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GUN WORLD

SEPTEMBER 1979
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**Merrill .357/44 B&D
Single-Shot**

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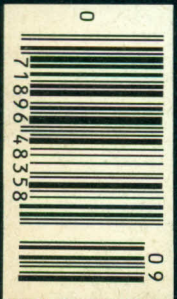


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See Page 67.



The Merrill Sportsman In .357/44 Bain & Davis



HANDGUN METALLIC SILHOUETTE has had a powerful catalytic effect upon the field of handgun development, and the boom goes on. The ever-more-popular sport presents a markedly different framework of reference for evaluating handguns than the ones that had been traditionally accepted for years.

Bowling the massive targets of half-inch steel off their support rails requires a heavy cargo of foot-poundage to be delivered to the destination. The targets are large enough — no matter how small they may appear — to represent a generous number of minutes of angle (MOA) at the given distance. The time allotted for each five-round course is sufficiently ample to de-emphasize the need for rapidfire capability.

As a direct result of such factors, several guns that have enjoyed no more than moderate popularity down the years are suddenly in vastly greater demand. The single-shot breed of pistols is an outstanding example of this phenomenon.

The Merrill Sportsman single-shot went into limited production about 1966, at Rockwell City, Iowa. It had been under development by its designer, Rex Merrill, for several years prior to that.

Like the Thompson/Center Contender, the Merrill Sportsman features interchangeable barrels that enable the owner to switch from cartridge to cartridge. The gun supplied to GUN WORLD for testing carries a twelve-inch .357/44 BD barrel, with open iron sights atop its ventilated rib. The

rear sight is a Micro, adjustable for windage and elevation. The sight radius is about 10-7/8 inches.

The design and operation of the Merrill is simple and straightforward. There is no exposed hammer. The striker is driven by a coil spring of music wire for a distance of about 3/16-inch, producing an admirably short lock-time.

The action is opened by pulling a serrated, spring-loaded catch rearward to release the breech end of the barrel. Pivoting the muzzle down through an arc of about thirty degrees cocks the striker and causes a cocking indicator to protrude from the rear of the receiver. The chamber can be loaded at the same time.

After snapping the barrel back into battery, the catch slides forward to



The 12" .357/44 BD barrel is topped with Leupold's new M8-4X Extended E.R. scope in Weaver QD rings that attach to the dove tail grooves at the rear of the ventilated barrel rib. Safety latch is set up for use by right-handed shooter.

After Many Years, This Wandering Wildcat Appears To Have Found A Home With A Handgun Too Long Unappreciated

secure it in place for firing. The action is automatically in safe mode until the spring-loaded thumb latch is depressed, permitting the striker to be released by pulling the trigger. A hex-socket screw at the rear of the grip enables adjustment of sear engagement and trigger travel, requiring the hex wrench that measures about .077-inch across the flats.

A hardened steel pin, .3114-inch in diameter, secures the barrel to the receiver and, on the test gun, it's removed or replaced by turning the knurled head. At various stages in the Merrill's career, tapered pins and later hex-socket pins have been used. The threaded end of the pin or cross-bolt engages mating threads in the left-hand side of the receiver to hold it in place. In current Merrill production, barrels in the rimfire calibers have their bores lowered so that the firing pin strikes the rim of the cartridge in the proper place, eliminating the need for shifting

the firing pin when changing between rimfire and center-fire.

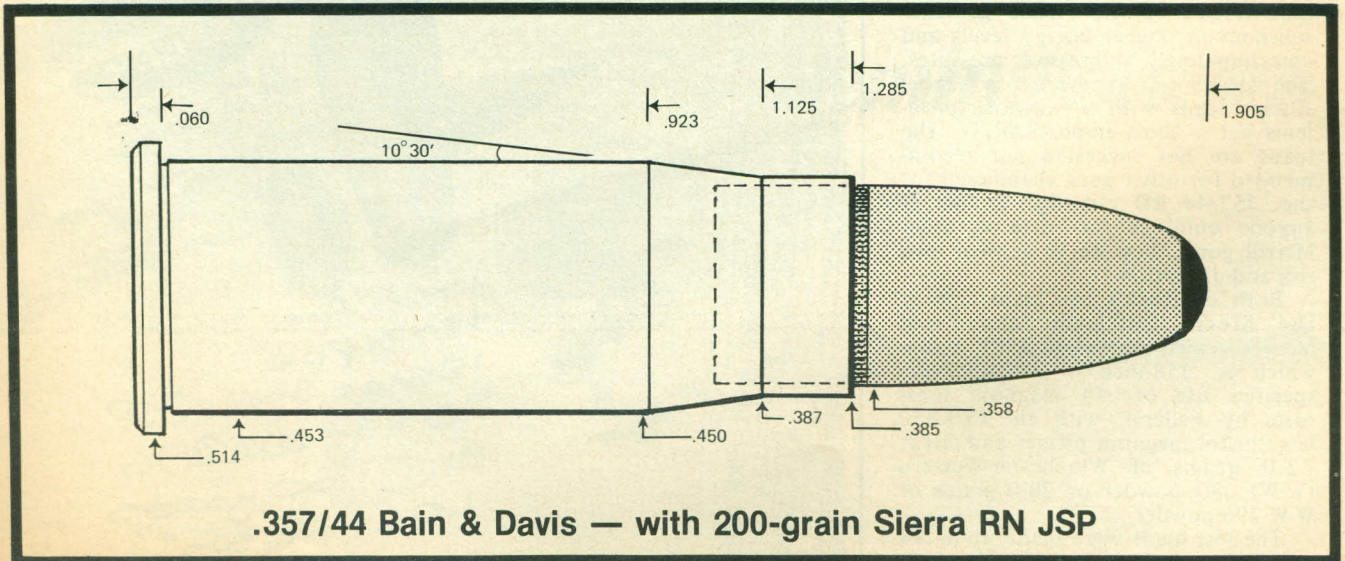
The usual barrel length for the Merrill is nine inches and the overall length of the gun is only about 1-11/16 inches longer than the barrel. If desired, the Merrill can be supplied with the thumb rest and safety latch on the right-hand side. It is at least marginally possible to fire a right-handed Merrill with the left hand by holding down the latch with extended index finger and putting the center finger on the trigger, but such an approach would sacrifice a considerable amount of recoil control with the harder-kicking cartridges.

Jim Rock, head of the Merrill's new production facility, is a skilled and avid silhouette shooter and he favors the .357/44 BD over all the other available chamberings for the Sportsman. He passed along his two favorite reload recipes for the cartridge in question. GUN WORLD staffer Roger

Combs has watched Rock rocking the rams off their stout pedestals at the two hundred-meter distance and Combs reports that the effect could hardly be more decisive if you took a full swing with a sledge hammer.

The .357/44 Bain & Davis is a wildcat number — that is, it's not available as a standard cartridge over the counter — that was worked up back in the early Sixties by Keith Davis in the Bain & Davis shop at San Gabriel, California. The .357/44 BD is produced from .44 magnum brass, necked down to accept bullets of .357 or .358-inch diameter, with a shoulder angle of 10½ degrees.

One of the few official listings of load data for the .357/44 BD appears on page 218 of the latest (No. 23) edition of Hodgdon's Data Manual, giving starting and maximum loads for





Left, details of Merrill and mount from right side. Below, .38/45 Clerke, .357 AMP, .357/44 B&D and .357 Herrett; reading from left.



H4227 and H110 Hodgdon powders in bullet weights from 110 to 158 grains. The listed loads were worked up in a ten-inch barrel for the Thompson/Center Contender. T/C offered barrels in that chambering at one time, but has dropped it from their list and does not plan to re-list it at this time, according to T/C vice-president Bob Gustafson.

The Hodgdon list rates 21.0 grains of H110 as their maximum with the 158-grain bullet, quoting a velocity of 1604 feet per second (fps), which equates to 903 foot-pounds of energy (fpe).

Davis developed the .357/44 BD primarily as a conversion cartridge for Smith & Wesson Model 27 and Model 28 revolvers with barrels five inches or more in length. His favorite load for the rechambered revolvers was 11.0 grains of Hercules Unique behind the 146-grain Speer hollow-point. The listed load delivers up to 1675 fps from a 2.5¼-inch rifle barrel for 910 fpe.

Both the Hodgdon and Davis loads are mentioned by way of pointing out that Rock's favorite loads generate substantially higher energy levels and correspondingly impressive pressures. The Merrill test gun seems to handle Rock's loads with no obvious problems but — most emphatically! — the loads are not suggested nor recommended for other guns chambered for the .357/44 BD cartridge. In fact, if anyone employs this data in other Merrill guns, they do so at their own risk and discretion.

Both of Rock's pet loads employ the Sierra 200-grain round-nosed jacketed softpoint (RN JSP) bullet, which is .358-inch in diameter. He specifies use of .44 magnum brass cases by Federal, with the CCI-350 large pistol magnum primer and either 22.0 grains of Winchester-Western (W-W) 680 powder or 20.0 grains of W-W 296 powder.

The test loads were made up in .44 mag cases of Remington-Peters (R-P)

headstamp because it happened to be the only headstamp on hand in sufficient quantity. The cases were lightly lubricated with Break Free applied to an uninked stamp pad and passed up into an Omark/RCBS case forming die with the No. 18 extended shell holder, also by RCBS, installed in the press ram. This was followed by a pass into the full-length resizing die of the RCBS set, after which the cases were trimmed to a uniform 1.285-inch length and lightly chamfered inside the mouth with a .358-inch reamer in the Forster case trimmer. After deburring the outside of the case necks, the brass was primed with Federal No. 150 large pistol primers.

The RCBS Uniflow measure was adjusted to throw 22.0 grains of W-W 680 powder and twenty-five rounds were loaded with the 200-grain Sierra RN JSP bullets seated to a length overall (LOA) of 1.905 inches.

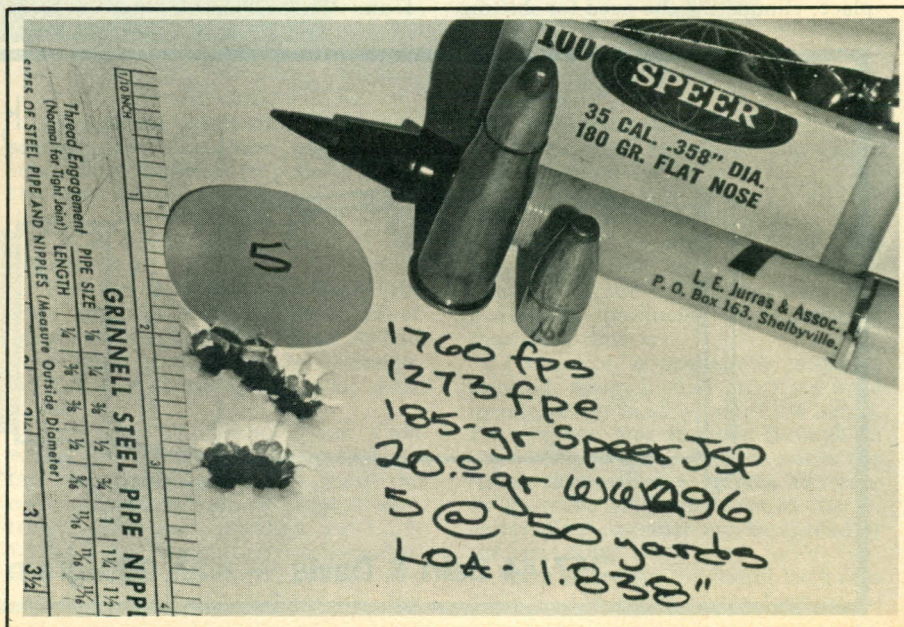
At that point, W-W 296 powder was substituted in the Uniflow and it was reset to drop 20.0 grains. Ten rounds each were made up on the 20.0 grains of W-W 296 powder, using the following bullets, with LOA of each in parentheses: 200-grain Sierra RN JSP (1.905); 200-grain Hornady RN JSP (1.956); 185-grain Speer full metal jacket (FMJ) (1.956); 185-grain Speer JSP (1.838); 170-grain Sierra FMJ (1.840); and 160-grain Hornady FMJ (1.750).

Five rounds of each load were fired off the sandbag rest at fifty yards, using a Leupold M8-4X extended eye relief scope in Weaver rings secured to the dove tail grooves at the rear of the Merrill barrel rib. The other five rounds were chronographed.

The tightest group was produced by the load with the 185-grain Speer JSP seated at 1.838 inches over 20.0 grains

Continued on page 16

The load that gave the tightest group also had the highest number of foot-pounds.



MERRILL

Continued from page 14

of W-W 296. It measured 0.824-inch in maximum spread between centers. Velocity of that load ranged from 1747 to 1768 fps for an average of 1760 and 1273 fpe. All velocities were measured on a Precisionics chronograph with its skyscreens spaced two feet apart.

The next-tightest group spanned 1.205 inches at the fifty-yard distance and it carried the 200-grain Sierra RN JSP bullet seated to 1.905 inches LOA over 22.0 grains of W-W 680 powder. Velocities ranged from 1634 to 1676 fps, averaging 1655 for 1216 fpe.

The load with the 185-grain Speer JSP not only grouped the best, but it showed the highest average for muzzle energy. The 185-grain Speer FMJ load was seated 0.118-inch higher in the case neck, doubtless accounting for its slightly lower velocity of 1734 fps (1235 fpe).

The 170-grain Sierra FMJs (0.3565-inch diameter) and the 160-grain Hornady FMJ (0.357-inch) both delivered higher velocities: 1775 and 1813 fps, respectively, for 1190 and 1168 fpe. Both were introduced by the manufacturer primarily for use in silhouette competition.

Hornady's 200-grain RN JSP averaged 1671 fps and 1241 fpe; it grouped 1.66 inches between centers at fifty yards on the five-shot test target. At



Merrill barrels are changed by removing pivot bolt. Catch at top rear of receiver is pulled rearward to open breech. Safety latch, visible here above thumb rest, must be pushed down in order to fire. Action cocks on opening.

that velocity, if sighted for center hold at one hundred yards, the drop at two hundred yards would be a bit under seventeen inches, and it would be about one inch high at fifty yards. The drop at 150 yards would be about six inches. Even transposed to the 50-100-150-200 meters of a handgun silhouette course, that is a trajectory

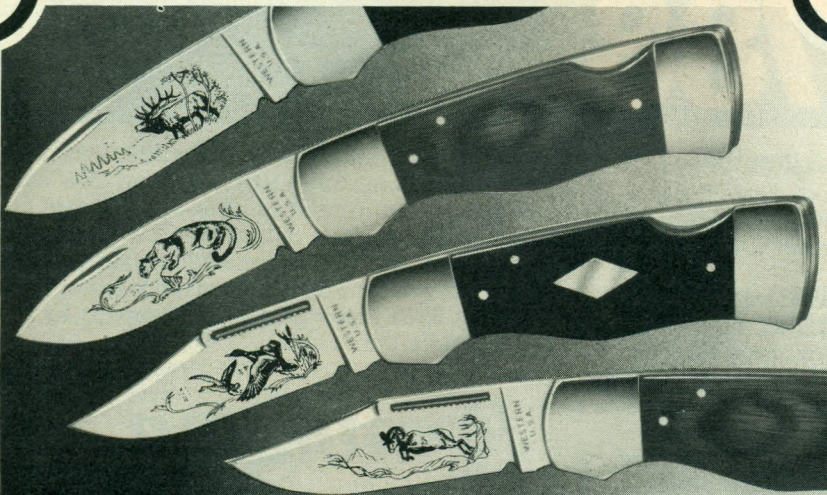
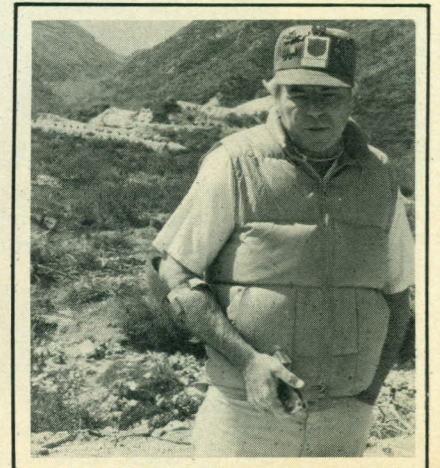
that would not require a great amount of sight adjustment between courses.

Descriptive literature on the Merrill Sportsman is free on request from the manufacturer: Rock Pistol Manufacturing (Dept. GW, 704 East Commonwealth, Fullerton, California 92631). The suggested retail price of the gun, as supplied for testing, is \$380; \$340 with nine-inch barrel. Extra nine-inch barrels are \$105 or \$145 each for the twelve-inch length. There is no extra charge for left-hand configuration and a hard chrome finish is available at an additional \$85.

The current caliber offering comprises twelve barrels to handle upward of thirteen cartridges. There's the .22 LR; .22 WMRF; .22 Hornet; .256 Win mag; .25-35 WCF; .30-30 WCF; .30 Herrett; .357 Herrett; .357 magnum (.38 Special); .357/44 BD; .41 mag and .44 mag.

The weight, with twelve-inch barrel, is about 4¼ pounds, less scope and scope mounts. I did not find the recoil

Jim Rock, head of Rock Pistol Manufacturing is current Merrill maker in Fullerton, California.



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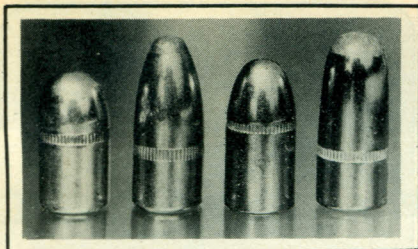
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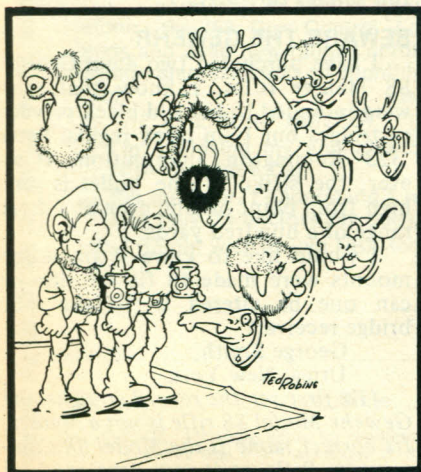
From left, 160-gr Hornady FMJ, 180-gr Speer JSP, 170-gr Sierra FMJ and 200-gr Sierra RN JSP.

particularly unpleasant although I think I would give serious consideration to sending it to Larry Kelly for his Mag-na-port treatment and I'd probably install a couple of small roll pins through the barrel rib just ahead of each scope mount to discourage forward migration of the mounts from recoil.

Early in the game, I whipped up a little homemade ramrod for use in evicting reluctant cases from the chamber. The ejector is spring-loaded and it lifts the case head a fraction of an inch out of the chamber, if there is not a great deal of resistance. With some of the loads listed here, there is a considerable degree of tight fit between spent case and chamber walls.

With that in mind, I'd plan on making sure I had the ramrod along if participating in a match. For hunting, I think I'd make up a length of solid brass rod, about four or five inches long and slightly less than bore diameter. If a case hung up in the field, the rod could be taken from a pocket and jogged up and down a time or two with fingertip over the muzzle to dislodge the case. I think that should do the trick nicely, without sacrifice of easy portability.

In closing, be it noted one more time: Since GUN WORLD and its staff has no control over methods and materials used in reloading by others, we cannot and do not accept any responsibility, either expressed or implied, for results alleged to have been caused by use of load data listed here. — Dean A. Grennell



"Uh...where do you usually hunt, Fred?"

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