justice.**



looking at Bowen's website and other sites, the choice was clear and Dan Love received the call. Two considerations governed the engraving on my pistol. First, my budget was growing thin and I could not find anything else in the safe I was willing to let go of. Secondly, and probably more important, I wanted a gun that I would carry or even hunt with.

Dan and I collaborated and decided to have my name engraved on the backstrap with a border and to have the year of the project engraved on the butt. This was just enough personalization to give the gun providence. Love's engraving is all done by hand and his lettering is exceptional.

He bordered my name with a single line and then added a compass accent on both ends. The butt of the frame has 2007 engraved in a script and is bordered by a fine large/small triangle punch that is tied together with a curled line.

The process of coordinating the work with Hamilton, Dan and Roy about my pref-



**After the loading gate and recoil shield, the frame is the next place that gets cut.**

erences and getting an occasional e-mail picture from Hamilton made the wait tolerable. It also served another purpose that I did not recognize until the project was completed. It gave me a sense of ownership in the entire project that I would not have felt if I had simply ordered a pistol from Bowen's limited supply of in-house stock.

The result was astounding! If you thought the perfect SAA was a 4.75-inch Model P, you thought wrong. Comparing the two is like night and day. The balance of the LW with its 4-inch tube is even better than expected. One option Hamilton recommended was to true the backstrap. As a result, the grips have been thinned toward the top of the frame, giving the LW a slim feel in the hand.

The only option that I would have liked to include was the installation of a Bisley-style hammer. Hamilton explained that that hammer was handmade and the option



**Bowen cut the barrel to an even 4" and installed his signature dovetailed front sight. The sharp angle of the blade, combined with the serrations, results in an improved sight picture.**

runs into hundreds of dollars. It is hoped that in the future, US Firearms will offer a Bisley hammer as an option. If that turns out to be the case, my Light Weight will be making another trip to Tennessee.

### **Bowen SAA Range Time**

On the range, every shooter commented on the crisp action and clean trigger break. Using Lyman's electronic trigger gauge, the Colt LW broke at just under 3.5 pounds. For those who don't know, Bowen is also an attorney and is very aware of liability issues. He will not release a pistol with a trigger pull under 3 pounds.

The new dovetailed front sight features a serrated sight blade, which is easier for my aging eyes to pick up. The pistol is a real shooter with one ragged hole groups being easy at 10 yards, even on an indoor range with poor lighting.

The final touch was the appropriate leather. I called on my old friend Thad Rybka to make an inside-the-waist (IWB) holster and a matching drop pouch. The holster is vintage Rybka with a rough-out finish that is accented by a smooth leather band at the mouth that has been folded over and stitched to prevent the holster from collapsing. The drop pouch is also rough-out with a border outline and covered snap.

In the end, the conversion from a stock SAA to a Bowen Light Weight has given me a classic single-action that I intend to carry and shoot. I also can't say enough kind words about how great Hamilton Bowen, Dan Love, Roy Fishpaw and Thad Rybka were to work with. Gentlemen all, they were gracious with our requests and provided wonderful guidance and advice. I can say that all four will be receiving more of my business in the future. After all, my son just got engaged and that calls for another pistol!

### **C&S SAA Details**

The second single-action in this article is a collaboration between Bill Laughridge of Cylinder & Slide fame, and Brian Powley.





The extent and detail of Powley's engraving is evident. The design and flow fit the SAA well.

Laughridge started his project with a stock US Firearms Frontier Six Shooter in .45LC caliber. Since this was to be a project gun, it was received unfinished or in the white. C&S then started their magic by completing a trigger and action job and installing an internal trigger overtravel stop. The barrel was re-crowned to 45 degrees and a small hole was drilled in the end of the base pin like the old Colts. The front sight was reshaped and the pistol was then regulated, or sighted in.

The pistol was then sent to Brian Powley for custom engraving. Powley is a very talented engraver who has been flying below the radar scope for several years. The majority of Brian's gun work has been for other custom gunsmiths and has been prominently displayed on several Pistolsmith Guild raffle pistols.

Powley engraved the frame and barrel in a tasteful western scroll. The loading gate



Powley did a gold inlay of Cylinder & Slide's mustache logo. The nitre-blued screws are an appropriate accent to the engraving.

and recoil shield has been embellished with a scalloped seashell design that was popular in the late 1800's. Each cylinder flute has been engraved with a bullet shape that has scalloped edges and filled with a fan design. Carving on the shovel continued with the fan design that flows into two single lines of scroll that cross each other down the backstrap.

On close examination, I realized how

much extra work went into this project. Very subtle borders and lines embellish the top strap and rear of the cylinder, and a starburst is carved into the bottom of the trigger-guard. The final touch was the gold band on the muzzle and Bill's famous mustache logo set in gold on the left side of the frame, just below the cylinder.

Bill then sent the frame to Doug Turnbull for color casehardening and had the barrel and cylinder carbon blued. The screws and ejection rod head were nitre blued for the rich deep purple color that set off the gun. Nutmeg one-piece ivory grips finished out the project.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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I would like to report that the pistol shoots as well as it looks. However, Bill took my credit card number and vowed that if the pistol came back with even a small scratch, he would damage my credit rating beyond repair. I can tell you that US Firearms is making a pistol that is every bit as good, if not better, than current Colt Model P's. As of this writing, the pistol is for sale and is listed on Cylinder & Slide's website.

An embellished pistol deserves special leather and John Bianchi from Frontier Leather delivered more than I could have hoped for. John was the founder of Bianchi leather, but now specializes in creating custom handmade western rigs of the highest quality. The rig shown in the photos is Bianchi's premium grade Lone Star of Texas.

The rig was popularized by the Texas Rangers in the 1880's and features a straight



Powley finished off the US Firearms single-action with a sunburst design on the front sight blade and a gold band on the muzzle.

cut 2-3/4-inch wide cartridge belt and a Mexican loop-style holster. Both are cut from premium cowhide and died to a rich chocolate brown. The belt and holster have been hand stamped with a double border and embellished with three sterling silver Conchos on the holster. A small sterling accent on each end of the cartridge loops, and a sterling silver belt buckle complete the elegant rig. To call this rig a work of art is an understatement.

## Final Notes

There comes a time in one's life where more is not always better. The Bowen Light Weight is a special piece that is on its way to becoming a family heirloom. I will carry it at my son's and daughter's weddings, and hope my son will carry it at his children's weddings.

For those who are too impatient to coordinate with a pistolsmith, engraver, and stock maker, Cylinder & Slide can fill the bill for what Texans call a parade and barbecue gun. The chance to handle and write about both guns has been a treat!