

# The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

## The Three Dollar Bill

By: **Glen E. Fryxell**

Photography by Glen E. Fryxell

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Back in the late 1950s and early 1960s **Elmer Keith** and **Bill Jordan** were petitioning the American arms community to produce guns and ammunition for a service revolver, roughly .40 or .41 caliber, which was capable of shooting a 180-200 grain bullet at about 1100 fps. Something that offered more thump than the pedestrian .38 Special, and gave better penetration than did the .357 Magnum. The .44 Magnum had just made its bawdy appearance, and the factories had given Mr. Keith even more than he had asked for. The resulting 240 grain bullet at almost 1500 fps generated unprecedented recoil, so recovery was slow and follow-up shots were difficult for most law enforcement officers. Keith and Jordan were asking for moderation -- sufficient bullet weight, diameter and velocity to be effective for law enforcement applications, but not so much power that recoil made mastery of the weapon difficult.

One might ask, "What about the .38-40?"

Well, that's pretty much what Keith and Jordan were looking to emulate, except without the thin, bottle-necked, balloon-head brass and sloppy chamber tolerances of the older guns. (Keep in mind that this was the early 1960s and the .38-40 was pretty much dead in the water, it wasn't revived until Cowboy Action Shooting came along 3 decades later). What they wanted was a new cartridge that embodied a straight, solid-head case, holding a .40 caliber bullet, that operated at moderate pressure and launched a 180-200 grain bullet at 1100 fps. What they got was the .41 Magnum, with a 210 grain bullet at 1400+ fps. Once again, the factories delivered far more than was asked for. The .41 Magnum went on to prove itself a fine hunting cartridge, but recoil recovery continued to be a problem for law enforcement applications. A mid-range load for the .41 Magnum was offered in an attempt to address this need, but it failed to catch on.

Double-action revolvers are best served by straight-cased, rimmed cartridges. Single-action revolvers can handle rimless cartridges with ease, but double-action revolvers are generally favored over single action revolvers by law enforcement and military as a result of their faster reload times and the option of shooting double-action. During the first World War, we had large quantities of .45 ACP ammo, but the factories were at capacity in terms of 1911 production, and capacity was not keeping up with wartime demand. The solution was to modify the large frame S&W and Colt double-action revolvers to accept the .45 ACP round using half-moon (3-round) and full-moon (6-round) clips. Thus was born the Model 1917, a birth of immediacy and need.

OK, now let's fast-forward to the 1980s -- a variety of new shooting games emerged during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of which was bowling pin

shooting. Large caliber revolvers were favored since bullet momentum was critical to sweep the eccentrically balanced bowling pin off the table. Competitors found that the Model 1917 provided adequate power with modest enough recoil that shooters were able to shoot fast and hit the pins hard, and the 1917 had the advantage that it came with its own built in speed-loader! The fit and popularity of the gun to the game were so good that S&W released several special editions of the Model 625 in the late 1980s, aimed specifically at this form of competition.

Also during this time frame, Jeff Cooper was championing the 10mm cartridge and the ill-fated Bren-Ten with which to shoot it. In a sense, Cooper was trying to fill the same void that Keith and Jordan had called to the world's attention two decades earlier, it's just that Cooper, a devout advocate of the Colt 1911, wasn't promoting a service revolver, he wanted to house this new cartridge in a semi-auto. Those who shot the gun sung the praises of both the cartridge and the gun, but there were problems with production and the Bren-Ten died an ignoble death.



The timing of the 3" 610 (1999) was such that it was made before S&W added the lock.

S&W was in a randy sort of mindset during this period, and they were introducing new models left and right. With the popularity of bowling pin shooting, and all the hype surrounding the Bren-Ten and the 10mm, why not take the concepts introduced with the Model 1917 and apply them to the new 10mm cartridge? Their N-frame was certainly up to the task, and if they put a full-lugged barrel on the new revolver (which had just proven to be fantastically popular on their .44 Magnum Classic Hunter) they could tame recoil and make the gun that much more attractive to bowling pin competitors. So in 1990 S&W introduced the Model 610 with a production run of 5000 with either a 5" or 6 1/2" barrel. S&W was afforded a subtle, but very real, luxury with the 10mm -- this was a brand new cartridge, that had no old weak guns with sloppy tolerances that it might get loaded into, and they had a clean slate to start with in terms of design tolerances. The design engineers and production personnel at S&W did not disappoint; chamber dimensions were snug and throat diameter was half a thousandth over nominal bullet diameter, and groove diameter matched bullet diameter quite nicely. Upon its release, the Model 610 was universally reported as being among the most accurate revolvers that S&W had ever produced, and that is a bold statement indeed! That being said, the revolver was received with a collective yawn, and sales figures lagged. It was quietly dropped from the catalog a year later.

Things were looking shaky for the 10mm cartridge with the Bren-Ten effort faltering, the early Delta Elites from Colt being reported to suffer from stress cracking in the slide, and the S&W 610 being dropped from production. In addition, the FBI's experience with the 9mm in the Dade County shoot-out led them to re-evaluate their use of the 9mm and decide to shift gears to a larger caliber, but they decided that the 10mm kicked too much for rapid recoil recovery, so they wanted it loaded down. They knew from past experience with the .45 ACP that recoil recovery was not a problem

with 185 grain bullets at about 950 fps, so that's what they aimed for, and amazingly that's exactly what S&W delivered with their brand spankin' new .40 S&W (if they knew a .45 with a 185 wasn't a problem, why didn't they just go with a .45 loaded with 185s?). The 10mm was losing ground.

One of the other fashion trends of the 1980s was that of the "Wonder-Nines", in which competing firms tried to vie for the consumers' dollars by seeing who could cram the most 9mm cartridges into a double stack magazine. One of the clear innovators on this front was a previously little known (here in America anyway) Austrian company, who pioneered the use of polymer grip frames. The Glock Model 17 held 17 rounds of 9mm Parabellum ammo and had several safety innovations, including a unique trigger mechanism designed to prevent accidental discharges. The Glock was immediately controversial because of its plastic grip frame, and to this day shooters either love its blocky profile or loathe it, there seems to be little middle ground when it comes to the Glock.

While the 9mm was an obvious choice for NATO applications, Americans typically want more power, and the 10mm was specifically designed to provide optimum power for semi-autos. Glock had seen the same market opportunities that S&W had seen. In 1990-91 the Glock Model 20 was unveiled here in the states, complete with its 15-round capacity of 10mm ammo. While the 610's sales lagged, the Model 20's sales figures remained steady. When the 610 was quietly dropped from production, the Model 20 stayed on.

After sitting back and watching the solid sales of the Glock Model 20 over the course of the 1990s, S&W decided to test the waters again. Newer production facilities, complete with CNC controlled machinery, meant that smaller batches of guns could be made more easily and with less financial risk. In the spring of 1998, S&W released the 610 Classic Hunter, a 6 1/2" version, similar (but not identical) to the original. These newer 610 were just as accurate as the originals. Handgun hunters had another very accurate choice for deer and antelope sized game.

About a year or so later, S&W followed this with a production run of 300 three inch round-butt 610s. These guns sat on distributors shelves for years. It seemed that not even S&W collectors were buying these limited edition guns! Why? Well, in many ways this little revolver amounted to the three dollar bill of the handgun world. Full-moon clips for rimless cartridges were designed as a wartime expediency, but the 10mm is not, and never has been the United States' official sidearm cartridge. The original S&W 610 enjoyed some modest popularity as a bowling pin gun, but who is going to shoot bowling pin competition with a 3" revolver? Law enforcement has almost universally gone over to semi-autos, and while the 10mm cartridge has a modest



A selection of cartridges loaded with **Lyman** Devastator cast hollow points. The 10mm cartridge is very well served by cast HPs (in this case, the 401638 HP). My favorite powders for loading the 10mm are HS-7 and AA #7. When loaded on top of 11.5 grains of HS-7, this 152 grain HP delivers 1220 fps from the 3" S&W 610 (1300 fps from the 4" and 1375 from a 6.5"). Expansion on vermin (ground squirrels) is both rapid and explosive.

following within the law enforcement community, there is little interest in a sixgun chambered for the round.

So does this little half-breed bastard-child that nobody wants have any place to call home? Well, I would argue that it does. My fondness for 3" round-butt S&W revolvers is no secret, so I'll confess right up front that I'm biased. But then again, it wouldn't surprise me if anybody reading this on Gunblast.com might be just as biased in favor of revolvers over semi-autos, or maybe lever-guns in preference to bolt guns, or perhaps for traditional rimmed cartridges over belted magnums. We all have our personal tastes. So, allow me my foibles and I won't kick dust on yours. So where does the 3" 610 fit in? I'll tell you where, ballistically speaking this gun is exactly what Elmer Keith and Bill Jordan were asking the American arms community to make back in the early 1960s. This revolver delivers 200 grain bullets at 1100 fps, is easily carried all day long, and capable of exceptional accuracy. Recoil is modest and follow-up shots are quick and on target. Now I believe that Keith and Jordan would have looked at the rimless case and full-moon clips and said that they were thinking in terms of a longer, rimmed cartridge, and one that operated at somewhat lower pressures. But the point remains that what this gun delivers -- the bullet diameter, bullet weight, velocity, recoil level and accuracy, all wrapped up in the smoothness and reliability of the S&W N-frame -- are exactly what those two grand old gentlemen were asking for. So where does it fit in, now that we live in a world obsessed with semi-autos? It teaches me once again, each time I take it out plinking, how much those two gentlemen really knew, it gives me the satisfaction of actually shooting what they were championing, and it reaffirms that modern revolver manufacturers really can make a production revolver to tighter tolerances than the commonly encountered minute of tin can we're so used to seeing. That's where.



Author is also very fond of his 4" 610 (with key lock).

That's reason enough for me.

- Glen E. Fryxell

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