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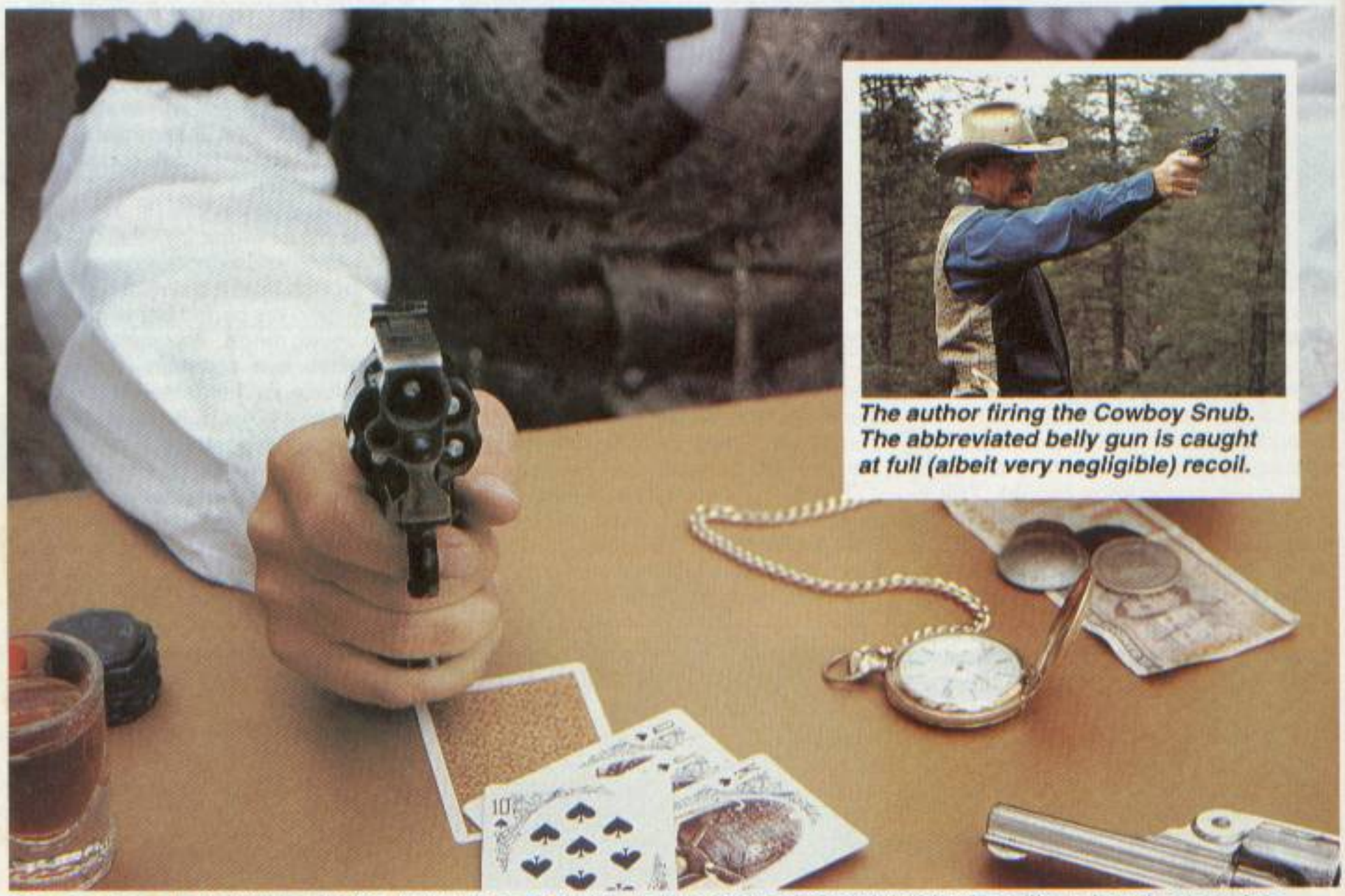
"CARD TABLE COLT"

A barrel-less .45 Single Action revolver—an Old West gambler's ace in the hole!



The author firing the Cowboy Snub. The abbreviated belly gun is caught at full (albeit very negligible) recoil.

From across a poker table, the big barrel-less Colt with its five easily distinguishable .45 caliber slugs is enough to make any choleric card sharp think twice about his honor.

Pictured is the author's Colt New Frontier just prior to having its barrel removed. The New Frontier differs from a standard Single Action Army in that it has a flat top frame to accommodate an adjustable rear sight assembly and a much higher front sight and modified hammer to go with that assembly.

By Todd Lofgren

The game was 5-card stud. The gambler had been having an extraordinary run, but that had changed with the last few hands. The big man with the scar had pulled off a couple of last-card wins that had cost the gambler plenty. Although he had seen this happen many times before—Lady Luck being a fickle sort—the gambler began to sense that it wasn't the Lady's fault this time.

From the icy stare of the gambler, the big man knew he had been found out. As his hand moved toward the 41 caliber Remington derringer in his vest, Scarface suddenly found himself looking into the recesses of a formidable handcannon that had suddenly materialized in the gambler's hand. Just the sight of it alone convinced him to pursue his pseudo indignation no more!

I have always been fascinated by short, powerful concealment pistols. I recall reading in some distant publication about 19th-century pistoleros pulling the barrels out of their Colt Single Actions, leaving themselves with a relatively compact, yet powerful, hideout piece. I remember wondering about how this setup would work. What kind of accuracy could one expect? Surely those big .45 caliber bullets, departing directly from a cylinder, without the stabilizing aid of a rifled bore, would tumble and twist as soon as they traversed the short distance required to clear that gaping threaded hole where the barrel normally screwed in.

What kind of velocity loss would result from those big bullets departing directly from their cases instead of being accelerated by the ever-expanding gases created by the continuously-burning gun powder? Instead of channeling all that energy being created, those big bullets would receive only one initial push. And as soon as the bullet cleared the case, all that remaining energy would be lost instead of captured and funneled behind the bullet.

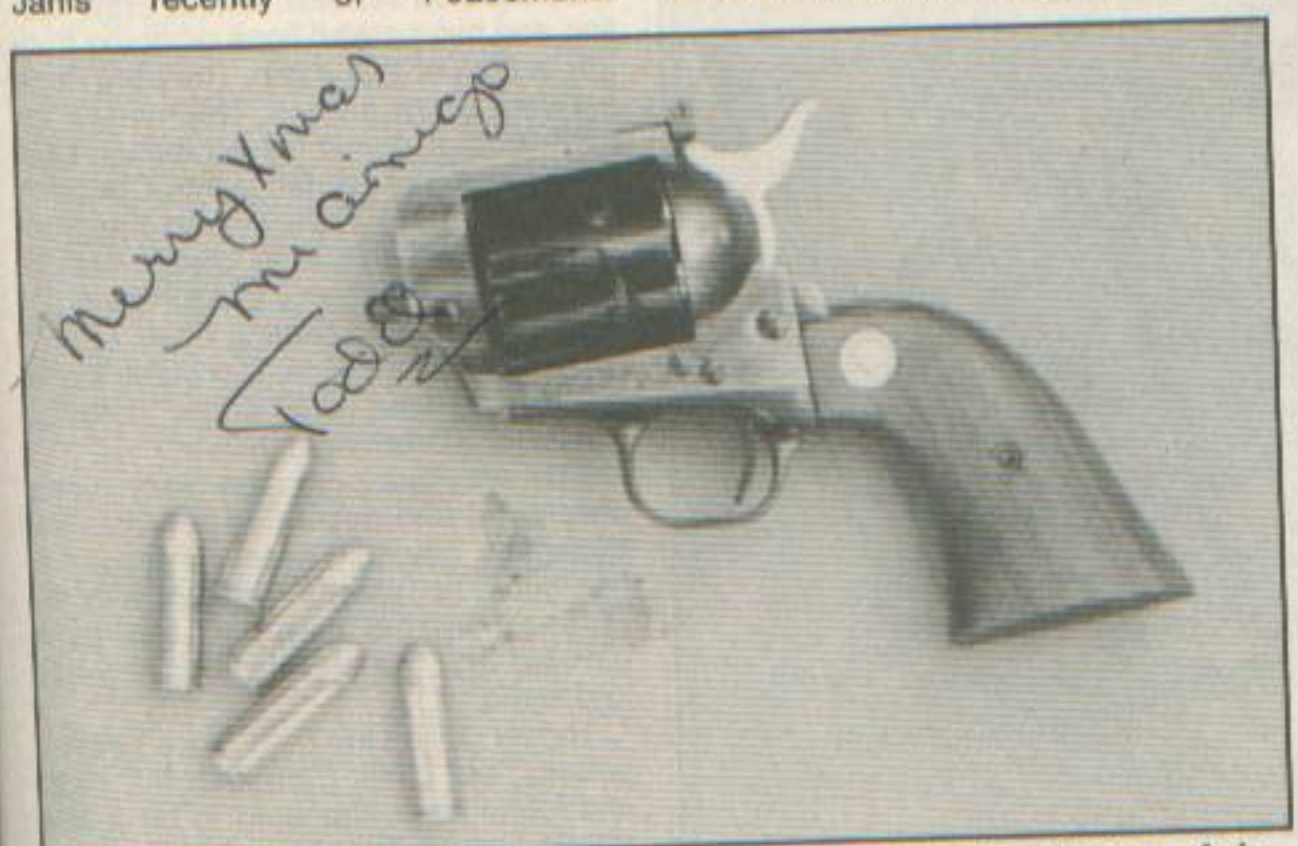
Was this a conversion that was actually useful and utilized in distant years or only the ramblings of some imaginative gun writer of the past? I couldn't remember who had written that article or, to be honest with you, if I'd actually ever read one about it. Maybe this had been the creation of some movie prop-man who had fabricated it for some cowboy epic I had seen. It wouldn't be the first time that the movies had started a myth.

The author (r) and Eddie Janis (l) pictured with a group fired with the Colt at a card-table distance of 6 feet at the late nefarious Ned Ne'er-do-well. Although the big .45 caliber Colt bullets were already tumbling at that distance, the group measured only 1.6 inches.

Eddie Janis in his Whitmore, California, shop in the process of removing the barrel from the author's Colt.

According To Skeeter

I had occasion to be talking with Eddie Janis recently of Peacemaker Specialists, P.O. Box 157, Dept CCH, Whitmore, California 96096; (916) 472-3438. And being that Eddie's specialty is the Colt Single Action Army revolver, I asked him if he'd ever heard of or read about this unique conversion of the venerable Colt "Thumbbuster." "Yeah," he said, "pictured in Skeeter Skelton's book 'Skeeter Skelton on Handguns.'" "You got that book?" I asked. As it turned out, he did. There, pictured on page 66 of Shooting Times' 1960 publication of "Skeeter Skelton on Handguns," was a Colt SAA sans barrel with the caption, "Gamblers often took barrel from revolver to heighten concealability. Bullet came directly from cylinder." That was it—that was the article I had seen. In some previous review of this publication, I had read this section and it had stuck with me. It had to be true. If you can't believe Skeeter Skelton, who can you believe?



Another group measuring 1-1/2 inches fired by the author at a distance of six feet. Not one single round went through the target nose first, but all were grouped sufficiently close together to have solved any problem for which this pistol would have been drawn and fired in the first place.

The Base Colt

Now, if you're like me, you've always got some unfinished gun project waiting for the day when time permits its completion. Stuck in the recesses of my gun safe was a 7 1/2-inch, Third Generation .45 caliber Colt New Frontier that I was contemplating at some point rebarreling to a much handier and, to my mind, more desirable 4 3/4-inch length. What had renewed my interest in this project was the fact that during a recent trip to Eddie's shop in Whitmore I had spied a 4 3/4-inch Third Generation New Frontier barrel in 44/40 caliber in amongst

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"CARD TABLE COLT"

(Continued from page 35)

Eddie's array of available barrels. This is not a commonly encountered barrel length/caliber combo, and bolstered by the fact that I also possessed an extra Colt cylinder in 44/40, I decided to push on with this otherwise rainy-day project.

H-m-m-m-m-m-m! Since the barrel of my Colt was going to be pulled anyway, why not put the early belly gun hypothesis to the test?

On a day pre-arranged with Eddie, I loaded my truck with guns, ammo, cameras, et cetera, and took the short drive from Redding to Whitmore, California. In order to determine velocity loss, I set up my PACT chronograph and fired two loads across its screens utilizing the gun's original 7 1/2-inch barrel.

The first load fired consisted of a 255-grain lead bullet, cast from Lyman's 454190 bullet mold, loaded over a Winchester large pistol primer and 7.2 grains of Unique. This is one of the .45 Colt loads I routinely use in Cowboy Action Shooting. The other round was Winchester's 255-grain lead factory load, which used a bullet with similar, if not an exact, likeness to the Lyman bullet. Out of my Colt's 7 1/2-inch barrel, my reloads clocked an average velocity of 783 feet per second (fps) while the factory load measured 772 fps.

Following chronographing and a couple of photographs, Eddie removed the New Frontier's barrel.

Although a little unorthodox looking, the New Frontier sans barrel balanced quite well in the hand. Without its barrel, the abbreviated Colt with five of its big, fat .45 caliber cartridges weighed in at 38 ounces. Not a featherweight by any means, but no more than a fully loaded S&W Combat Magnum of today's genre.

Next came test firing. I was somewhat concerned that firing this barrel-less Colt might create havoc with the exposed barrel threads, as I wanted to be able to screw in the new, shorter tube when this little experiment was over. Eddie assured me that this shouldn't be a problem. I decided to start by chronographing.

Velocity Loss?

From six feet in front of my closest screen, my .45 Colt reload clocked an average velocity of only 376 fps. That factored out to a 52% decline in velocity over this same load fired with the original barrel. Still, a 255-grain bullet traveling at 376 fps produces approximately 80 foot-pounds of energy, which is 35% more powerful than the energy produced from the vintage, but often encountered, Remington .41 caliber derringer, whose

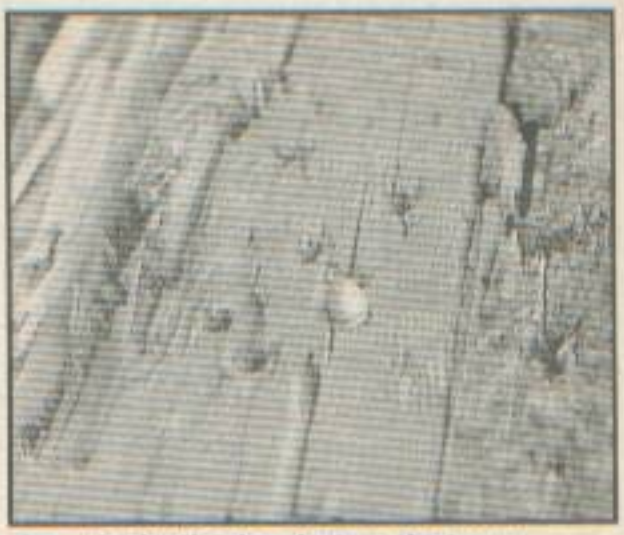
Although not as compact and concealable as this Remington-patterned derringer pictured with it, the no-barreled Colt, with its five-round capacity and awesome intimidation factor, would have made the extra effort it took to pack it around worth it.

The first time the author read of a conversion such as this was in an article published in the October 1960 issue of "Skeeter Skelton on Handguns."

published ballistics show a 130-grain bullet at 425 fps and 52 foot-pounds of muzzle energy. The factory .45 Colt load, although slower than my reload when fired through the Colt barrel, produced velocities averaging 494 fps. This I opined was probably due to these rounds having more "bullet pull" from a heavier factory crimp, letting its burning powder build up a little more steam before the bullet departed the case. These velocities factored out to a muzzle energy of 138 foot-pounds and were on the average 36% slower than the same round pushed through the original 7 1/2-inch barrel.

How Accurate?

Next, I decided to see what kind of an offhand group I could manage with the pistol at a distance roughly equivalent to "across the proverbial card table (approximately 6 feet)." Surprisingly, by looking across the revolver's top strap,



Caught in the backstop that was some 24 feet from the "muzzle" of the Cowboy belly gun when it was fired is a 255-grain Colt .45 slug that impacted exactly backwards due to the lack of bullet stabilization caused from its departure directly from the cartridge case instead of a rifled bore.

while trying to keep the revolver properly indexed as to elevation, I was able to produce very small 5-shot groups upon demand. Close examination of these groups showed that the bullets were penetrating the target at every imaginable attitude—frontways, sideways, and probably even backwards. I had positioned my target so rounds passing through it would impact Eddie's backstop constructed of railroad ties. As it turned out, I had placed my target some 18 feet from this backstop, which resulted in it being approximately 24 feet from the short-snouted revolver's muzzle. Examination of the backstop and the ground in front of it revealed that, as with the cardboard target, bullets were arriving at the backstop in anything but a nose-first orientation, some even bouncing off rather than penetrating the oil-soaked wood. One round managed to burrow itself into one of the ties, entering the wood exactly backwards from the direction in which it had been fired. A 255-grain slug traveling in the neighborhood of 500 fps, tumbling as it went, would be a nasty proposition to encounter.

Back In The Old West

I have no idea of how widespread the usage of a pistol of this sort might have been, but what I learned from this experiment was that it was feasible and, in a 19th-century way, somewhat practical. Had I been a professional gambler in the late 1800s, perhaps one of these barrel-less SAAs would have found its way into the folds of my sash or have been tucked away into a special pocket sewn into my frock coat. I think mine would have had its cylinder pin ground back flush with the frame, had its grip refashioned into a bird's-head design, and would have sported nickel plating and ivory handles. Now that would have gotten their attention! ■