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## The Custom Loading .45 Colt

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From mild blackpowder loads to high-velocity numbers rivaling the .454, this good old "cowboy cartridge" proves to be one of the most versatile revolver loads around.

Even though the .45 Colt cartridge will celebrate its 125th anniversary very shortly, it is still our most versatile sixgun cartridge. There are few sixgun cartridges that can best it in any one category, and certainly none can do so as an all-around sixgun cartridge. It simply does it all.

Many of the detractors of the .45 Colt come up with the same old tired reasoning that it is a weak cartridge case, whatever that means. They would almost have us believe that cartridge manufacturers somehow have a section in their plant where they deliberately manufacture weak brass and the .45 Colt is the number one product.

Yes, the old balloon-head or folded-head .45 Colt brass originally loaded with blackpowder is weak compared to today's solid head brass found in the .44 Mag. case. Anyone using this argument, however, is at least 50 years behind times as solid head .45 Colt brass has been the norm since 1952. Dick Casull did all of his experimenting that led to the .454 by using so-called "weak" .45 Colt brass. Those experiments began in the 1950s and should have settled the weak argument right then and there.

Perhaps .45 Colt brass has been regarded as weak simply because of the early sixguns in which it was chambered. Frontier revolvers chambered in .45 Colt have almost paper-thin cylinder walls and should be treated accordingly.

From 1873, when the Colt Single Action Army debuted, it would be almost 100 years before we had a factory-produced .45 Colt revolver that was capable of even beginning to tap into the versatility of the .45 Colt. That sixgun, of course, was the Ruger Old Model Blackhawk chambered in .45 Colt, which arrived on the scene in 1971.

For several decades, loading manuals have had two sections for the .45 Colt -- one for the Colt Single Action and the other for the Ruger Blackhawk. This barely begins to touch the range of possibilities with the .45 Colt; however. There are at least six levels (with some overlapping) to be considered when attempting to create .45 loads. This means that loading this most versatile cartridge must not be approached light-heartedly. Knowledge of the capabilities of the sixgun being used is imperative as using the wrong load for the wrong sixgun can result in disaster.

### Blackpowder Loads

Most of the .45 Colt revolvers manufactured in the 19th century were blackpowder sixguns. Colt changed from the screw holding in the cylinder pin to the spring-loaded latch system at serial #165,000 and many also take this as the change from blackpowder to smokeless in 1896.

However, Colt stated that they did not guarantee Single Actions under serial #180,000 for smokeless use. This gets us to 1899. To be safe, do not use any Colt Single Action under serial #192,000 (beginning in 1900) with smokeless powder.

Vintage Colt revolvers can still provide a great deal of shooting enjoyment. The original blackpowder loading was 40.0 grs. of FFG blackpowder under a 255 gr. bullet. Now there are many grades of blackpowder and we certainly have better primers now, but using old balloon head style brass and 40.0 grs. of Goex brand FFG, with a 255 gr. bullet in a 7 1/2 .45 Single Action results in a muzzle velocity of 1,050 fps. That is definitely a load to be reckoned with and also explains why they were able to kill such large animals as

grizzly bears and buffalo with a sixgun even back then. This load was quickly dropped to 35.0 grs. for civilian use (875 fps) and 30.0 grs. for military use (800 fps).

### Early Smokeless Loads

Even though these sixguns were and are designed to be used with smokeless powders, their cylinder walls are very thin by modern gun standards and should be loaded cautiously. For these sixguns we stay at 900 fps to 1,050 fps with 250 gr. to 260 gr. bullets. Favored loads with a Keith bullet from a 7 1/2" sixgun include 9.0 grs. of Unique for 1,000 fps; 10.0 grs. Unique for 1,090 fps; 20.0 grs. of H4227 for 1,085 fps (a great load); and 16.0 grs. of HS-7 for 1,065 fps. Any of these loads with their game getting Keith bullets are certainly adequate for deer and black bear sized critters at reasonable ranges.

### Cowboy Shooting Loads

Vintage (replica and authentic) sixguns are also the ones most used in cowboy shooting activities. For these, we prefer a realistic blackpowder-style load and by the rules of cowboy shooting, we must stay under 1,000 fps. To keep within these parameters, we work up loads using a commercial cast 250 gr. RNFP from Bull-X or Oregon Trail running from 800 to 900 fps. A loading of 7.0 grs. of WW231 yields 800 fps; 6.0 grs. of TiteGroup yields 810 fps; 6.0 grs. of Red Dot runs at 835 fps; 6.0 grs. of N-100 runs at 870 fps; and 8.0 grs. of Unique yields 900 fps.

### Transition Loads

New Frontier and S&W sixguns from the first half of the 20th century are only slightly stronger than the Colt Single Action, with the New Frontier being nothing more than the Single Action Army with a heavy top strap and adjustable sights. The New Frontier is also one of the most beautiful of all the single action models to surface in the last 125 years.

Smith & Wesson's Model 25-5 and various 625 Models chambered for the .45 Colt are regarded as being quite a bit stronger than the Colt Single Action Army by some who even see it nipping at the heels of the Ruger Blackhawk. We tend to be a bit more cautious and place it somewhere in between the Colt Single Action Army and New Frontier, a very narrow range. Perhaps we are overly careful, but we will never get into trouble nor lose a grand and valuable sixgun by having this attitude.

For these sixguns we start at 1,050 fps and approach 1,200 fps. A load using 18.5 grs. of #2400 with a 250 gr. to 260 gr. Keith bullet is used a lot, also 23.0 grs. of WW296 with the same bullet for right at 1,200 fps.

We even use JHP bullets with these .45 Colt sixguns. Sierra's 240 gr. JHC, Hornady's 250 gr. XTP and Speer's 260 gr. JHP all yield 1,075 to 1,100 fps with 23.0 grs. of H110. For hunting, these loads will easily handle deer and black bears.

### Modern .45 Loads

Ruger opened a whole new vista of six-gunning experience with the .45 Colt with the introduction of the Old Model Blackhawk in 1971. For the first time since the introduction of the .45 Colt in 1873, we finally had a sixgun that could even begin to tap into the real possibilities of the .45 Colt cartridge. Several .45 Colt sixguns have arrived since the advent of the Blackhawk with sufficient strength to handle these loads, namely the Dan Wesson Model 45, the Ruger Bisley, the Colt Anaconda and the Ruger Redhawk in .45 Colt.

These sixguns, with their appropriate loads, are capable of taking any American big game, except the big bears. For the bears they may be capable yes, but we doubt that it would be a very wise thing to attempt.

With these sixguns, our most used load is a 300 gr. bullet over 21.5 grs. of H110 or WW296. The bullet is usually BRP's 305 gr. FPGC for around 1,200 fps. Going up to 23 grs. of powder will get the muzzle velocity in a 7 1/2" sixgun right at 1,300 fps. This is certainly well above the factory 240 gr. .44 Mag. in actual killing power on big game.

Two other heavyweight bullets that we particularly like for these sixguns are NEI'S 310 gr. and 325 gr. Keith bullets. The former is #310.451 and the latter is #325.454. These are both plain-based bullets of a true Keith design with wide driving bands and a deep grease groove. With the same powder charges of WW296 and H110 as for BRP's 305 gr. GC, muzzle velocities are about the same.

The strength of these sixguns also allows us to experiment with the 250 gr. to 260 gr. Keith bullets at muzzle velocities far above what we would try to attain with sixguns on the Colt SAA pattern. With Lyman's #454424 Keith bullet we work up from the standard 18.5 grs. of #2400 loading to 20.0 grs. which yields 1,240 fps; 21.0 grs., yielding 1,265 fps; and 22.0 grs., yielding 1,330 fps.

Switching to H4227, 24.0 grs. gives 1,250 fps and 25.0 yields 1,300 fps. These are very potent .45 Colt loads and we cannot emphasize enough that these loads must never be used in any Colt Single Action or replica.

The LBT line of bullets is probably the most popular these days with handgun hunters who use the .45 Colt. The LFN (Long Flat Nose) and WFN (Wide Flat Nose) from LBT feature bullets that have a wide meplat, much of the weight in the nose, and increased powder capacity compared to the Keith-style of bullet.

Cast Performance Bullet Co. is now offering a complete line of LBT hard cast bullets including those for the .45 Colt. These are game-getting bullets pure and simple. In Ruger's .45 Redhawk, the 335 gr. GC over 21.0 grs. of WW296 clocks out at nearly 1,300 fps while the 360 gr. bullet over 19.5 grs. approaches 1,200 fps.

#### Custom .45 Loads

For many years, gunsmiths such as Hamilton Bowen, David Clements, John Linebaugh, Gary Reeder and Jim Stroh have been building custom five-shot .45 Colts on Ruger Blackhawk or Bisley platforms. For these super-strong .45 Colt sixguns, over-sized cylinders are used that completely fill the frame window top to bottom and front to back.

Cylinders are normally line-bored to match the lineup of cylinder chamber to barrel as perfectly as possible. Actions are tightened up, blocks are even placed in the interior to prevent the bolt from moving under recoil -- in short everything is done to make these guns as tight and strong as possible and keep tolerances to minimum.

What then can we expect performance-wise from these sixguns? Now we are talking 260 gr. bullets at 1,500 to 1,600 fps, and 300 gr. at 1,500 to 1,600 fps -- from a "weak" .45 Colt case! With these sixguns the 260 gr. Keith bullet over 32.0 grs. of WW296 is good for 1,575 fps; the SSK 270 gr. FN does 1,690 fps, and the 310 gr. Keith with 29.0 grs. is good for 1,475 fps. Recoil is stout, pressures are right up there, and you can hunt anything that walks with these perhaps short of Africa's Big Four.

There are some that will read this and feel they could go farther with some loads in some categories. Perhaps. But we would rather err on the side of safety. We have never blown a sixgun except under controlled tests performed deliberately to see exactly what that sixgun was capable of holding. This was done with the sixgun placed in a container not hand held. We do not want it to ever happen any other way!

Always begin by reducing powder charges by 10 percent and working up to the recommended loads with caution, discontinuing use of any load that shows signs of excessive pressure, and never use a load in an older gun than it was designed for. Stick to these simple, common-sense guidelines, and we're sure you'll find the "old" .45 Colt to be one of the most versatile, practical loads around.

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