

# The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

The Summer of 38

By: Glen E. Fryxell

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Ah yes, those were the days! Those barefoot days of dusty scrub-oak freedom, pocket cover-alls, a dime-store fishing pole, a pocket knife, a little wad of chewing tobacco stashed in the back of the "traveling" tackle box (that's the little one that fit on that rack on the back of my black Sears 3-speed), a sling-shot and maybe a little something to read by Jack London or Mark Twain in between naps; this was a sure-fire recipe for a lazy Southern summer afternoon. Blue-gills, bass and maybe an unlucky bullfrog or two cooked over an "Indian" campfire in a dented, old Army surplus mess-kit in a dollop of butter made the perfect preamble for a Texas sunset.

Well, the times have changed, the boy has grown and the world just isn't that simple anymore. The dusty backwoods trails to "secret" fishing holes have given way to high-speed, rush-hour interstate commuting. The simple stories of Huck Finn were displaced by scientific journals, technical reports and research proposals. A small-town, weekly allowance evolved into research budgets, investment leveraging and retirement annuities. "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore..."

The care-free innocence of a dusty, denim-draped youth just doesn't compete very well against the demands of a technically-oriented, responsibility-ridden adulthood. That's not to say that the bean-pole boy with the scraped up knees, dirty jeans and an armadillo skull in his back pocket is no longer with us ... it just means that he's been squeezed into that musty closet in the back room with Grandpa's old waders and doesn't get to come out and play very often.

I will take the liberty of assuming that everyone who is reading this is a gun-crank. There are certain guns that take me back to those simpler days as soon as I pick them up (you too, I'm sure), an old bolt-action Stevens .22, a battered old single-shot 16 gauge, my beloved Marlin 39A. In the last couple of decades, my own interests have centered around handguns and handloading for same. We were all avid bow-hunters back then, so we didn't have too many handguns around as we were growing up (only a few shotguns and .22s), so there aren't really any handguns that have been with me since those days in central Texas. Nonetheless, there are some special handguns that take me back...

If there was ever a timeless handgun, the S&W K-frame .38 has got to be it -- it has been in continuous production since 1899, so it is now entering its third century. These revolvers have spent the last 100+ years serving our country, serving our constabulary, and serving our citizenry: a most honorable



S&W K-38 5 Screw.

service record indeed, and one that will no doubt continue for many years to come. I have a personal favorite 5-screw K-38 Masterpiece that was born in the middle of 1954 that takes me back to those simpler times in scrub-oak woods of central Texas. It would have been just the ticket for armadillos, bull-frogs, jack-rabbits, starlings and head-shooting cotton-tails.

One of the beauties of the .38 Special is the ease with which good accurate ammo can be assembled. As most of you are probably aware, a little bit of minor tweaking with cast bullets and fast pistol powders and just about any combination can be made to shoot well out of a good K-38. A compendium of accurate small game field loads for the .38 Special could easily fill volumes. Relax, my list is somewhat shorter. When I come across a new .38 mould and want to find out how well the new bullet shoots in standard pressure .38 Special loads, I load it over Bullseye, Red Dot, AA #2, W231, PB and Unique. If .38 +P loads are on the menu, I load them with HS-7. Period. Sure, there are other suitable powders, but these are the proven powders that have given excellent accuracy with cast bullets in past load development.

The .38 Special will be forever linked with the 148 grain wadcutter. Many shooters subscribe to the mindset that the wadcutter is good for punching paper, but these saucer-faced projectiles are basically too wimpy for much of anything else. As the old song goes, "It ain't necessarily so ..." -- the .38 wadcutter constitutes an excellent, and deadly, form of vermin control.

I have a deep-seated disdain for starlings. As I was growing up in central Texas, our next-door neighbor had a lovely war-bride from Tokyo, and she worked very hard to create and maintain an ornate Japanese garden in her backyard. Every year the starling migrations would come through central Texas and her bamboo gardens would be destroyed by the sheer mass of starlings roosting in it. Everything would be crushed to the ground and blanketed with a whitewash of droppings. Where there was once beauty, there was now devastation, filth and disease. I have hated starlings ever since.

A starling doesn't put up much resistance, and a revolver bullet doesn't get much of a chance to expand before it runs out of starling to expand upon. But who needs expansion when you've got a wadcutter? And what a .38 wadcutter does to a starling! (I recommend you see for yourself.) The perennial favorite of 2.7-2.8 grains of Bullseye under a 148 grain wadcutter works OK for smacking starlings (600-650 fps), but a little more velocity is useful to flatten the trajectory and increase the force of impact. The late John Zemanek reported in *Handloader* (#161 Jan/Feb 1993) that he got excellent accuracy with a 148 grain wadcutter over 4.0 grains of AA #2 for right at 900 fps. I've tried this load and found it to be every bit as accurate as Mr. Zemanek reported. A faster, and even more

accurate, load (in this particular K-38 Masterpiece anyway) is the Lyman 358091 over 4.6 grains of W231, for about 950 fps. Both of these make excellent field loads for vermin and small game. We have some swamp-land just outside of town with levees that run through the middle of it, so one is above the brush (and starlings), shooting down into the thicket and mud (i.e. there's a good, safe backstop).

This area is not too far from civilization, so a big booming magnum would be un-welcome, but the mild-mannered .38 wadcutter is downright neighborly. When winter starts to thaw and the days start to get longer, "wadcutting" starlings makes an excellent cure for a bad case of cabin-fever.

As a general-purpose, small-game load for the .38 Special, good service has been consistently delivered by Lyman's 150 grain SWC (358477) launched by 4.0 grains of Red Dot for 900 fps (6" barrel). This is also an excellent load for ventilating the elusive pop can (not one of them has ever gotten away!). RCBS makes a very similar mold that is every bit as good as the Lyman (but I just haven't been able to squeeze out the same level of accuracy from the Lee 150 SWC). Lyman has produced this mold in more than one version. I have a 358477 mold which drops 150 grain SWC's, that have a true, well-defined crimp groove, and I have a 358477 mold which drops a 158 SWC with a radiused "crimp groove" that looks more like a grease groove. The latter mould has also been slightly re-designed for longer driving bands, pushing the shoulder slightly forward and shortening the ogive. Of the two Lyman molds, I prefer the older, lighter version (although at this point the RCBS mold is probably easier to find). More recently, I've been shooting both the Lyman 150 grain SWC and the RCBS analog over 5.4 grains of Unique. This combination is extremely accurate and generates about 950 fps or so. These loads are favorites for small game, it provide excellent accuracy at reasonable pressures, it's a good, clean killer, but not terribly destructive. It basically bores a big, bloody hole straight through the vermin *du jour* without a lot of fanfare or fuss. The critters don't complain, the gun doesn't complain, the shooter doesn't complain -- a solid recipe for varmint hunting happiness.

Recently, I came across a factory hollow-pointed version of the Lyman 358480 SWC. It drops cute little bullets that weigh about 128 grains and are quite accurate in the K-38 Masterpiece. In this case, experimentation with a variety of powders and charges led me to settle on a load of 4.6 grains of Bullseye underneath this little pill (4.7 grains of PB also turned in exceptional accuracy). This load is extremely accurate and at just over 1000 fps constitutes a surprisingly hard-hitting form of rodenticide. When cast of 25-to-1 alloy, expansion is positive and it's quite flat-shooting out to about 75-80 yards. The more I shoot this load, the more I like this little dimpled bullet.

Several years ago, I had some very positive results using the Federal FBI +P load (158 grain swaged lead SWC-HP going 915 fps from a 4") on jack rabbits. That load flattens big Montana jacks with surprising authority. It was deemed worthwhile to duplicate this load with home-grown cast HP's from the

Lyman 358439 mold (162 grains when cast of WW alloy). After trying a variety of faster powders in various charges, I settled on 8.5 grains of HS-7 (this is a +P load and should not be used in small frame or alloy frame revolvers). A magnum primer seems to increase the consistency of this powder in .38 +P loads, especially in colder weather. This load generates right at 1000 fps out of a 6" tube and is quite accurate.

By the way, I got both of the above mentioned hollow-point molds from Western Bullet Company (P.O. Box 998, Missoula, Montana, 59806;). Jon deals in just about anything to do with bullet casting and has a good selection of used molds available. If you're looking for an unusual, obsolete or hard to find mold (or cast bullet), check with Western Bullet Co. I've bought about a dozen molds from him so far and have been satisfied with the condition of them all (i.e. he doesn't sell junk).

Anyway, this +P HP load was involved in one of the more comical shots I've taken in recent years. We were in Arizona, not far from the Mexican border. I had decided to spend an hour or two in pursuit of jack rabbits with the 5-screw K-38 and the 358439 HP load. I kicked up the first jack less than 200 yards from the truck. He jack-knifed through the sage in that way that only a jack rabbit can, and then snuck to a stop, spying on me from beside a clump of sagebrush, about 35 yards off. He was standing in the classic broadside bunny stance, facing my left. The Partridge blade came up black and dark in the late afternoon Arizona sun and tucked itself into the jack's armpit, for a mental sight-picture of a 6 o'clock hold to center-punch the rabbit's shoulder. The hammer fell and fluff erupted everywhere! It looked like somebody had tied a firecracker to a cat-tail and launched its fluffy seeds to the four winds. It was then (and only then) that I remembered that I had the gun sighted in for a 6 o'clock hold with target load wadcutters (650 fps) and that it shot this HP +P load exactly to point of aim! Scouring the area closely revealed that there was no blood or meat at the site, but lots of fluffy off-white fur spread out over a 6 foot circle. Basically I had shaved this rabbit's armpits! I kicked him up another 3 times (he was easy to identify), but never got a chance for another shot at him. He was clearly unhurt, just fashionably coifed. He didn't even tip his barber...

A little while later, I kicked up another larger, darker jack. After executing many of the same escape maneuvers, this somewhat wiser wabbit stopped and hid *behind* a very large piece of sagebrush about 35 yards away. He was quite well-hidden, but still committed one fatal mistake -- there was about a 4-inch window through the sage that I was able to line up with his shoulder. This time I remembered how the gun was sighted and held for "center of window". The cast HP "threaded the needle" and center-punched the hidden rabbit's shoulder. Expansion was positive, and the big jack never even twitched. The exit wound was about 3" in diameter. That's pretty much the way it goes with this bullet. I *like* cast HP's.

Bottom line is, I spent most of that summer with that old 5-screw friend in my hands enjoying the sunny simplicity of a summer afternoon, the joys of

getting my jeans dirty, the simple honesty of being a predator participating in the intricate workings of Nature, much the same way as I did around those Texas fishing holes so many moons ago. It felt good. That Special .38 spent so much time in my hands, it just kinda felt right to refer to it as "The Summer of 38" giving credit where credit was due and adding the somewhat nostalgic sentiment that the 5-screw provided its owner. The Summer of 38, those were the days indeed. May every summer be the Summer of 38.

- Glen E. Fryxell

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