

Of Sixguns and Heros

By Doc Barranti

Some folks collect every variation of a particular model of handgun. Others only collect Old Models, while still others choose different brands. My friend Robb Barnes, set out to have custom sixguns built by every one of our most talented gunsmiths, he called it his Custom Sixgun Quest.

I enjoy accumulating firearms, custom and factory, and I am by no means a collector, but rather a shooter. My interests vary, but my tastes have been guided by others; past sixgunners, long gone but certainly not forgotten, and living, modern day sixgunners whom I have had the pleasure to meet.

My earliest memory of a favorite gunwriter is of The Grand Old Man himself, Elmer Keith. He bridged the gap between the cowboys and frontiersmen of yesteryear, and modern day outdoorsmen and peace officers. His writings would take me to another time and place, when game and wilderness were plentiful. He was on the cutting edge of firearm and ammunition development, with much of his work being done before he was barely 30 years old! There isn't much done today in the sixgun world that can't be traced back to him. His favorite handloads for the 357, 41, 44 special and magnum and 45 Colt are still widely known and used today by knowledgeable shooters. They worked then, and continue to work now.

Another writer came into my life in those early years. Skeeter Skelton's writing style captured my imagination. When you read his stories, it seems as if he is sitting at a rough hewn table across from you, telling the story by the light of a kerosene lamp and fireplace. You can smell the bacon, biscuits and coffee.

Skeeter showed me what a sixgunner was; not that Elmer didn't, but Skeeter did it in a different way. Elmer's ability is almost unattainable by mere mortals. Skeeter on the other hand, made you feel like he was kind of just like the rest of us, and showed us what normal folks could do with a sixgun. In reality, Skeeter was an exception sixgun shot. If I ever get to be half the sixgunner he was, I'd be extremely happy! Skeeter is, to this day, my favorite gunwriter, and when I read of his passing, it was as if I had lost family.

After a while of trying different gun magazines, I found another writer that covered my favorite subject, handguns, to my liking. John Taffin's articles covered everything from mild to wild. His articles on custom sixguns are the leading cause for my daydreaming. He filled the void that Elmer and Skeeter had left when they passed. It was JT's writings that pushed me to have my first custom built by David Clements; an OM 357 converted to 44 special.

I started my bigbore sixgunning with a Super Blackhawk. I slowly gravitated to the 45 Colt for several years, but it was JT that drew me back to the 44s. I now own more 44s than all my other bigbores combined. His "Book of the 44" was in my hands while I waited anxiously for Clements to finish my 44 special. JT and Mrs. Taffin were gracious enough to let me visit them last summer, accompanied by the next person I will mention.

I remember a few years ago, probably on this very forum, seeing a picture of some funny looking big fella sitting on the ground, shooting one of his sixguns on a set of shooting sticks. He wore shorts, a t-shirt, and a pair of Crocs...Pittsburgh Steeler Crocs! As I read his stories, I could see that this was no ordinary, Croc wearing blowhard. That same year, I received a phone call from that man, Dick Thompson, requesting some gunleather. That began what has become a once in a lifetime friendship. I consider Dick to be both mentor and good friend.

As many of you know, Dick has been blessed to be in the right place at the right time. His corner of Idaho is known by many to be the world's biggest playground. He lives a life that any sixgunner would love to live. Shooting and hunting are a daily thing. Dick's choice of sixguns run rather plain jane. Plain, but each one is customized with dab of JB Weld added to the top of the front sight to correct the typically short factory sight used by Ruger. While his sixguns may be plain, what Dick can do with them is often extraordinary! One that stands out in my mind as I type this is the rabbit that he headshot at 30 yards with his shorty 357 Blackhawk...while he was hanging out the window of his son's truck...going 30 miles an hour...on a bumpy gravel road...shooting by the light of the headlights! Dick says he was just lucky...

As I said before, I am not a collector. I shoot all my sixguns, and if I think that I won't shoot it, I usually don't keep it. I don't collect certain models, manufacturers, or variations. I accumulate what I like, and don't collect based on any specific criteria...with one exception; I have people that I consider my sixgun heroes. Men who helped shape my handgun knowledge, by their writings, and by example.

The above men that I have outlined are known for many things, and each one has a handgun or two that could be associated with them. Elmer had his classic No.5 and his S&W 4" 44. Skeeter's 7.5" Flattop 44 magnum was a favorite, and a medium frame 44 special was the last firearm that was being built for him just prior to his untimely passing. JT's custom 44s graced the pages of magazines and books.

My tribute to the men who have taught me the most about handgunning is to own sixguns that are known to them. When I handle and shoot these fine sixguns, I am in my own little way, carrying on the tradition of sixgunning.

Elmer Keith Tribute: No.5 built by Alan Harton, using a Powers Custom #5 gripframe and a NMFT 44 special, and The Mary Gun, an S&W model 29 with carved ivory stocks by Bob Leskovec



Skeeter Skelton Tribute: 7.5" Flattop 44 magnum acquired from Robb Barnes (Thanks Robb!) and semi custom NMFT 44 special with action job and front sight modified by Shane Thompson and stocks by Dick Thompson





The last person outlined, Dick 'Sixshot' Thompson has used a variety of sixguns over his long hunting and shooting career. Up until last year when he acquired his first custom built sixgun, or more accurately, fivegun, you couldn't really pick one or even two handguns that he used exclusively. His custom fivegun is a stainless Bisley, chambered in 480 Ruger, built by Alan Harton. Dick hasn't had the gun long enough for it to be considered exclusive yet, but I know that over the next year or two, this fine handgun will account for more game than most folks will take with a handgun in a lifetime!

I eventually will have a 480 Ruger built on a Bisley, and it will be my tribute to Dick and his custom fivegun. Until that day though, I have two sixguns that fill that role. Over the past few years, I have managed to weasel a few guns out of Dick's hands, and they are two of my favorites. They are a way for me to connect with a man that I consider to be the closest thing to Elmer and Skeeter that we have. I know that I am lucky to have them.

Sixshot Tribute: 6.5" Flattop 44 magnum and an S&W 624(which will soon wear a set of Roper style grips made by Dick)



I have other sixgunners that I look up to. They are men I would ride the river with; great friends that I trust with my life. When the time is right, I will be adding other tribute sixguns to my collection.