



My Take on “Collectible” Guns

By John Siers (AGI Certified / FFL Gunsmith)

What can you do with an old gun that is no longer serviceable? Well, you *could* just hang it on the wall or toss it into the gun safe and hope that it will somehow become valuable in the future. Unfortunately, most old guns are not really “collectible.” Unless an old gun is rare, sought-after, historically significant, or in near-perfect condition, it isn’t likely to have much “collector” value.

Despite this fact (easily verified by checking Blue Book values), there are some out there who claim you should never do *anything* to an old gun – that it must be left to be admired in all its rusty glory, and that even cleaning it is a cardinal sin that will destroy its value forever.

Hey, I’m a gunsmith – or so it says on all those AGI certificates hanging on the wall in my shop. I like to take those old “collectible wannabe” wall-hangers and make them into *shooters*. I clean, fix, and refurbish old guns. I give them new life, so someone can take them to the range or his favorite hunting grounds and enjoy them as they were meant to be enjoyed.

I don’t try to make them look like new – an old gun should wear its age proudly and its history should be appreciated. I don’t misrepresent them as being “all original” or “untouched.” I just

try to put them in good looking, sound mechanical condition. If I replace any parts with “non-original” versions, I note that in my description of the gun when I sell it.

Here’s a classic example – an old Hopkins & Allen break-top revolver in .32 S&W. There are thousands of these little century-old revolvers on the market these days, in varying states of disrepair. Value on most of them is under \$100, and I’ve seen some go for less than half that.

When I got this gun, its finish was mostly gone. It had one grip broken and the other missing. The action was sticky and gritty, and nothing seemed to work properly. I stripped it down and found that most of the mechanical issues involved 100 years of rust, dirt and crud accumulated inside. Rust was not too bad, because most of the crud inside was – thankfully – oily, greasy crud. Once that was cleaned up, everything seemed to work just fine. With a little adjustment, timing was good and lockup was tight.

As for the finish, I removed what was left of the original, then cleaned and polished the metal underneath. It looked pretty good that way, so I left it shiny (back in the day, bluing was an extra-cost option from Hopkins & Allen). I then took the broken grip and used it as a pattern to cut a couple of new grips from cocobolo wood with a scroll saw (besides gunsmithing I do a little woodworking on occasion). I then shaped, drilled, and sanded my homemade grips to fit the frame. The results are shown in the picture.



Of course, I also test fired the gun – my philosophy is you can't sell it as a "shooter" unless you have actually taken it to the range and shot it. Just for the record, I have it on good authority (the reloading experts at Sierra Bullets) that any of these old .32 S&W revolvers in good condition can handle modern .32 S&W ammo. That ammo – sometimes referred to as .32 S&W "Short" to distinguish from the more potent .32 S&W Long, is still readily available. The .32 S&W cartridge was only converted from black to smokeless powder around 1940, and by that time there were so many thousands of these revolvers around that pressures for the "new" smokeless rounds were kept low to avoid problems with older guns.

Here's another example – an Iver Johnson .32 break-top. Again, the finish was mostly gone, but this time the original grips were intact. The primary mechanical problem was a loose top latch and a stuck ejector. Again, lots of dirt and crud inside, and a good cleaning and lubrication fixed the ejector. The top latch mainly needed a little "attitude adjustment" involving proper application of a hammer to the lugs. This time, I decided the gun would look good with a new blue finish, so I went ahead and did that. Results are pictured below:



Yes, I can hear the members of the Rusty Wall-Hanger Society cursing my name even now, because I dared to re-blue a 100 year-old gun. Well, I don't want to rain on their parade, but bidders on the most popular gun-auction site don't seem to agree with them. Both these guns have since been sold, snapped up by enthusiastic buyers who would much rather have a century-old shooter than a wall decoration.

Lest you think this is limited to old .32 revolvers, here's a 1910 Mauser .25 caliber pistol I also did. This one was in pretty good shape when I got it and the finish wasn't bad (but yes, I did clean it, in the course of making sure it was in good shooting condition). Its main problem was broken, non-original grips and a missing magazine. In this case, I gave it newly-manufactured reproduction grips and two newly-manufactured magazines (because there's no point in having a removable magazine if you don't have a spare). I took it to the range and had so much fun with it I almost decided to keep it for myself... but hey, I had bills to pay and Momma needed a new Glock. So I put it up for auction and the bidders were really enthusiastic. In fact, it brought a bit more money than Blue Book's listed "collectible" value.



There are lots of old guns out there – vintage .22 rifles are another area ripe for restoration – and there is some money to be made restoring them. I joke that I am running a “Gun Rescue” operation, in which I take in abused, neglected and discarded old guns and bring them back from rusty oblivion.

Anyway, that’s my take on the subject. I love old guns and I appreciate their place in history; but I like them even more if I can take them to the range and shoot them without worrying about diminishing their questionable “collectible” value.