

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

A Love for the Classics

By: Glen E. Fryxell

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The year was 1988; I had a shiny new job, with a shiny new paycheck and I decided that I needed a shiny new .44 Magnum to commemorate the event. Up to that point, I had never owned a revolver made of stainless steel and I figured that it was time to see what all the hoopla was about. I walked into my favorite neighborhood gun shop one day at lunch and described my dilemma to Rick. A wry grin came across his face (a sure-fire danger sign) and he said, "I've got just the thing. Just came in this morning." He walked over to the pile of boxes that UPS had recently delivered, picked one out of the cardboard mountain and brought it over to me. Opening the blue cardboard box, he laid it out on the counter in front of me. Inside was one of the most beautiful revolvers I had ever seen -- a S&W 629-1 with a non-fluted cylinder, 6" full-lugged barrel, wide target hammer, smooth trigger, black ramp front sight, fitted with a black rubber Hogue Mono-grip on a square-butt grip-frame; the black sights and grips crisply offsetting the brushed stainless finish. Today we see stainless revolvers with rubber grips all the time, but this package was quite striking to my eyes at the time "They call it the Classic Hunter, Glen. It's a limited edition, a run of only 5000, and then they're not going to make any more. I ordered 3 but could only get one. This looks like it's going to be the only one that I can get." I was hooked -- handling the revolver only set the hook that much deeper and harder. I *had* to have it.

It turns out that those 5000 Classic Hunters sold so fast that S&W also brought out an 8 3/8" model (2500 made), followed by a 3" (3200 made), and a few other variations on the theme. They then reintroduced the 6" Classic Hunter in 1991 with another limited run of 2000. All of these sold so quickly that they finally just broke down and added the Classic Hunter to regular production. I guess I wasn't the only one who was so instantly enamored...

Also in 1988, S&W made 5000 L-frame 686s in the Classic Hunter guise -- 6" full-lugged barrel, unfluted cylinder, "semi-target" hammer, smooth trigger, Hogue mono-grip on a square-butt grip-frame, with the stamped barrel reading ".357 Magnum". Not surprisingly, the 686 didn't make quite the splash that the 629 did -- the .44 Magnum has been the mainstay of the S&W line for 3 decades running now. And while the 686 is a handsome and accurate revolver, the little Classic Hunter just didn't have the



S&W Classic Hunter's

sales stamina that its big bore brother had. I found mine sitting unwanted in a pawn shop, priced well below what the regular 686s were selling for (huh?).

In an effort to capitalize on the excellent sales of the 629 Classic Hunter, Lew Horton contracted with S&W to produce a run of 2000 .41 Magnum Classic Hunters in 1991. These 657s had a 6.5" full-lugged barrel stamped ".41 Magnum", wide target hammer, smooth trigger, black ramp front sight, non-fluted cylinder, and a black rubber Hogue Mono-grip on a square-butt grip-frame. This is a fine, fine hunting revolver, but the bottom line is Americans want .44s and the .41 Magnum has always been the runt of the litter in terms of sales activity. This run of Lew Horton's came and went with modest fanfare. When I turned 41, I figured what better way to mark the event than with stainless steel stamped .41? A friend of mine had a 657 Classic Hunter for sale, we negotiated a fair price and shook hands. A matched set was taking shape

The original run of 5000 S&W 610s was made in 1990-1 with a fluted cylinder and wood grips on a round-butt grip-frame (shown on the back cover of "Hunting for Handgunners" by Larry Kelly and J.D. Jones). This revolver quickly established a reputation for exceptional accuracy as a result of the tight tolerances that S&W employed in its manufacture. However, this reputation was offset by the fact that this was a revolver that was chambered for a rimless semi-auto cartridge, required full-moon clips, and folks weren't sure if the cartridge would still be around in 10 years due to its checkered past. Sales figures for the first run of 610s were rather ho-hum, but the funny thing is, they were rarely seen on the used gun market (at least in my neck of the woods). The people who had them seemed to be mighty fond of them. In the spring of 1998, S&W brought back the 610 in the Classic Hunter format, with a few changes -- the 6.5" full-lugged barrel was now laser engraved (instead of stamped), the Hogue square-butt grips were now molded around a round-butt grip-frame, the trigger and hammer were color case-hardened (instead of in the white), and the front sight was now a red-ramp. But it still had the non-fluted cylinder, the full lug, the wide target hammer and smooth trigger. Most importantly, it still had the same tight tolerances as the original 610, delivering the same level of exquisite accuracy.

A decade has come and gone since that shiny new .44 magnum followed me home, and it along with each of its little brothers, has spent much time in the field, repeatedly proving its meddle and living up to its moniker. The vast majority of my .44 Magnum shooting is done with 23.5 grains of W296 sparked by a CCI 350 primer underneath a Lyman 429421 cast of WW alloy with 2% added tin and water quenched straight from the mould (in my guns, the CCI 350 primer delivers better accuracy and an average of about 75 fps more velocity in the .44 Magnum). I lube all .44 magnum cast bullet loads with my homemade 50/50 beeswax/Moly grease lube. This load delivers 1310 fps from the 6" Classic Hunter with excellent accuracy. The full-lug and non-fluted cylinder add extra weight to help attenuate recoil, and the black sights make for bold, solid sight picture. All in all, a very deadly and versatile hunting package.

On those days when vermin and the .44 Magnum share the day's agenda, the same powder charge and primer are used to launch the HP version of the 429421, usually cast of air-cooled WW alloy. It's way more power than needed for prairie dogs and ground squirrels, but so far I haven't heard any of them complain.

In general I prefer to shoot plain-based (PB) cast bullets, but on those occasions when GC bullets are on the list I substitute Ray Thompson's GC-SWC (429244 -- 258 grains as they drop from the blocks) also shoots quite well with this combination, running 1258 fps from the 6" Classic Hunter. It's hollow-pointed kid brother (the 429244 HP) is also very accurate with this combination but I've never gotten around to chronographing this load (should be about 1300), I just don't shoot that many GC loads if I don't have to (and the PB Keith bullets do just fine, thank you). I also have heavier bullets (290s, 300s, 310s and 340s) that I shoot in the .44 Magnum, but I save those bullets for my Rugers. The Keith bullets just seem to fit the N-frame, and they shoot so well ... I guess I just like Elmer's ideas.

One fall while hunting mule deer in the rocky crags of the Snake River, I happened across a crippled buck while the 629 Classic Hunter rode on my hip. His was a rather bizarre wound, involving a missing antler, a large tattered hole in one ear and a ragged surface wound crossing the spine at about his kidneys. His remaining antler was a short, twisted stub a little over a foot long, that looked more like a weather-worn piece of driftwood than the 3-point mule deer antler that it was. We later learned that this buck had been crippled a little before 8 am that morning, and by 11 am (when I ran across him) he had finally stiffened up to the point that his back legs no longer worked. He tried to lie down as I approached... he couldn't. He had been in pain for hours. It was a very sad sight indeed. He knew I was going to kill him and there wasn't anything he could do about it, but stand there and accept his fate with dignity. He watched me as I aimed carefully and put a bullet through his shoulders, hitting him hard enough to spin him in a full circle and knock him to the ground. The blood-splattered wheat stubble surrounding him was straight out of a Sam Peckinpah movie. Even hit that hard, mortally wounded, and having lost that much blood, his 3 hour adrenaline surge had him trying to get back on his feet. A second 429421 through his neck ended his misery as I watched the life drain from his eyes. Killing doesn't bother me, seeing an animal suffer bothers me immensely. We usually view our hunting guns as recreational icons that allow us to participate in the timeless traditions of the chase, but sometimes they are tools of a higher calling. A Classic Hunter indeed...

The 686 Classic Hunter is one of my favorite plinking guns, usually with cast bullets. But while it shoots cast bullets well enough, this gun is truly spectacular with jacketed bullets! Lots of powders and bullets shoot well out of this gun, but 14.5 grains of 2400 underneath the Hornady 158 grain XTP HP delivers 1373 fps and stellar accuracy (it has turned out 12 shot groups under an inch at 25 yards more than once). For long-range plinking, it's hard to beat the Lyman 358429 Keith SWC over 14.5 grains IMR 4227 with a CCI 550 primer for

1256 fps. This load is very accurate and delivers superbly stable long range flight. Quarter mile plinking with this load is great fun! Some of the finest handgun varmint loads ever can be made by assembling the Lyman 358429 HP (cast of air-cooled WW alloy, 162 grains) over 14.0 grains of 2400, or the Lyman 358156 HP (same alloy, 153 grains checked and lubed) over 16.3 grains of W296. Both of these loads deliver about 1300 fps from the 6" Classic Hunter, with explosive, rodent wrecking accuracy. The most accurate cast bullet load I've shot from the 686 Classic Hunter to date is Ray Thompson's GC-SWC (358156) over 14.5 grains of IMR 4227. This load is a little slower than the others (only running a little over 1250 fps), but it's very accurate.

Have you ever had a rodent thumb his nose at you? You know the attitude -- where you can almost hear the Woody Woodpecker laugh as he ducks and dodges around the stumps and clumps of bunchgrass, just to peak around at you from the one angle you least expected, give you one last "raspberry" and disappear just as the front sight settled on his nose. Well, I had been playing these games with one particularly abusive rodent for several minutes, the embarrassment being compounded by the fact that I was introducing a new hunter to Pacific NW high country varminting. It seems I was providing entertainment for both the quarry and the student. The ground squirrel snuck around underneath and behind his fallen log, and into the backside of its upturned root mass, taking up a hidden, shaded position where he felt safe, whereupon he proceeded to rain rodential insults and profanity upon my tender ears (fortunately I always wear good hearing protection while varmint hunting...). Ah, but I could see his beady little eyes staring back at me from the darkness! The 686 Classic Hunter snaked a cast Keith SWC-HP through that snarled root mass at 1300+ fps, quickly putting an end to the vulgarity (actually, considering the mess it left behind, one might argue otherwise...). This is a great varmint hunting gun, and over the years has accounted for many hundreds of rodents while in my hands.

The 610 Classic Hunter appears to be every bit as accurate as its predecessor's (the Model of 1990) reputation suggested it would be. I broke the 610 in with a trip to the varmint fields (what a surprise!). It was stoked with handloads carrying the Speer 165 grain Gold Dot HP over 12.0 grains of AA #7, which had been shown to print delightfully close-knit groups at a shade over 1300 fps. This is a flat-shooting, hard-hitting varmint load, not quite as explosive as the .357 Magnum loads described above, but dramatic nonetheless. Recently, I've acquired a Lyman 40388 HP mould, whose 165 grain Keith-style SWC HP bullets come out of the 6.5" Classic Hunter at 1277 fps when launched with 10.5 grains of HS-7. I haven't had a chance to hunt with this bullet yet, but I'm very much looking forward to summer varminting with this combination. For edible small game and just plain plinking, a real winner is found in the Lee 175 grain truncated cone paired with 7.5 grains of HS-6. This combination delivers reasonable accuracy at a sedate 925 fps, so my hasenpfeffer doesn't get sprayed all over the sagebrush. The 10mm is smack in the middle between the .357 and the .41 Magnum ballistically, making it well-suited for both small and medium game (as well as self-defense). I keep meaning to take the 610 Classic Hunter

deer hunting, I just haven't done it yet. The ammo is loaded up and ready to go though -- 200 grain Hornady XTP's over 12.5 grains of AA #9. Groups run just under 1 1/2" at 25 yards and velocities are about 1200 fps -- should handle deer and antelope sized game rather nicely.

This particular 657 Classic Hunter has the interesting quirk of printing different bullet weights to different *windages*. I've seen this before, but never to this degree. When sighted in for the 210s, this gun prints the 170s a full 4-6" to the right, and a tad low. While it shoots the lighter bullets just fine, I primarily stick with the 210s just to keep from having to re-set the sights every time out. Loading for this revolver is quite simple -- 21.0 grains of W296 teamed up with a CCI 350 primer and whichever 210 grain bullet I'm playing with that particular day (jacketed or cast). Just as with the .44 Magnum, the CCI 350 delivers better accuracy and about 80 fps more velocity for me than do other magnum pistol primers. This revolver absolutely dotes on the Lyman 410459 SWC (213 grains) with this combination, delivering one-hole accuracy at 25 yards at 1332 fps. The RCBS SWC (211 grains) is almost as accurate out of the 657 Classic Hunter, and has a broader meplat to boot, so this might be the better hunting bullet of the two. My gun doesn't care for GC bullets at all, but as well as it shoots PB cast bullets, who cares?

I guess that's what I like about the Classic Hunters -- they shoot cast bullets as well as they shoot jacketed bullets, and they deliver power with precision and style. The clean, simple, straight lines of the full-lug barrel and non-fluted cylinder, along with the understated brushed stainless finish make for a handsome, and practical, package. It has been a pleasure to spend the last decade hunting with S&W Classic Hunters. Truly, I do love the Classics...

- Glen E. Fryxell

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