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Colt offers the black composite checkered eagle grips with rampant Colt trademark as standard, other options are available from the Custom Shop.

Colt is back in the business of listing their 7.5" Single Action Army again, along with a brand new lower price. This is the author's new SAA after some work by Peacemaker Specialists.

NEW COLT Single Action ARMY .45colt

BY DENIS PRISBREY

The original—now better than ever!

There were a number of genuine historical figures who favored the longer barrels on their Colt Peacemakers back in the early history of the gun, such as Wyatt Earp, Theodore Roosevelt, and the US Army, to name just a few, but most of my images of the 7.5-inch Colt single-actions came from watching TV as a kid.

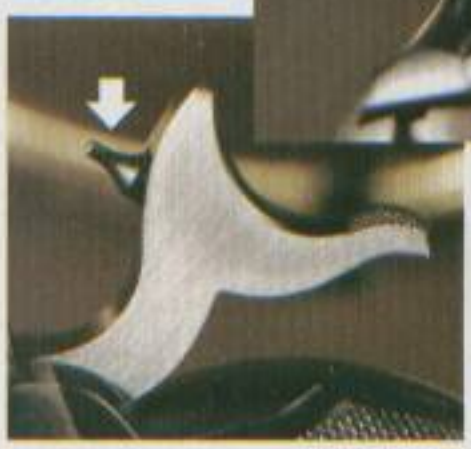
My maternal grandfather farmed well into his 70s, and didn't have much time for TV. But I recall as a young kid, when we'd go to visit during the summers, he made it a point to be in front of the set at 8:00 PM on Saturday nights to watch *Gunsmoke*. If we were at Grandpa's, us kids would have to sit down and shut up while Marshal Dillon maintained law and order in Dodge City, Kansas, with the aid of Chester, Doc, Miss Kitty, and frequently that long barreled Colt .45 he carried for the show's 20-year run. In black and white, and much later in color, there he was each

week facing down Arvo Ojala on Dodge's dusty main street in the opening sequence. Marshal Dillon may not have gotten off the first shot, but he did get off the best shot, and that was the one that counted. It never seemed to bother him that the extra barrel length might be slowing him down some on the draw, he obviously knew what he liked, and he liked what he knew.

There's some dispute about what the gun actually used on the show was (many say it was a succession of Hawes Western Marshal single-actions), and at the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming, among several Colts used by other TV Western actors, there's a 7.5-inch single-action revolver listed as one used by James Arness as Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke*, documented by the Colt factory as being a genuine Colt Peacemaker. It's an odd-looking duck up close with a barrel that looks out of place and a gripframe that I've never seen on a Colt, but it could be a prop gun assembled from other parts for the show, and as long as it shot blanks and looked okay on the small screen, that's all it had to do. In the hands of the tall Arness, who handled it very well, whatever long barreled pistol he did actually use looked very appropriate.

Several companies produce serviceable single-actions, but if you want the "real thing," there's only one place to go...Colt. Having been the proud owner of one entire Colt Peacemaker for nine years now (us retired cops aren't quite as wealthy as people think we are!), I'd thought about picking up another one. That's the bad part of buying a genuine Peacemaker, it tends to make you want more. When Colt went dealer direct and lowered their pricing on the old Single Action Army, the time had come. My first Model P, acquired in 1994, was a blued 4.75-incher in .45 Colt, and with visions of Marshal Dillon in mind I decided my second Model P was going to be a long barrel. The caliber was easy, with three sets of .45 Colt reloading dies and several thousand .45 brass cases downstairs in the bullet mine, a .45 it would be.

Hammer spur is graceful and cleanly checkered for non-slip cocking.



Current guns still retain the classic fixed firing pin in the hammer.

Current Colt Peacemaker

Over the last few years Colt has been busy downsizing, re-organizing, re-tooling, and concentrating on military contracts while trying to rebuild the company after a series of changes in ownership and financial structure. The situation appears to be looking up now and I'm among many who are glad to see it.

Colt's website now shows nine different variations of the Single Action Army, including the 7.5-inch barrels that haven't been listed for quite a while. Calibers are .357 Magnum, .44-40 Winchester, and .45 Colt, all in blued/casehardened finish. Sights are fixed, capacity is six (we still load the old thumb-buster with only five and carry it with an empty chamber under the hammer), and they come with black checkered composite eagle grips. There are other options available as custom orders, such as different calibers, finishes, barrel lengths, and engraving. So don't be discouraged if you don't see the custom pistol of your dreams listed. The website only shows blued pistols, but nickel finishes are still available through the Custom Shop.

The biggest news on these guns are the new lower price ($1380 suggested retail) as mentioned above, which is an attempt by Colt to remove the distributor middleman and make the pistol more affordable in the single-action market, and the return to the older First and Second Generation removable cylinder bushing. Both of these steps are in direct response to consumer feedback. Colt has listened and that removable bushing should delight the purists among us who just never did quite cotton to the Third Gen pressed-in bushing. The new price is also much more affordable than the nearly $1900 retail the Model P was working its way up to in recent years.

Also, in case you're a little behind on the Single Action Army, current pistols have a squared rear sight notch. I know, it ain't

Specifications: Colt Single Action Army

Caliber: .45 Colt, .44-40, .357MAG
Barrel: 4.75, 5.5, 7.5 inches
Weight: 40-42 ounces
Grips: Black composite
Sights: Blade front, rear notch
Features: Single-action, nickel or blue finish with color casehardened frame, options available from Custom Shop
Capacity: 6-shot
Price: $1380

Performance: Colt Single Action Army .45

LOAD	ACCURACY
PMC 250 LFP	2-5/8
Black Hills 250 RNFP	2-1/16
Winchester 250 RNFP	2-1/2
Federal 225 SWHP	2-15/16
HANDLOAD	
8 UNIQUE 225 NBC SWC	1-3/8

Bullet weight and load measured in grains, accuracy in inches for best 6-shot groups from bench at 25 yards. Temperature: 99 degrees, Humidity: 20 percent, Elevation: 4500 feet, 7 MPH wind gusts.

period correct, but I'll tell you it makes trying to get a decent sight picture a bunch easier and quicker for us older fogies.

Peacemaker Specialists

My first Single Action Army came with a rough action, and it was eventually sent off to Eddie Janis at Peacemaker Specialists for some custom work. My new SAA, when it arrived, had a noticeably better action, but after you've seen and felt Eddie's magic on a Peacemaker it sorta spoils you, so off it went to California for Eddie to do another top-of-the-line Gunslinger Action Job. This time I didn't have him go quite as far on the new pistol as he did on my first one; I stayed with the black eagle grips, and the front of the cylinder was already beveled in the older style out of the box (I found they do not come standard this way when I double-checked, that's an optional service provided by the Custom Shop), so those

Author's Colt was given a rust bluing while at Peacemaker Specialists, which leaves a more gun-metal-grey finish than factory bluing. The beveled cylinder is a Colt Custom Shop option.

were two areas that were left as they came. There's really nothing wrong with the factory bluing on the Single Action Army, but I just happen to prefer the gun-metal-grey looks of a good rust bluing job, and had Eddie do that. The only other work done to the Colt was cutting the forcing cone to 11 degrees and fire bluing the screws.

You have to experience a Peacemaker Specialists' Gunslinger action job to understand why it's worth $300. Eddie takes each part and "optimizes" it, as he puts it, which means the insides of the Colt are hand honed and fitted, along with the appropriate surfaces in the frame where those parts engage it. It's not just a trigger job, it's a time consuming process that completely goes through the pistol to maximize performance and reliability. With the Gunslinger action job, you get your choice

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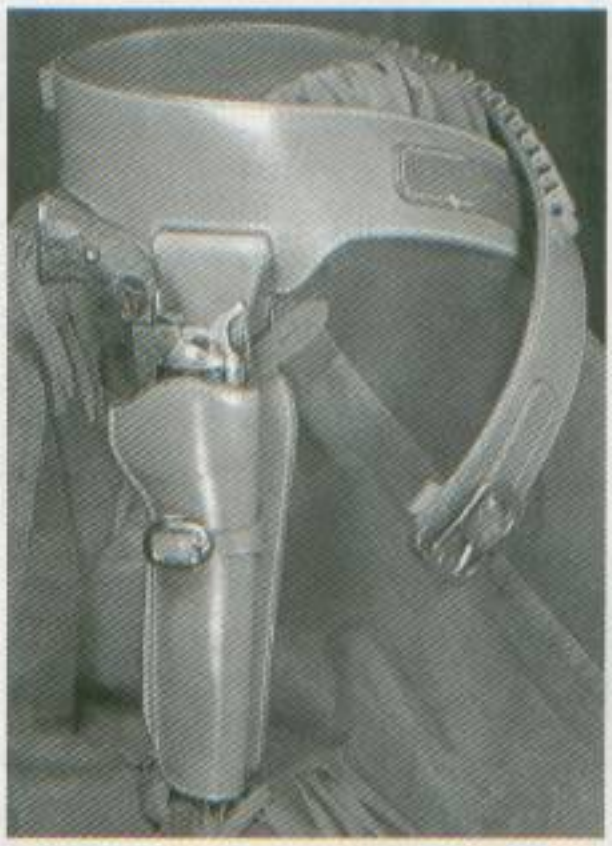
of Peacemaker Specialists' Light or Extra Light springs, and Eddie will tailor the trigger pull to your specifications (within certain safety boundaries). The Extra Light springs that he installed in my first SAA left the hammer so light in cocking that I'm still amazed it actually pops a primer—I can easily cock it with the tip of my off hand little finger, but it's never had a misfire. Still, just to avoid getting too soft in my declining years, I had Eddie use his Light springs on the new Colt. I can still cock it with that little fingertip, it just takes a tiny bit more oomph and I don't feel quite so coddled. My new pistol came back with a 2.5-pound trigger pull, quite nice.

Eddie's prices are not cheap, but you do get what you pay for. If you're considering one of the best single-actions on the market, you might as well consider one of the best gunsmiths specializing in the Colts, and a good action job will actually lengthen the life of your Peacemaker. Yes, you can do your own "field" action job just by shooting a couple thousand rounds through a new pistol to smooth it up, but if the timing is off, or the parts aren't well mated, they'll wear sooner and more, and if you buy an SAA to shoot a lot you'll probably end up having some work done eventually anyway, whether you want to or not. Eddie can do just about anything you might like to have done on a new or old Colt, I recommend him without reservation. You can order a catalog from him for $4.

John Bianchi's Frontier Gunleather

I've always thought it goes against the laws of nature to hang a $1300 pistol on a $50 leather rig. You and I aren't the only ones who remember *Gunsmoke*—John Bianchi's Frontier Gunleather builds a very handsome recreation of the gun belt worn by Arness in the series. The James Arness Gunbelt is leather lined and saddle stitched, using top grain heavyweight saddle leather. It's a Buscadero rig with a lowride holster that works nicely with a 7.5-inch barrel on both the draw and reholster. The sample cartridge belt and holster sent were a medium brown Saddle Tan in plain, highly buffed leather, which is closest to the originals. It's also available in stamped and carved versions if you prefer a little decoration. The Arness Gunbelt in the photos has a billeted front with plated



The very well-crafted limited edition James Arness Signature Gunbelt from John Bianchi's Frontier Gunleather is a brick-built reproduction of the Matt Dillon rig used on the long running *Gunsmoke* TV series.

brass corner-clipped rectangular buckle, a "keeper" loop behind the buckle, and 30 cartridge loops. The holster is not steel lined (as many of the Hollywood holsters were), it features a hammer spur tab, oval plated buckle, narrow skirt, and a leg tie-down thong. The sample cartridge belt and holster were built for a .45 caliber Colt, but other calibers and holsters to fit other pistol brands and barrel lengths can be ordered. Altogether, this is one very fine rig, and as a collectors' item, it's serial numbered and bears a facsimile of James Arness' signature underneath the front tongue billet. The James Arness Gunbelt sells for $495, and as a top of the line Hollywood-style rig with connections to the longest running TV Western ever, it's expensive, but quality like this usually is. (Don't forget to order the limited edition US Marshal badge to go with the leather, by the way. A reproduction of the Matt Dillon badge, there'll only be 500 of them, each one serially numbered in a presentation case with a certificate of authenticity signed by Arness himself for $125.)

Old West Reproductions

For those who like to carry a Colt in something a little more authentic to the late 1800s, Rick Bachman at Old West Reproductions does some of the finest recreations of the older styles actually used in the Old West that you'll find anywhere. Rick built me a very nice special order F. A. Meanea "Cheyenne" style Mexican loop holster to fit my new Colt. Also a medium brown, the buckskin-lined holster uses two loops to accommodate the longer body and almost full-length skirt, and displays an interesting geometric stamping pattern that's very representative of Meanea's originals. Most of Meanea's work used stamped designs (as opposed to the more common floral carving of the day) and some of his patterns were very intricate. The holster shown is more elaborate than Rick's standard production Meanea pieces, and runs a little higher in price.

Cutting, stitching, dyeing, and stamping are all perfectly executed on this holster, and Rick goes the extra step of punching round holes at each end of the loop cuts in the skirt where the holster body threads through to reduce the occasional tendency to tear. The ends of these cuts are a potential weakness of the old Mexican loop design, and Rick obviously understands the old rigs very well.

My Old West Reproductions lightweight but rugged "Meanea" holster will carry easy on a canvas cartridge belt on foot, features a squared-off toeplug with drain hole at the bottom that I like (and which isn't easy to bring off right), and grabs the Colt tight enough to hang onto the pistol without a hammer thong, just like the originals. The pricing at $130 is very reasonable, and if you're looking for a high

Old West Reproductions' special order Meanea "Cheyenne" style holster is a recreation of a period design actually used on the frontier.

quality period correct leather, you won't go wrong with Old West Reproductions.

Kirkpatrick Leather

The company that Joe Kirkpatrick founded in 1950 is still running strong, and Kirkpatrick Leather today is the home of such notable rigs as the "Evil Roy," "Tequila," and "Idaho John." All models were used by the top three Cowboy Action Shooters they're named after. The current catalog shows twenty-two other handgun rigs, ranging from the entry level "Range Rider" on up to the classic B Western "Silver King," with a wide variety of styles and decorations in between.

The Model 1867 "Slim" caught my eye and Kirkpatrick duly sent along a sample rig based on the Slim Jim holsters used toward the end of the percussion era in the 1860s. The high-ride holster is suede lined, substantial and rugged. It flares out at the top for easy holstering, and shows a hand tooled floral pattern that's reminiscent of the styles used back then. The open-bottomed holster is hand molded and no hammer thong is needed here, either. The plain three-inch wide double billet style belt is also suede lined with a keeper behind the clipped-corner buckle and comes with 24 cartridge loops. My sample was tan; other options include black and brown colors and basket weave stamping.

The $280 Slim rig as shown would be a durable way to carry a Colt either in the field or at a Cowboy Shoot, and a crossdraw holster can also be ordered to match it.

Shooting Impressions

My new Colt is timed perfectly (no ring-around-the-cylinder), locks up tight with no end play, cocks with an incredible degree of smoothness, looks great with that rust bluing, and altogether is pretty close to what I think a real Colt ought to be. It wasn't bad from the factory, but it's a notch or two better now. At the range, using four factory loads and one practice handload (8 grains of Unique powder, 255-grain National Bullet Company lead semi-wadcutter sized at .454, Winchester primers, and mixed brass), the long Single Action Army shot as well as I'll ever need it to, with the Winchester and Black Hills Cowboy loads all holding under three inches at 25 yards and the others not far behind. At 25 yards groups averaged about two inches low, which I can deal with in further handload development. For CAS use at closer distances, the gun is good to go with most Cowboy loads. The chart shows the best five-shot groups. So, I've got another good lookin', good shootin' classic firearm I plan to enjoy for many years to come, and some great leather to carry it in.

If you've been wanting to shoot the real thing, now would be a fine time to go Colt shopping under the new pricing structure, they're not going to get much cheaper. As a wise man once said: You'll never regret buying the best.

Kirkpatrick's Model 1867, the "Slim," is a rugged hand-tooled suede-lined holster.

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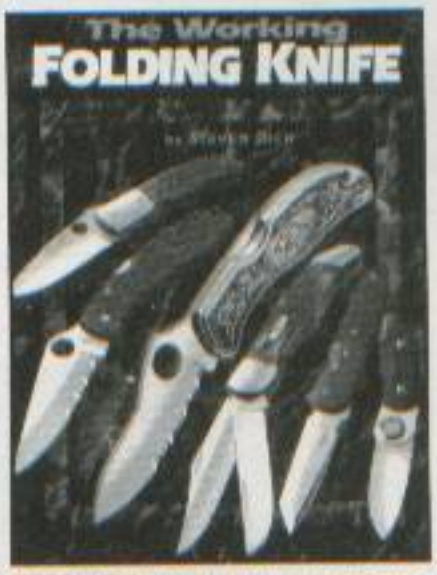

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