

Colt Single Action Army and Cowboy Revolvers - Gun Review Synopsis

By Chuck Hawks



Illustration courtesy of Colt's Mfg. Co., Inc.

The Colt Single Action Army (SAA) . . . was introduced in 1873 . . . It became the most popular handgun on the American Frontier and . . . the definitive firearm of the Old West

The Colt SAA adopted by the U.S. Army in 1873 was in caliber .45 Long Colt . . . U.S. Army revolvers had 7 1/2 inch barrels . . . and the inspector's initials (and often date) were stamped into the grips. The U.S. Ordinance Department's test board . . . concluded: "the Colt revolver superior in most respects, and much better adapted to the wants of the Army than the Smith & Wesson." The U.S. government procured over 37,000 Colt SAA's over the next 19 years.

Various Colt SAA models were built from 1873 to 1940 . . . Production was reinstated in 1956, the beginning of the "2nd Generation" of SAA's . . . 1976 saw the introduction of the "3rd Generation" (New Model) SAA's, which are still being made as I write these words in 2003. The differences between one generation and another are minor. . . .

Over the years Colt has produced SAA variations under the names Peacemaker, Frontier Six-Shooter, Bisley, Bisley Target, Flattop Target, New Frontier, Buntline, and possibly others. Collectors often refer to various models as Buntline, Long-Flute, Rimfire, Sheriff's, Storekeeper's, and U.S. Martials.

.45 Colt was the official U.S. military caliber, and has also been the most popular caliber in civilian versions of the revolver, but many other calibers have been offered over the long lifetime of the SAA.

The calibers currently offered are .45 Colt, .44-40 WCF, and .357 Magnum/.38 Special.

In the past many other cartridges have been offered . . . Altogether, some 30 different SAA calibers appear in Colt records.

Barrel lengths of 4 3/4 inches, 5 1/2 inches and 7 1/2 inches have always been the most popular, but several others have been produced over the years . . . Current production is supplied with 4 3/4 inch and 5 1/2 inch barrels. 7 1/2 inch barrels are available by special order.

Colt SAA revolvers have been produced with a myriad of metal finishes. Most common is a combination of blued steel with a color cased frame. Next most common . . . gold and silver plated examples were turned out by Colt to special order . . . and various combinations of nickel, silver, gold, color case, and blue have also been produced.

Standard grips were walnut or black hard rubber . . . exotic woods, metals, ivory, mother of pearl, stag, and probably other materials were also used for SAA grips. Grips were smooth, checkered, or carved in various patterns. Colt logos, Colt medallions, and the American eagle are found on most SAA grips . . . but not by any means on all.

Engraved SAA's are fairly common. Colt . . . offers A, B, C, and D factory engraving patterns . . . Grade "C" engraving (75% coverage) is the most popular . . . Many unique SAA's have been produced, some for historically significant figures such as . . . and General George Patton. The latter ordered his famous engraved SAA with nickel finish and ivory grips in 1916 and carried it through WW II.

Of course, most of the famous frontier personalities of song and story used the SAA after it was introduced. These include (but are certainly not limited to) famous lawmen such as Wyatt Earp . . . as well as outlaws like Frank and Jesse James . . . Plenty of other frontier notables and gunfighters, such as Judge Roy Bean . . . are also associated with the famous Colt. The SAA also became the favorite handgun of . . . legions of anonymous peace officers, cowboys, farmers, miners, shop clerks, and gamblers.

Modern Colt SAA Revolvers

Colt SAA revolvers of the modern period (since production resumed in 1956) have been produced as Single Action Army and Buntline models . . . standard models have a round top frame . . . barrel lengths are 4 3/4, 5 1/2, and 7 1/2 inches. The Buntline model came with a 12 inch barrel but was otherwise similar to the regular SAA.

The modern SAA remains true to its heritage. It is a traditional Colt single action powered by flat springs . . . It is properly and safely carried with the hammer down on an empty chamber . . . Nothing has changed in this regard since 1873, nor should it.

The SAA uses a hammer mounted firing pin, and a loading gate in the left side of the frame gives access for loading and unloading. The steel ejector rod housing is located on the lower right side of the barrel, aligned with the loading gate.

The fluted cylinder is easily removed for cleaning . . . and can be removed from the right side of the frame.

To eject fired cases from a Colt single action revolver, the hammer is put in its half-cock position . . . the cylinder is manually rotated . . . so that a stroke of the spring loaded ejector rod can knock out the case. Loading is likewise accomplished one chamber at a time

Here is an easy way to safely load any traditional SA six-shooter . . . Visually inspect the gun (after loading) to verify that the empty chamber is under the hammer. You will be able to see the 5 cartridges that are not lined up with the barrel . . . Any single action revolver with the hammer down on an empty chamber is absolutely safe. It cannot be fired unless it is first manually cocked.

The typical SAA with a 5 1/2 inch barrel is 11 inches in overall length and weighs 42 ounces. The current Single Action Army is an expensive revolver with a very high quality finish, assembled in the Colt Custom Shop

The SAA New Frontier

A modern version of the flat top target SAA was introduced in 1961 as the New Frontier . . . A presentation version was made for President John F. Kennedy, who had coined the term "new frontier" during his 1960 election campaign.

The New Frontier has a flat top frame. The top strap of this frame is considerably more substantial than the rounded top strap found on standard SAA models. The sights consist of a white outline, target-type fully adjustable rear and a serrated ramp front with a square top blade . . . A .45 New Frontier with a 7 1/2 inch barrel . . . weighs 4 pounds. Calibers offered were .357 Magnum, .44 Special, and .45 Colt. Serial numbers end with the letters "NF."

The production of 2nd Generation New Frontier models . . . ran from 1961 until production of all 2nd Generation SAA's ceased in 1975. But the model was reinstated in 1978 (a 3rd Generation SAA) and continued until the New Frontier was finally discontinued . . . sometime during 1983.

The 3rd Generation SAA New Frontier test fired for this article . . . is a presentation grade revolver with a lustrous Royal Blue metal finish, color cased frame, and oiled walnut grips with gold Colt medallions . . . The New Frontier is . . . the most functional of all modern era . . . SAA models. Most are in the hands of collectors, which I regard as unfortunate; they deserve loving care, but they should be used in the field.

In 1984 SAA revolvers became available only from the Colt Custom Shop, and the New Frontier model is not available at all. This is a pity because . . . the SAA New Frontier was Colt's only big bore hunting revolver.

The Colt Cowboy

An offshoot of the standard SAA is the Colt Cowboy single action revolver . . . Externally the Cowboy is a SAA clone dimensionally identical to the original. This all steel revolver comes with a traditional blue metal finish and a color cased frame. The grips are walnut

Internally, however, it uses a new mechanism that incorporates coil springs and a transfer bar ignition system. Unlike all SAA models . . . it is safe to carry a Colt Cowboy with all six chambers loaded. In this respect the Cowboy is more like a Ruger Vaquero than a traditional Colt single action . . . the Cowboy loads in the traditional manner with a half-cock hammer position. As the name implies, the Cowboy model was inspired by the sport of cowboy action shooting . . . intended to give competitors (or anyone else) a chance to own a genuine Colt SA revolver at a price far below that of a new SAA.

The Cowboy is available in .45 Colt caliber only . . . comes with a 5 1/2 inch barrel . . . and weighs 42 ounces. You will note that these specifications are identical to the Single Action Army

Test Fire

The Colt SAA test fired for this review is the late model New Frontier described above. This .45 Colt caliber revolver has a 7 1/2 inch barrel . . . the fully adjustable sights are zeroed at 25 yards.

The SAA is a comfortable gun to shoot . . . points naturally . . . the graceful Western style grip allows the gun to roll slightly upward in the shooting hand, minimizing the effect of recoil. Many shooters over the years have found the Colt SAA grip to be the most comfortable of all handgun handles.

The New Frontier's adjustable sights are excellent in use, a definite advantage compared to the fixed sights of standard Single Action Army revolvers

According to the *Speer Reloading Manual No. 13* . . . At a MV of 1000 fps the 225 grain Speer JHP develops about 500 ft. lbs. of muzzle energy (ME). That makes the .45 Colt New Frontier a viable short range deer gun.

Factory loaded .45 Colt ammunition is rather expensive . . . Federal Classic factory loads with 225 grain lead SWC-HP bullets were test fired . . . All shooting was done from a bench rest on an outdoor range at 25 yard targets . . . The first reloads I tried used Speer 230 grain lead RN bullets over moderate charges of W231 powder . . . handloads using the famous Speer 200 grain JHP ("flying ashtray") bullet in front of fast burning W231 and 700X powders and medium burning rate HS-6 powder were tried next . . . The real winner was the 200 grain Speer JHP in front of . . . medium burning powder at a MV of 945 fps . . . Groups with this combination averaged a satisfying 1.7 inches.

It is worth noting that some of this shooting was done in the company of a friend shooting a modern Colt Government Model (1911) pistol in .45 ACP. Both of us were able to consistently shoot smaller groups with the SAA than with the semi-automatic pistol . . . Not bad for a 130 year old design!

Note: The complete review of these revolvers can be found in its entirety on the *Product Review Page*.

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