

Nigel Utting writes about the cartridge that was the ancestor of the .44 Magnum – the

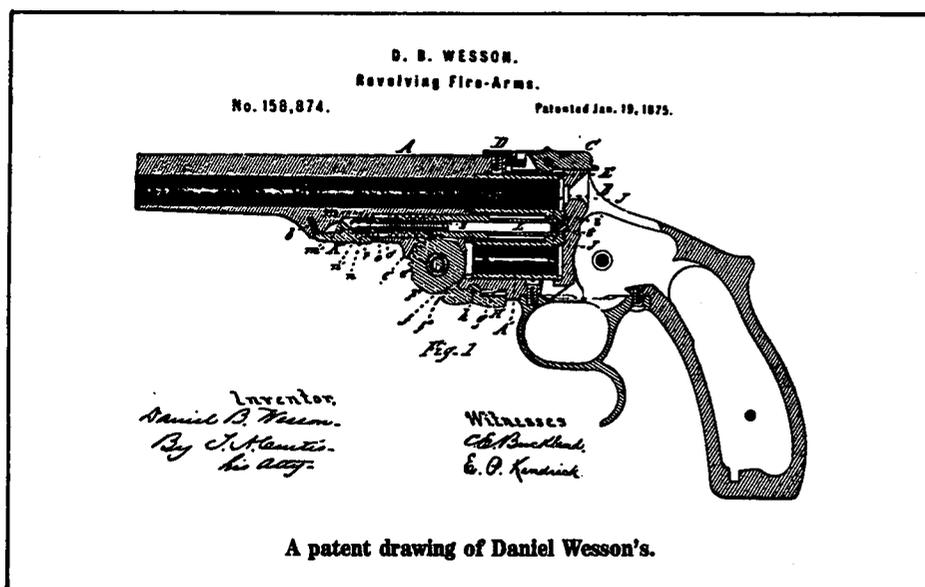
44 RUSSIAN

Ask any non-shooter to name the world's best-known revolver, and it's a pretty safe bet that the answer will either be Smith & Wesson's .44 Magnum (thank you, Clint Eastwood) or Colonel Colt's .45 'equalizer' (thank you, John Wayne). Press further, however, and few people — even regular shooters — are likely to know a great deal about more than a selected few of these manufacturers' earliest pistols. In this article we shall be looking at a specific, late-1800s Smith & Wesson revolver, the .44 Russian Model 3.

Smith & Wesson's No. 1 revolver, produced from 1857 to 1861, was a diminutive seven shot .22 Short rimfire; whilst the No 2, introduced in 1861, was a larger, six-shot, .32 Long rimfire. (The .32RF Long cartridge consisted of a 90gr outside-lubricated bullet propelled at 950fps by approx. 13gr of black powder). In 1865 there followed a further .32 revolver, this time a 3½ or 4" barrel 5-shot, referred to as the No 1½! Finally, in 1870 there appeared a full size .44 revolver, catalogued as the No. 3.

The Model 3 started life in 1870 as the 'First Model American'; an 8" barrel, six-shot, single-action revolver chambered for .44 Henry Rimfire or .44 S&W American. This latter was a popular and successful cartridge using an outside-lubricated bullet propelled at about 660fps by 25gr black powder. Loading/unloading was achieved by lifting the catch situated above the hammer and swinging the barrel downwards. Ejection of fired or unfired cases was effected automatically, and the ejector star then snapped back into the 'closed' position ready for the next batch of six rounds. In 1872 an improved version of the original revolver — the 'Second Model American' — appeared.

The Russian aspect of this matter started with the arrival in America of Russian Military Attache Colonel Aleksandr Gorlov, whose task was to consider the adoption of



A patent drawing of Daniel Wesson's.

American longarms by his country's army. Having selected the Gatling gun and the Berdan rifle, Gorlov switched his attention to the matter of a suitable revolver. Eventually, an order (the first of many) for 20 000 modified 'Second Model American' revolvers was placed with Smith & Wesson in 1871 against an initial payment of US\$50 000. Enigmatically, whilst the Russians eventually purchased 150 000 S&W Model 3s, the US Army purchased just 1 000!

The pistol as initially ordered by the Russians ('First' or 'Old Model Russian') revolvers was not the standard Second Model American. The most obvious change was the chambering for .44 Russian rather than .44 S&W American. The new round used a case a few thousandths larger in every dimension, together with an inside lubricated bullet (ie with the lubricant trapped in grooves in the bullet shank and protected within the top of the case, as with modern centre-fire cartridges).

To accommodate the new round, the cylinders of the Russian contract models were bored with a step at the case mouth instead of being bored straight through as with the .44 S&W American. More obvious to the untrained eye was the switch from markings in Roman script to markings in Cyrillic script on the barrel.

In time, Gorlov — who had by now been promoted to the rank of General — and his assistant, Captain Kasavery Ordinetz, specified further changes including a new grip shape (a hump or 'prawl' was added) and a shorter (7") barrel, all of which lead in 1873 into the 'Second' or 'Old Model Russian' and contracts for a further 40 000 pistols. A feature originally introduced with the Second Model American design and included in the Russian revolvers was the lip on the front edge of the hammer which locked the barrel latch in the closed position when the hammer was at rest, but prevented the hammer falling far enough forward to fire a round if the barrel catch was not firmly closed.

The 'Third' or 'New Model Russian' (introduced in 1874) which differed considerably from the Second Model soon followed with an integral front sight, an improved extractor, a more easily demounted cylinder and a still shorter (6½") barrel. Since US Patent No. 158,874 covering the novel aspects of this Model was issued to Daniel B. Wesson, the credit for its design seems due to him.

It should not be imagined that as soon as each newer Russian variant of the Model 3 appeared, production of the older variant(s) ceased; indeed, Old Model and New Model Russian revolvers were produced concurrently for some years. Identification is not helped by the fact that stocks of older parts were used up by combining parts from different versions wherever possible!

In addition to the Russians, the Turkish government entered into two contracts with Smith & Wesson for a total of 7 000 Model 3s in .44 Henry rimfire. For this reason, both sides carried the Model 3 in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8; whichever side won, so did Smith & Wesson! Small numbers of the .44 rimfire Turkish contract Model 3s also found their way onto the commercial market. (To distinguish a centre-fire from a rimfire revolver, look at the nose of the hammer which is noticeably higher in the rimfire version).

The Model 3s produced for the Turks under the first contract were made up from a mixture of frames from Second and Third Model Russian revolvers with cylinders bored to the correct dimensions for the .44 rimfire cartridge. A proportion of the second contract (2 000 pistols), although rimfire revolvers, were fitted with cylinders whose chambers were bored for the .44 centre-fire cartridge and were therefore at least 11 thou oversize; as a result the rimfire cases bulged and/or burst on firing. The balance of the second contract Turkish pistols (5 000) were Third ('New') Model Russian revolvers converted to rimfire.

Interestingly, the Turkish contract Model 3 which was used to illustrate this article was purchased in York; sometime later, a Peabody Martini rifle engraved: "Presented to Cap. Duncombe by Turkish Officers, June 1879" also surfaced in York, and it is tempting — but totally without foundation — to suggest that their histories might be connected. Nice thought though.

By this time you may have gained the impression that only the military ever purchased Model 3s. This is far from the truth, however, since S&W produced Model 3s for the commercial market at the same



Smith & Wesson First Old Model .44 Russian in 'broken' position, showing extractor partially lifted. This will snap back when the revolver is fully open.



S&W Model 3 Second contract Turkish Model in .44 Henry Rimfire, made by Smith & Wesson — Serial No. 3295.



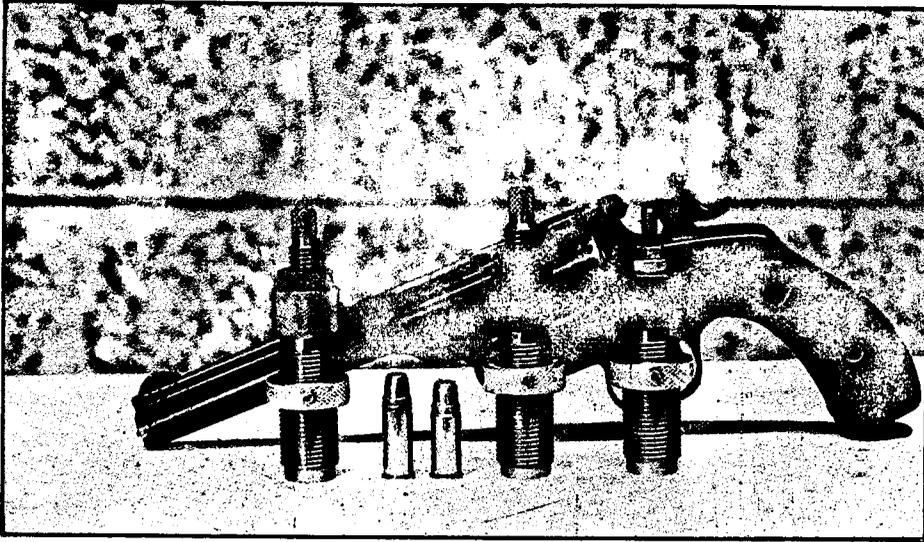
S&W Model 3 First Old Model Russian in .44 Russian No. 287 by Smith & Wesson.

time as fulfilling their military contracts.

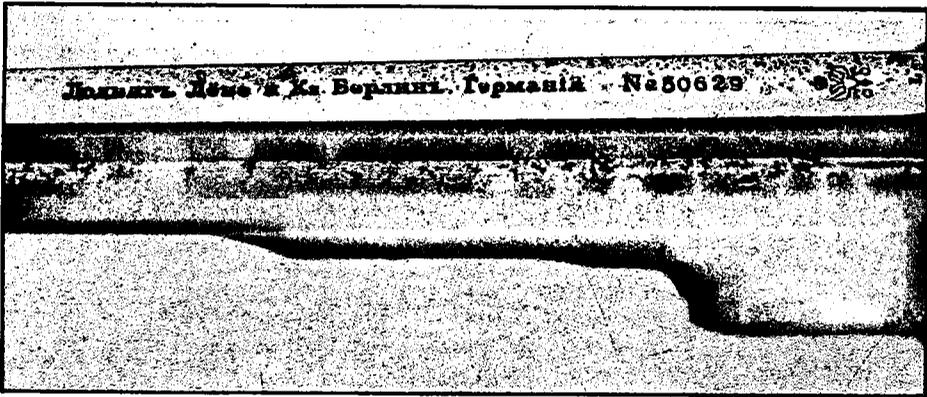
The demand from the Russians for what they evidently considered to be a superior revolver could not be satisfied by Smith & Wesson alone, and two other factories produced 'Third/New/Cavalry' Model 3s:

Tul'ski Oruzheinyi Zavod (Tula), the Russian government ordinance establishment (over 100 000 revolvers), and Ludwig Løwe and Company, Berlin (another 100 000 revolvers).

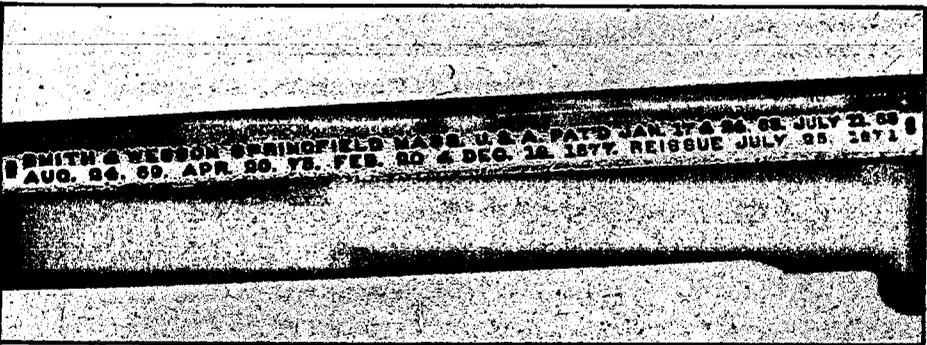
For most people, a Model 3 is an old gun



NDFS .44 Russian loading dies (dies in .44Spl/Mag can also be used). Cartridges: (L) .44 Special (R) .44 Russian. (First Model Russian in background.)



Barrel inscription on Ludwig Loewe Third Model Russian revolver. 'Ludwig Loewe & Company, Berlin Germany.



Barrel inscription on S&W Turkish 2nd contract model.

seen in a museum; my extraordinary luck lies in knowing a serious collector of firearms who works on the basis that guns were made to be fired, and that includes his Model 3s. For this reason I have been privileged to fire not just one, but two such pistols, and to closely examine a Turkish Third Model chambered for .44 rimfire.

Whilst shooting the Model 3 revolver is an absolute delight, suitable ammunition is no longer commercially available and handloading is a necessity. Fortunately, the .44 Russian round, as the forerunner of the .44 Special and Magnum, differs only from the Special round in case length, and producing .44 Russian brass is simply a matter of shortening .44 Special brass from 1.16" to 0.97". (I say 'simply', but try shortening 100 cases in an evening!). Lighter .429" diameter bullets (preferably round-nosed in keeping with the 'period look') are ideal.

The matter of powder is up to you: the original loading was 23gr black powder — however, Nobel's 1975 loading guide gave charge weights for their (smokeless) Pistol Powders Nos. 2 and 3. Personally, I think it is far kinder to use black powder charges for these old pistols, and on balance I would not recommend the use of smokeless powder. The granulation of modern black powder differs from that of the late 19th century, and I find that 18-20gn is as much powder as can be comfortably accommodated with a 250gr bullet (the only weight I had available) in order to stay within the maximum 1.43" overall length allowed by the Model 3's cylinder.

Brass cartridges loaded with black powder inevitably become very discoloured. This does not affect the performance of the brass, but no one likes dirty cases. The answer is quite simple: cases should always be soaked in a solution of detergent after firing to soften and release the hardened fouling which builds up internally; this soaking also helps with the subsequent removal of external fouling and discolouration. Take the expander rod from your expanding die, and chuck it in your electric drill. Push each case onto the end

of the expanding rod (mine sit there with a light friction fit) and then spin the case against a dampened Brillo pad (don't forget to do the case head as well). A five-second whizz does the trick and leaves the cases looking like new. It's only cosmetic, but we all know that clean cases shoot better!!

How well can you expect 110 year-old pistols to perform? I, for one, received quite a shock. Since black powder should not be metered through a powder measure (the shearing action of the measure can cause such powder to ignite), each caseful was individually weighed from a dipper into my powder scales. As a result, powder charges were very accurate. Firing over a rest at 25 yards outdoors, groups were a mixture, ranging from three shots into 6", to all shots clean off the target! This was hardly surprising, since on the day in question the wind had risen to a half-gale by the time I reached the range.

Under better circumstances, groups slimmed right down to an amazing 7cm (three shots, with a fourth shot opening the group to 16cm) (First Russian Model (Serial No. 2XX), superb trigger let-off) and 7cm (five shots, with a sixth shot opening the group to 12cm) (Third Russian Model (Serial No. 50XXX), heavier trigger let-off) from a sandbag rest at the same 25 yards. (Incidentally, gripping the trigger guard spur of the Third Model with the middle finger of the firing hand did not improve groups at all).

For pistols of such age fired with black powder loads, I find these results very impressive; however, had I been born in the age of Ira Paine and Walter Winans I might have had a better appreciation of the accuracy potential of black powder handguns! Although I can thoroughly recommend taking a Model 3 to the range, anyone thinking of doing likewise should:

1. ensure that their revolver is in safe mechanical condition to fire, if in doubt consult a qualified gunsmith;
2. decide whether, in view of an original Model 3's monetary value (in the region of R3 000) they really want to fire the gun; and,
3. clean their pistol immediately after firing to reduce the possibility of corrosion from black powder residue.

This has necessarily been a thumbnail sketch of the Model 3, and advanced collectors of these pistols would undoubtedly be able to point out many more variations between the three main versions with far greater authority than I; however I hope that shooters more used to Model 19s and 66s will now know a little more about one of the distant forebears of their favourite revolver.

