

The Trail of the No. 5
By Fermin C. "2 Dogs" Garza

Elmer Keith in 1929 wrote of a sixgun he called No. 5. Keith had a Colt SAA built into a state of the art revolver. It stands even today among the finest in existence. In 1955 Keith wrote "Sixguns". This is a "must read" for the student of the sixgun. The preface states Keith's book was "scented with the pungence of sage brush campfires, cold for more than half a century".

I built my No. 5 to honor Elmer Keith. No other man will fill his boots. I had no such ideas. I sought the opportunity to seek out the finest craftsman and challenge him to build from scratch the finest sixgun in the land. A sixgun to last a lifetime, to answer any call, and to prove that even decades after the time of Elmer Keith old world craftsmanship and the Keith legacy live on.

In Sixguns, Keith wrote of falsified copies of Walkers, Dragons, and others being counterfeited by frauds with "dishonest intent". Keith wrote that he modified and remodeled sixguns with the "idea of improving the guns." Keith wrote, "Our guns were so different as to leave no doubt that they were made up to improve them and not to, in any way, imitate a factory model." Keith wrote of improvements that coiled springs added to durability of the Colt SAA. I set out to build an "Improved" No. 5 that could in no way be mistaken for the original.

The craftsman I chose was Alan Harton of Houston Texas. My No. 5 began with a prototype "one of" flattop stainless steel blank frame that would accept Ruger Old Model internals with coil springs. There would be no mistaking this No. 5 for the original. It would be built to stand on it's own, in the spirits of the grand Gunmakers of old, to be an improvement but not a copy. Harton built a cylinder blank to be both longer and heavier for strength he refers to as "Tank Tough". A stainless Colt style front strap was married to a Ruger Bisley stainless backstrap to recreate the No. 5 grip frame.

Harton then fabricated the screw adjustable front sight next followed by welding the topstrap to extend back over the hammer and built the adjustable for windage rear sight. The base pin lever and related parts were sculpted and carefully fitted. Sixgunsmith David Clements built the Old Model style Bisley hammer and wide trigger. The Clements parts were left blue along with some latch components for contrast.

The result was a balance of grace, precision, and strength I had never experienced in any sixgun before or since. The Harton No.5 has proven to be exceptionally accurate.

Groups fired at 50 yards were so small I had to walk downrange to be sure my eyes weren't lying to me! The grand masters of old sixgun craft were calling out to me.

My friend Boge Quinn scrimshawed the Harton ivory stocks with a Mexican Eagle clutching a Rattlesnake with the Cacti in the background. Mike Barranti built me his best quality Signature rig to suit.

I worked up a powerful load with a 250 grain Keith bullet at 1225 fps. Mark Hargrove invited me to hunt his West Texas ranch. I sought to take a cull out of his herd of deer. The stunted little buck arrived but the afternoon sun was right onto the fine sight picture of the No. 5. Even without a correct sight picture, I "knew" there was no way I could miss this shot. But I did. That 250 Keith went high. The deer scattered with the intended target getting a thicket of brush between us. He moved to my right and I saw a window in the brush that might allow a second chance. I changed position and fixed the now clear No. 5 sight picture on the window and waited for the cull to trot into the intersection. I squeezed off a shot into the center of the window as soon as the front edge of the culls chest appeared as he trotted past. I heard the dull "plunk" of a hit as the No. 5 recoiled. I marked the spot of the shot and counted 84 nervous steps to look for blood. As I looked at the ground for blood, Mark spotted the little buck and pointed. The buck was trying to make good his escape on wobbly legs and just collapsed. No great rack of horns this, but no less a trophy and a triumph for the No. 5.

The built almost from scratch Harton No. 5 stands among the finest sixguns ever created and certainly takes a backseat to none. A sixgun created to celebrate the ideals of the past masters and to carry on the traditions of old in honor of Elmer Keith.

A photo collage of the build:



A cull buck taken on the Hargrove Ranch with the No. 5.