

Guns and Gear of the Cowboy Era

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PEACEMAKER SPECIALISTS

By: Sixgunner

Sixguns, Leverguns, and Leather

The Colt Single Action Army was removed from production in 1941. Many were saddened; tears were even shed over such news. However, sales had been going down consistently since World War I which had resulted in the discovery by shooters of the Colt 1911 as well as military surplus 1917 Model double-action sixguns from Colt and Smith & Wesson. It was an economic decision that could not be avoided. However, never count a good man or a good sixgun out. The arrival of television in the late 1940s saw much of the airwaves time filled by old B Western movies (the same movies we now see on cable and satellite!) These old movies sparked the interest of a new generation in single-action sixguns so much so that a young fellow by the name of Bill Ruger

introduced a .22 Single-Six in 1953, Great Western brought out the first American-made Colt replica in 1954, and Colt brought back the Single Action Army in 1956. Those Colts are now known as 2nd Generation Single Actions as they also were removed from production in 1974. Two years later the 3rd Generation Colts arrived.

Colt Single Action Army actions are very fragile or very sturdy all depending upon whether or not they have felt the touch of a master gunsmith. If the parts are all smoothed and perfectly timed they will work together and virtually last forever, if not they will work against each other causing more stress than the action should take. I purchased my first new Colt in 1957 and learned very quickly it needed the touch of a master's hands. Fortunately, we had such an old-time gunsmith in our area specializing in Colt Single Actions.

Today there are very few specialists among local gunsmiths as there are so many different types of firearms requiring their services. On a





A 1st Generation Colt SAA engraved with Helfricht style "C" coverage by the late Charles Baker. The shot-out barrel and cylinder was replaced with custom 2nd Generation parts. The cylinder was beveled and refluted and rechambered with tight .452 throats. A cut and crowned 7-1/2" barrel was installed with the proper front sight. Period correct caliber markings and address were applied along with an 11-degree forcing cone. It was plated with antique silver plating and fire blue screws and elephant ivory one piece grips with a carved horse head were added. Finally, it was given a "Gunslinger" action job with a 2.5 lb. trigger pull.

national level there are many specialized gunsmiths working in different areas. I only know of one who specializes in the Colt Single Action Army to the extent he will not touch any other type of sixgun and also maintains a huge inventory of parts, virtually any part needed to keep 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Generation Colts working. Not only does he maintain a large inventory of original parts, he also manufactures replacement parts. The man I'm speaking of is Eddie Janis of Peacemaker Specialists. Eddie is THE man when it comes to Colt Single Actions.

Several years ago I made a hasty purchase during the closing hours of a local gun show. Had it not been for Eddie Janis, that purchase could have been a total loss. Oh that Colt Single Action .44-40 sixgun looked good and felt good during my rush, however a more careful look at home revealed several things. The barrel was brand new and Colt manufactured; the cylinder wasn't. The back strap had a notch at the bottom for a shoulder stock, while the trigger guard had a very early serial number from the 1870s. The mainframe somehow seemed thinner. It was. Upon dismantling my "bargain", I found both the bolt spring and hand spring were handmade out of a piece of lightweight metal and would last about just long enough to operate the action a few times. The cylinder turned out not to be Colt but Italian and the hand and bolt were just about ready to let go. I had a perfect example of the proverbial dog.

A trip to Shapel's Gun Shop turned up a new .44-40 Colt cylinder, which I needed to try to fix the mistake I had made. A call was put into Peacemaker Specialists and Eddie Janis. "No problem," says Eddie, "Just send it down and we will put in all new parts and the cylinder and give it a Saddle Tramp action job." So off went my 7-1/2" .44-40 "Colt" to Peacemaker Specialists. I had also told Eddie that the hammer notches needed to be welded up and re-cut. A few days later Eddie called back to inform me my problems were not quite at an end. The notches on the hammer could not be welded as someone had already tried that and botched the job necessitating replacing the hammer. Since I'd gone this far I decided to go all the way and do away with the Italian grip frame and replace it with a Colt back strap and trigger guard. My bargain sixgun was now down to the only usable parts being the Colt mainframe, barrel, and ejector rod housing. Then it was found the ejector rod housing would not fit properly, so it also became expendable. Fortunately, Eddie was able to make everything right and I decided to

make this a new old sixgun with an antique finish. Instead of a blued and case colored new sixgun, I now have a brownish looking "old" sixgun that is actually brand new on the inside and functions as perfectly as a Colt Single Action can operate. To finish off the project I found a pair of Third Generation eagle grips in my parts box, and attached them so they could be polished to the new grip frame. Brand new grips on a 125-year old sixgun just did not look right at all. They would have to be aged also. Using a piece of mesh screen that is used to sand drywall did a perfect job of adding years to the new grips. They even feel old with all the sharp edges gone. Thanks to Peacemaker Specialists, a Colt Single Action Army with my favorite 7-1/2" barrel and with the second most popular chambering of the Frontier, the .44 Winchester Center Fire (.44WCF) was rescued from the bone pile. Not only did Eddie completely rebuild it, it is now a sixgun that looks as if it could tell tales of cowtowns, cattle drives, campfires, round-ups, and shootouts.

A couple years ago I managed to pick up a 1917 manufactured 4-3/4" .45 Colt, with excellent bore and chambers, several pits and scratches on the surface, black eagle grips slightly warped, and the cylinder a little loose. It needed several parts to return it to the first class shooting shape it was in at the time it was manufactured during World War I. I found it shot to point of aim so there was no problem there, however, a new bolt and hand were needed for tightening and tuning, the base pin needed to be replaced as did the base pin latch, and all the exterior screws needed to be replaced as the old ones had the typical mis-fitting screwdriver malady. With a gun this old, for continued reliability, it is wise to replace all springs. This sixgun also went off to Eddie Janis to be totally rebuilt.

As the sixgun that had been stored in leather for over 50 years, the finish was not in the best of shape. There was still plenty of bluing in protected parts; however, there was some discoloration in other places. Eddie does not think it is ethical to refinish an old sixgun that has never been re-finished but rather prefers to leave it in its original state. This is exactly what was done with the only major change on the exterior replacing the old black eagle grips with a set of aged, one-piece, fleur-de-lis carved ivory grips. My 3rd Generation 7-1/2" .44-40 made to look old has now been joined by a 4-3/4" .45 Colt that is genuinely old, and both have been totally rebuilt on the interior for several succeeding generations of service thanks to Peacemaker Specialists.

People often ask if the parts of Italian replicas are interchangeable with Colt parts. The answer is yes and no. There are some Colt Single Action parts that will fit Italian sixguns, however, unless it is a dire emergency I would not even consider placing Italian parts in genuine Colt sixguns. Even Colt parts are not always interchangeable. There are differences from 1st to 2nd to 3rd Generation, and although 2nd Generation parts are often found, many of the 1st Generation parts are slightly different. Interior parts need to be subtly different to expertly



Four 4-3/4" .45 Colt Single Actions representing 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Generation Colts all totally reworked by Peacemaker Specialists.

tune a 1st Generation Colt. Examples of this are a longer bolt and hand, and firing pins that are also shaped differently. Even the older 1st Generation screws were different with domed instead of flat heads. Whatever the parts are, and whichever generation they are made for, Peacemaker Specialists has them or manufactures them and can expertly install them. They have newly manufactured parts to fit the old 1st Generation Colt Single Action sixguns. All the necessary screws, several different styles of base pins, base pin bushings, firing pins, hands, bolts, all springs, and even bolt and trigger screws that are different in length to allow for the tapered frame. In addition to all these newly manufactured parts, both 1st and 2nd Generation barrels and cylinders are available for most calibers and models and eventually these may also be offered as newly manufactured parts. Whatever the problem with old Colt Single Actions, the use of Peacemaker Parts from Peacemaker Specialists can put it back into excellent shooting shape.

A total tune-up of a Colt Single Action is neither cheap nor is it a job for a kitchen table gunsmith. Most Colts that have never been properly tuned have interior action parts that are either well worn or were not very closely fitted during their manufacture or both. This can only be corrected by careful hand fitting of locking bolts and cylinder hands. This is not an assembly line procedure, but requires precise handwork to have the bolt lock into its locking notch in the cylinder precisely at the time the hammer reaches its furthest backwards travel and the hand has finished rotating the cylinder. All three of these events must happen at the same time and it cannot be accomplished with drop-in parts, but rather with a master's touch with stone and file. Knowledge, skill, and patience all come together in a time-consuming operation. The result is a Gunslinger Deluxe Action from Peacemaker Specialists.

Eddie describes it this way: "Our priority in doing an action job is NOT to make the gun feel smooth and light. Our priority is to build a gun that is totally reliable by eliminating wear and parts breakage. By accomplishing this goal, the byproduct is having a pistol that feels like it's running on ball bearings but locks up like a bank vault." Janis has worked on several of my Colt Single Actions with examples from all three generations. I trust him to do it right and everything he says is true. Once they have been worked over, these guns are virtually unbreakable, even though they still operate with flat springs and a design that goes back to 1837. I always enjoy letting someone work the action on a properly tuned Colt Single Action. The look on their face says they did not think a sixgun could feel so smoooooooooth! In the course of his work, Janis replaces all the original springs with his custom-made Gunfighter springs, which adds to this smoothness.

Many older 1st Generation Colt Single Actions will be found with pitted barrels and cylinders from using black powder, and on the flip side, especially when it comes to .45 Colts and 3rd Generation .44 Specials, sixguns will have oversized chambers. To correct this, Peacemaker Specialists re-chambers .357 Magnum cylinders to the proper .44 Special and .45 Colt dimensions. Pitted barrels on 1st Generation sixguns can be replaced by 2nd Generation barrels and can even be marked with period correct style markings.

Recently **SHOOT! MAGAZINE** had the loan of four examples of Peacemaker Specialists' work of smoothing, tuning, and rebuilding the Colt Single Action Army. All four had the actions rebuilt with oversized parts and then tuned to perfect smoothness; and since all had originally been chambered in .45 Colt, they were fitted with .357 Magnum cylinders properly re-chambered to .45 Colt. Three had been fitted with new .45 Colt barrels, which were also marked the way the original barrels were lettered at that particular time period. The sixguns are a 1st Generation Single Action Army from 1899 with an exterior showing more than a century of use. Instead of refinishing this classic old sixgun, the newly installed barrel, cylinder, and ejector tube have been antiqued to match the original parts, and then to further the antique look, a pair of buffalo bone grips have been fitted. This sixgun may look old, but it performs like it is new.

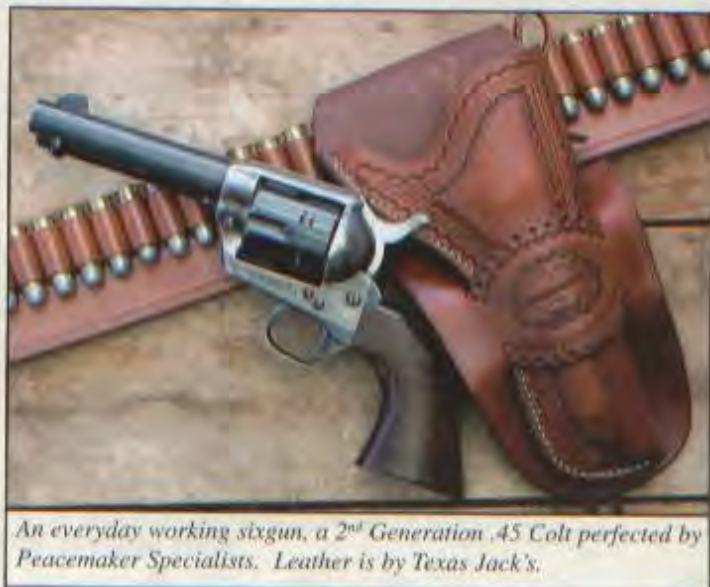
A second example is a 1st Generation Single Action Army from 1903 that has been given the full treatment resulting in one of the most beautiful Colts in existence. After Peacemaker Specialists performed all the action, barrel, and cylinder work, this sixgun was beautifully C-engraved in Helfricht style by the late Charlie Baker, and then plated with antique silver; highlighted with fire blue screws, base pin, base pin latch, and trigger, and fitted with one-piece ivory stocks carved with a horsehead. A beautiful example of what is possible for an artist to achieve on the canvas of a 1st Generation Colt.

The third example is a 2nd Generation Single Action Army from 1959 with a totally tuned action, a .357 Magnum cylinder re-chambered to correct .45 Colt dimensions, and a very appropriate touch is the fact that both the front edge of the cylinder and the ejector tube have been beveled in the 1880s style. This is an everyday working sixgun, so it has been fitted with oil finished one-piece walnut stocks.

The fourth Colt Single Action is one of a matched pair of consecutively serial numbered 3rd Generation nickel-plated Colt Single Actions. This is one of Eddie Janis' Cowboy Action Shooting sixguns, so it has been set up with an adjustable hammer stop, unloading funnel cut in the frame to facilitate speed loading, bolt blocks installed to decrease both bolt twisting and cylinder side play during the hard usage, Gunslinger Deluxe Action Job, and all sharp edges have been de-horned including those at the toe and heel of the grip frame which now carries a one-piece elephant ivory stock. A slight rounding in these two spots really helps to make a Colt Single Action Army feel very comfortable in the hand.

One of the most beautiful Colt Single Actions, and one that also makes my list of Perfect Packin' Pistols, is the Colt New Frontier which was only made from 1962 to 1982 with a break in the middle where they switched from 2nd to 3rd Generation sixguns. This is the most versatile of all Colt Single Actions as it has adjustable sights. To make such a great sixgun even better, Eddie comes up with The Last Frontier, which is Peacemaker Specialists' idea of exactly what a Colt New Frontier should be. The barrel and cylinder have both been replaced, oversized action parts have been fitted, the front sight has been stoned square and serrated, the rear sight has been replaced by an Elliason, and the no grain factory walnut stocks have been replaced by beautiful one-piece elephant ivories. A stunning New Frontier.

If one is careful, pays attention, lives a good life, it's not too unlikely he will run into an old Colt Single Action Army at a good price. I know if the frame is in good shape, everything else can be replaced by Peacemaker Specialists. They can definitely turn the silk purse trick. Whether one is looking for Colt Single Action Parts for any generation, a master tune up, or a total rebuild, Peacemaker Specialists can be found at P.O. Box 157, Whitmore CA 96096 or call them at (530) 472-3438. Send \$4.00 for a complete catalog.



An everyday working sixgun, a 2nd Generation .45 Colt perfected by Peacemaker Specialists. Leather is by Texas Jack's.