



*Concocting accurate and effective
pistol loads is an applied
science. Here is a graduate
course from the Dean of
American Handgunners.*

Elmer Keith picks his... 'Favorite' loads.

Each month I receive requests for the best loads for various sixgun cartridges.

Back in 1927, I designed the first of the Keith six-gun bullets for the Lyman Gun Sight Corporation. My 250-grain Solid, Ideal Number 429421, followed by two 235-grain versions, one with a hollow base, the Ideal 429422, and the other a hollow-point version of the same flat-base solid bullets.

Later, I designed three bullets for the .38 Special: Ideal's 173-grain solid Number 358429, a hollow-point type, the 160-grain Number 358439, and a hollow-base version, the Number 358431. Next, I designed a bullet of the same characteristics for the .45 Auto Rim. It was a 240-grain weight, the Ideal Number 452423. Another bullet was made of the same design for the .45 Colt, at 250 grains. It was the Ideal 454424.

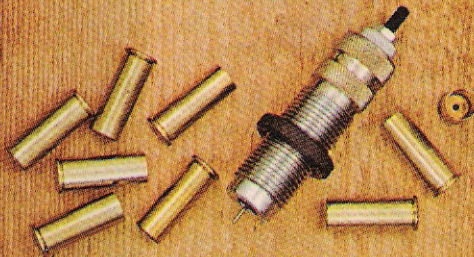
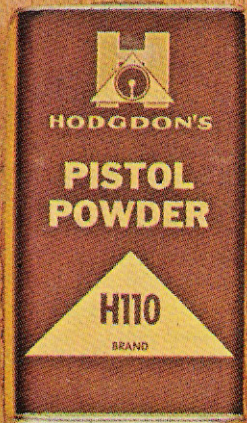
With the advent of the .41 Magnum, I designed for it a 220-grain bullet. Molds for it are made by Hensley & Gibbs, Murphy, Oregon. Back in 1925 and 1926 I designed a 260-grain blunt-nose bullet for the .45 Colt. This was for Belding & Mull. It was followed by two for the .44 Special, one in 260 grains weight and the other in 280 grains weight. These Belding & Mull bullets had one large, square grease groove and a good

bevelled crimp groove. While excellent up to 50 yards, they did not prove very accurate beyond that range, so I dropped them and designed the later, best-known Keith line for Lyman Gun Sight Corporation. These last have proven the most accurate lead-alloy sixgun slugs ever produced.

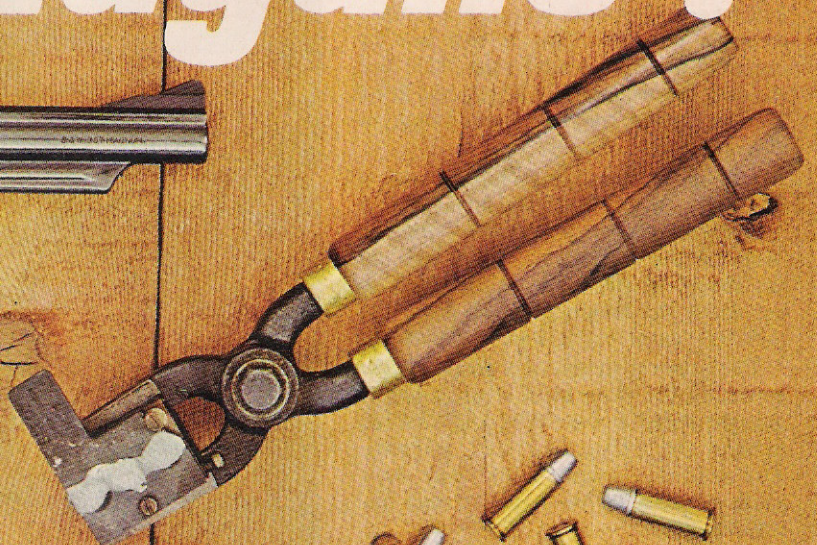
Over the years, these bullets have proven their worth to many thousands of shooters. I wanted a bullet that was stable and accurate to extreme long range, half a mile if necessary, and yet one that would cut a full-caliber clean hole in either target or meat. These bullets accomplished my purpose.

First in this line comes the .38 Special. My three bullets in this caliber are cast not softer than one-to-16 tin and lead. I sized them .357 for Smith & Wesson guns and .354 for most Colt guns. This proved very accurate. In the M&P and other light-frame guns, I use 3.5 grains of Bullseye or 5 grains of Unique. However, in the Colt Single Action and New Service Target, and the Smith & Wesson Heavy Duty and Outdoorsman, I use a load of 13.5 grains 2400 as the best and most accurate load. Target shooters, however, may use 2.7 grains Bullseye to 3 grains with all three of these .38 Special bullets for excellent accuracy to 50 yards. Many state matches have been won with them.

GUNS & AMMO



for handguns!



Most guns require customized loads for maximum accuracy. Of the more popular models are (top to bottom): Colt Officer's Model .38 Special with custom rib; accurized Colt .45 Government Model; S&W .357 Combat Magnum; Colt Single Action .44 Special. Hodgdon powder, Lyman TC die and Saeco bullet mold add precision, economy.

Major Douglas Wesson wanted me to work with him on the development of the .357 Magnum back in the early '30s, which I did. I sent him 200 of my 173-grain solid bullets, sized and lubricated, after I had put 1000 of them through a 5-inch .38 Special Heavy Duty Smith & Wesson with a heavy load of Number 80 powder. Col. Bill Tewes, then of Peters Cartridge Company, chronographed them at an average of 42,000 psi. They were very accurate but far too heavy for any light-frame gun.

I gave the dope to Major Wesson and he then decided to bring out the .357 Magnum. Whitsil of Remington would not load these bullets for Wesson, so he went to Mert Robinson of Winchester who did load and test them. They shortened the nose of my bullet, cut down the width of the forward band, which was a mistake, and brought out the Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum cartridge and a fine gun for it.

I spent three days in the Pahsimeroi Valley, testing this gun and load along with Cale Dickey in 1935. I killed 125 jackrabbits those three days with this early .357, but found that the factory Winchester load of that time was not accurate enough for certain hits beyond 75 yards.

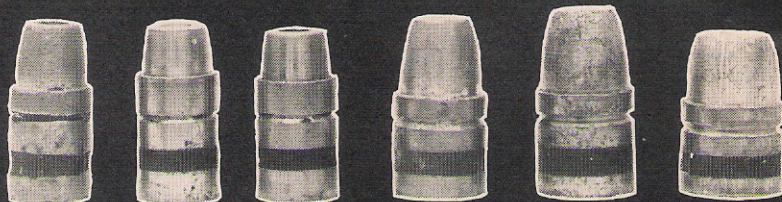
My handloads with 173-grain solids and 160-grain hollow base or hollow points in .38 Special cases, with 13.5 grains 2400, were extremely accurate and I killed many jacks at 100 to 125 yards. I even took one, standing on his hind legs out at 180 yards. This shot was taken using both hands, but from a standing position. This is still one of the most accurate loads in the .357, and the only one with which I have had good accuracy from the .38 Special case in that gun.

I designed this line of bullets with a full-width and full-caliber driving band in front of the crimp groove—thus in front of the loaded case—to true up the round in the cylinder and also to cut down the length of jump from the cartridge case to the barrel throat.

The greatest strain on a sixgun bullet comes on the front band when it jumps straight ahead to the rifling and then has to take the rifling and start spinning. Any recorded sixgun bullet will show some skidding of the lands on this forward band.

My design cuts this slippage to the minimum, and the forward full groove diameter band scrapes the bore clean each shot. The bullet has two heavy forward bands to take and hold the rifling with only the deep bevelled crimp groove between, then a big, deep square lubrication groove, to hold an adequate supply of lubricant so as to properly lubricate the bore. I have never had any leading from these Keith bullets.

The nose of my .38 Special bullets proved a bit long for crimping in the



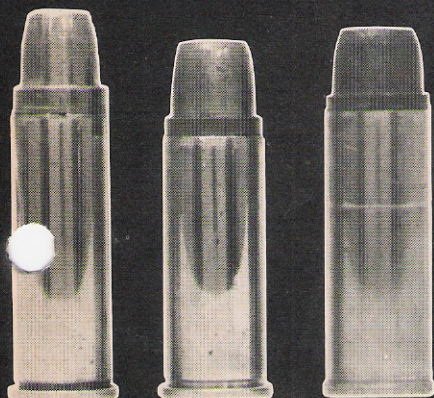
(l to r) 160-gr. hollow point for .38 or .357; 173-gr. solid for .38, .357; short 160-gr. hollow point for older S&W .357 short chambers; 250-gr. .44 plain and also copper-coated; 240-gr. .45 Long Colt. All are original Keith designs.



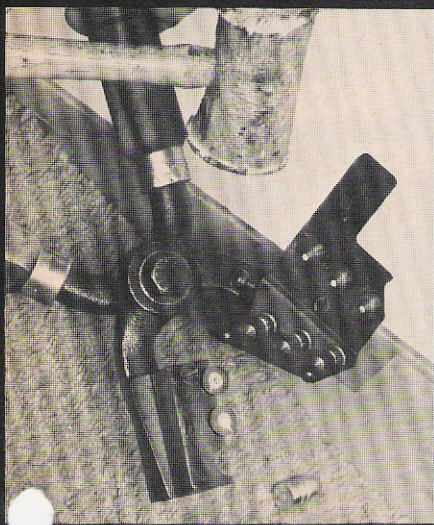
Over the years, Keith has designed cast, lubricated bullets for auto pistols as well as revolvers, such as this 200-grain hard-cast semi-wadcutter for .45 ACP. A Star press will "marry" the components after they are measured, inspected.

Loads

Keith's life-long study of long-range pistol shooting has convinced him of the need for custom-designed handloads in guns like the .41 S&W Magnum.



These .41 Magnum, .44 Special and .44 Magnum (l to r) handloads with Keith bullets and loads stem from many years' work.



Saeco mold's sprue cutter is knocked away from freshly cast .44-caliber Keith 250-grain solid-nose bullets for revolver loads.

crimp groove in .357 cases, because of the length of the early .357 Magnum cylinders. I simply lubricated both the grease and crimp groove and crimped barely over the front band. With these, I used a charge of 14.5 grains of 2400 with the 173-grain solid and 15 grains of 2400 with the 160-grain hollow base or hollow point. These loads proved very effective.

More recently, Ruger brought out his fine single-action .357 with a cylinder long enough to crimp the Keith bullets in their proper crimp groove and still be short enough overall for the length of the cylinder chambers. Still later, Smith & Wesson brought out their little .357 Combat Magnum, also with a long cylinder and less barrel exposed through its frame. These will also take my bullets crimped in the proper crimp groove on .357 cases. In the short cylinder, old model .357 Smith & Wesson, the .38 special case with 13.5 grains of 2400 and my bullet, properly crimped, proved more accurate at any range than the .357 factory loads or my loads crimped over the forward band.

Even more recently, I designed a shorter-nose version of my bullet, especially for the old .45-frame S&W .357 Magnums that would permit crimping in the proper crimp groove and still be short enough overall for the chambers. These proved the best in these short cylinder .357s with identical loads as used when the bullets were crimped over their front band.

Next in line of size is the fine .41 Magnum that Bill Jordan and I had the companies bring out as the ideal police weapon. Groove diameter was decided by Doug Hellstrom at .410-inch to eliminate any chance of its being used in old .41 Colt guns. I designed a 220-grain bullet for this cartridge for Hensley & Gibbs. With this cartridge I worked up a load of 20 grains 2400 and this proved perfect, for my use at least, and has for others as well. Some use only 19 grains or a slightly lighter load, giving around 1400 feet with normal pressures. Remington brought out two fine loads for it, a lead bullet at around 1000 feet and the soft-point jacketed at around 1500.

This cartridge is fast proving the ideal police cartridge, and many big cities have now adopted it as their standard police weapon. San Francisco and Amarillo use it, as well as Nevada State and many others I could name.

The .41 Hensley & Gibbs bullet works perfectly with 4 grains of Bullseye for a light load or 7.5 grains Unique for slightly heavier load. The full load of 19 to 20 grains of 2400 is for serious social purposes or game shooting. I took five caribou with the pair of 4-inch S&W guns given me and Remington factory soft-nose ammo.

I particularly recommend molds from Hensley & Gibbs and Santa Anita Engi-

neering Company of Pasadena, California (Saeco). These Saeco and H&G molds both have long, cool handles and are cut to my true design. Saeco brought out an excellent 220-grain .41 Magnum bullet to my design, but with a slightly narrower forward band than the H&G. These two 220-grain bullets have proven best in the .41 Magnum, in either the Ruger — in my opinion best single action ever produced — or the fine Smith & Wesson guns. The factory load was brought out with 210-grain bullet against my wishes, as I prefer a 220-grain bullet in .41 for best long range accuracy.

Next, we cover the .44 Special. In factory persuasion, it is a 246-grain round-nose "grouse load" at only around 750 feet, although a wonderfully accurate light target load. With my bullet, Ideal Number 429421, I first used 12 grains of Number 80 back in 1927, when Harold Croft and I first tested it, up until the advent of Number 2400 Hercules powder. I have used 2400 ever since. This bullet proved very accurate with 5 grains of Bullseye for a light load or 7.5 grains of Unique for a heavier load or 18.5 grains of 2400 in the old balloon-head cases.

In 40 years of use, I never had a head pull off a balloon-head .44 Special case and some were fired more than 20 times with heavy loads. They finally split over the bullet and then were discarded. In the new solid-head cases, I cut the charge to 17 grains because of the much smaller powder capacity. Velocities were not quite as high so, to me, the old balloon-head case is still the most efficient. I have killed a lot of big game with this 250-grain solid and 18.5 grains of 2400 and it is still a very effective load. It is also accurate out to as far as 600 yards.

For the .45 Auto Rim, I designed the 240-grain Ideal 452423 to be cast very hard, one-to-ten tin and lead. This helped them take and hold the very shallow .003 lands of the 1917 revolvers, that were designed and bored for .45 ACP jacketed bullets.

These .45 Auto Rim cases first came in the old balloon-head type and later the solid-head type. I have used 7.5 grains of Unique for a medium load, but it was never as accurate as the full load of 15 grains 2400. Also, the 250-grain bullet shot very well with 5 grains of Bullseye. However in the solid-head cases, with a 14 to 14.5-grain load of 2400, it gave me a very accurate load.

Later I learned that my .45 Colt bullet, Ideal 454424, when cast very hard and sized down to .451, was the correct diameter for these 1917 revolvers. For the fine S&W 1955 Target it proved an even better bullet than 452423, so I dropped the use of the 240-grain and went to the .45 Colt 250-grain bullet with the same powder charges. This is

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LOADS FOR HANDGUNS

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the most effective load in the .45 Auto Rim Case, for all purposes, including police work.

Now, let us look at the time-tried old .45 Colt, that will never wear out, it seems. These guns vary to beat the devil in both chamber throats and groove diameters and one has to size his bullets exactly to groove diameters of the particular gun he uses. My bullet is cast not softer than one-to-16 tin and lead. I back it with 5 grains to 6 grains of Bulls-eye for a light load and 10 grains of Unique for a heavier load and 18.5 grains of 2400 for a full load. These all worked very well, but the full load should only be used in smokeless powder guns or guns fitted with modern steel cylinders.

The .45 Colt cases were notoriously weak. I once had the cartridge head blow off with 30 grains of black powder and a 300-grain .45-90 Winchester bullet, sized down to .454 to fit my gun. The escaping gas broke off the loading gate and drove it through the top of my trigger finger.

Many, many times .45 Colt case heads would pull off in the resizing die, until I quit the cartridge in favor of the .44 Special, way back in the late '20s. I never have used it extensively since, as I found the .44 Special could be loaded to higher velocity with the same weight bullet and better sectional density and accuracy. The .45 Colt chambers were simply too thin to stand much pressure.

I even had one .45 SA blow up, but good! It happened with a case full of King's Semi-Smokeless and a 260-grain government soft lead bullet. The cases had been fired many times and primer pockets had enlarged until the primers were not a tight fit. Two rounds went off at once. I believe this was caused by set-back of the loaded cartridges against the recoil shield and a loose primer detonated in the cartridge to the left of the one fired in the barrel.

At any rate, the top strap and three chambers departed the gun and one piece of cylinder cut through the door panel into my bedroom. Another piece I later found in the bronc corral and I guess the top strap is going yet. That is one time when I learned a bit about heavy pressures in the .45 Colt.

Gas-check cups are useless on revolver bullets, in my estimation. They raise pressures from 3 to 5 thousand psi. Also, they do not upset to fill the chamber throats, and do allow gas to cut by them in the chamber throats to blow the lubricant out of the grease groove and melt the driving bands on the bullet. Often, there is also further gas cutting of the top strap of the gun at the barrel and cylinder junction.

Really, the best shape of base for revolvers is my hollow-base version, that

flares out to fill the chamber throats perfectly and seals off pushing gas. This is, however, a slow bullet to cast as you must let the molds cool somewhat or else the base-plug will tear out a side of the hollow base, when opened.

Users of the .45 Colt should profit from the experience related, but if they have a modern smokeless-cylinder gun, then, the above heavy loads will give excellent results. If you have an old army gun for black powder, made with a screw-front frame, you had best stick to factory loads or their equivalent, that develop only 870 feet with 250 to 255-grain bullets. The old factory Remington black powder load of 40 grains and a 250-grain bullet developed 900 fps and it and the present smokeless factory loads are as heavy as should ever be used in the early single-action Colts.

Lastly, let us take up the .44 Magnum. It took me 30 years of work and writing to get this gun and load. In 1953, I spent a week at the Remington plant at Bridgeport and another week at the Smith & Wesson plant with my friend Carl Hellstrom, president of Smith & Wesson. They promised to bring out the gun and load. The first gun made, a 6½-inch tool-room job, was sent to me and the second gun produced was given to General Julian S. Hatcher, so I get a bit weary of reading how many Johnny Come-Latelies were responsible for the .44 Magnum.

I asked Remington for my heavy .44 Special loads in factory persuasion, but they were afraid of the old Triple Lock for strength. I had fired several thousand of my heavy 18.5-grain 2400 loads through my own gun, one that Ed McGivern had traded to me in the early '30s. So, I proposed that they lengthen the case 1/10-inch and call it a .44 Magnum. They agreed and Carl Hellstrom promised to wrap a gun around any safe load that Remington would bring out. I urged him to invite the Remington engineers up to the Smith & Wesson plant and let them get together with Bill Gunn and his engineers and see what could be done.

The .44 Magnum was the result and it has proven the finest heavy sixgun load extant and also the most accurate of them all. Ken Lomont and his father, of 4421 South Wayne Avenue, Fort Wayne, Indiana, have done more experimenting with the cartridge for accuracy than any other shooters I know of. They have, with 8¾-inch-barrel guns, using special 6-power scopes and a sand-bagged benchrest, shot a good many five-shot groups of 1 inch, or slightly under, at 100 yards with my 250-grain hard bullet and 22 grains of 2400.

On the 4th of September, 1968, Ken also made a group of just ¾-inch at 100 yards with an 8¾-inch scoped Smith & Wesson .41 Magnum. He used my 220-grain Hensley & Gibbs bullet

and a charge of 21 grains of H-110 powder. The same day, he made a 2-inch group with iron sights from a Super Blackhawk Ruger and a charge of 22 grains H-110 and again the 220-grain.

When Carl Hellstrom sent me the first .44 Magnum, I saved my fired factory cases and worked up a load of 22 grains of 2400 with my 250-grain hard bullet. I have used that load ever since, and it has now become the standard for a heavy handload in the .44 Magnum. It has taken about all American big game. Also, two elephants were killed with this load in Africa, one with a brain shot down the ear-hole and the other with a heart shot from Ruger's 7½-inch barrel Super Blackhawk.

For a light load, use 5 grains of Bulls-eye with any of my three bullets, solid, hollow-base, or hollow-point and for a medium target load, use 8.5 grains of Unique. Then, 22 grains of 2400 will do for the full load.

Many have tried to improve on my bullet, but the only real improvement in this design is by Phillip W. Robinson, El Cajon, California. He decided to make up my bullet in soft-point design, the same as Lyman used to do for most cast-bullet early rifle calibers. He cast a soft, pure-lead tip, inserted it in the regular mold and then cast a harder body around the soft tip. Sacco made him up a three-cavity mold for the tip of the nose of my bullet forward of the front band, but with a long dovetail flare at the base to extend back into the hard-bullet body.

Robinson casts the soft tips, then heats them up and inserts them with tweezers into his regular mold for Keith bullets and casts a hard one-to-ten tin and lead body. The final .44 Keith bullet comes out at 250 grains. It expands perfectly up to 100 yards, even on small game, yet holds together and makes perfect mushrooms.

This bullet is also nearly as accurate as the full-hard cast bullet, as Ken Lomont made five-shot groups under 4 inches at 100 yards. Some were under 3 inches with his scoped 8¾-inch barreled Smith & Wesson guns, fired from his sand-bagged benchrest. This makes an excellent expanding soft-point .44 Magnum bullet for side shots at deer or lung shots on elk and other big game. Still, where deepest penetration is needed, then solid, hard bullets are best.

Such heavy sixgun loads with hard bullets usually penetrate much deeper in game than many high-velocity soft-nose rifle bullets. Remember, resize all sixgun cases full length and use an expanding plug small enough to allow a tight friction-fit of the bullet before the crimp is administered.

Follow these recommendations, and you can make the sixgun of your choice do its job more efficiently and more effectively.

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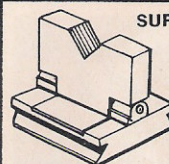
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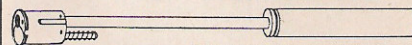


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