

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

The Preacher's Gun

Smith & Wesson 32-20 M&P

By: Glen E. Fryxell

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Make no mistake, the Preacher's little fixed sight revolver is one sweet little sixshooter. It may be 70+ years old, but it's been well cared for and well-oiled, without a trace of rust or pitting. The chambers, throats and bore are as shiny as the day it left Springfield back in the 1930s. The grips are in fine condition and the case colors on the hammer and trigger are still bright. From a different time, this 5" S&W Model 1905 (4th change) chambered in .32-20 is a gentleman's sixgun. It's the Preacher's gun.

It belonged to a minister down in Texas who spent his time sharing his love of the Bible and his love of handgun hunting throughout the course of his long life. Eventually, the time came when it was necessary for him to start selling off his guns, and I happened to hear about the sale early on. Having enjoyed Hal Swiggett's gun-writing for decades, and appreciating his simple, honest, folksy style, I felt that this would be a way of preserving a little piece of his legacy, as well as adding something very special to my gun safe. There was no hesitation, the purchase was made.



The Preachers Gun - Glen's (Hal Swiggett's) 5" 32-20 Smith & Wesson Military & Police (M&P)

Besides, there's something special about a vintage (blued) S&W with a 5" barrel, it just looks, well, *special*.

The revolver showed up at my local gun-shop, well-wrapped and in the condition promised. While waiting for the gun to be shipped from Texas, I had picked up brass and dies, and cast up some bullets for testing/load

development. At some point in the past, some unknown gunsmith had done an "action job" on this gun and had taken just a touch too much metal off the double-action sear (fly), so the trigger would hang up halfway through the double-action cycle (as the trigger transferred from the fly to the hammer). A little judicious welding and re-shaping of the double-action fly by my good friend Dave Ewer cured this little problem. Single-action operation of the revolver was fine.

The S&W .32-20 Hand Ejector Model of 1905 (4th change) was made from 1915-1940, with almost 79,000 guns made. Heat treating of the cylinders began with serial number 81287 (sometime around 1920). They were available with 4", 5" and 6" barrels. An adjustable sight target version was also offered. This gun is

in the 137,xxx serial number range, putting production sometime in the mid-1930s. The serial numbers on the butt of the grip frame, the cylinder and the barrel all match, just as they should.

Loading this fine old revolver with anything other than cast bullets would just give me the heebie-jeebies. And while it does have a heat treated cylinder, it still seems prudent to keep pressures at or below 16,000 CUP and velocities at or below 1000 fps. If I want to push these bullets faster, then I'll grab a Ruger Blackhawk in .30 Carbine and make these little lead pills really scream. The Preacher's gun is intended for a more relaxed kind of shooting. Like the kind where folks used to gather at the gravel pit on the edge of town for some Sunday afternoon plinking before they headed back to Church for a pot-luck dinner. The kind where friendly challenges were placed by neighbors and business associates as to who would be the first to hit yonder tin can. The kind where young boys were amazed by the shooting prowess of the town's men-folk, and would vow that one day they would grow up to be men that could shoot like that. Shooting as a wholesome, social, Sunday afternoon activity. The kind of shooting that helped to knit strong communities that in turn made America strong. We are losing this flavor of shooting today. The shooting sports are getting pushed out of the mainstream and forced out of sight, into cramped indoor shooting ranges. The only way that we're going to get this flavor of shooting back is to make it happen ourselves -- invite some of the members of your congregation to go plinking after church this Sunday. Or take a break from mowing the lawn and challenge your neighbor to a friendly bullseye match some Saturday afternoon. Or recruit a co-worker to go play "roll the can" after work. Let's make shooting a social activity again. That's the kind of shooting that the Preacher's gun is ideal for.

Bullets:

The 311008 is both the logical and historically correct place to start for the .32-20 cartridge, along with the Ideal 31133 HP, and the gas-checked Lyman 311316 SWC and HP. One of my favorite .32 revolver bullets is the Cramer #52D, a very accurate 93 grain SWC with a wide, flat meplat. Also in the line-up was a Cramer #52F, a pointier 93 grain SWC, a custom 100 grain .32 Keith-style SWC made by Mountain Molds, along with an LBT 85-grain .32 SFN (short, flat nose). RCBS rounds out the line up with their fine little 85 grain Cowboy bullet and their utilitarian 98 grain SWC.

Powders suitable for the .32-20 include the medium to fast pistol powders (HS-7 to Red Dot). I'm a big fan of HS-6 for revolver loads in the 900-1000 fps range, so that was my starting point. SR 7625 has been singled out as an excellent powder for the .32-20, and of course "Old Reliable" Unique was also tested, as were Red Dot, HP-38, Bullseye and HS-7. Long story short -- with these bullets sized .312", these various loads ALL shot well above point of aim (6-8"), and ALL grouped VERY poorly. While there was no serious leading observed in the barrel, there were clear indications of bullet yaw in the targets, and occasional keyholes. Clearly, something just wasn't right...

.314" Bullets:

It was then that I actually bothered to make some measurements. There was no major leading observed when using the .312" bullets (a little around the forcing cone, but nothing serious), so my initial read on the situation was that the bullets weren't grossly undersized for the bore. The throats were a different story however. Measuring the throats revealed diameters over .314" and as much as .315". The poor accuracy and key-holing seems to be due to .312" bullets getting misaligned in a .314-.315" throat prior to entering the forcing cone. A .314" sizer die was ordered forthwith. Next, the various bullets were measured in their as-cast condition, and it was found that the Lyman 311008 fell from the blocks at .312" and therefore was probably not going to work in this particular revolver (sad, because this is the proper bullet for the .32-20, historically speaking). The Cramer #52D (93 grain SWC), RCBS Cowboy bullet, LBT 85 grain SFN and the Lyman 311316 GC-SWC were found to drop bullets that were .314" or larger, and therefore were suitable for these subsequent tests. Unfortunately, my 31133 HP and 311316 HP moulds were found to make bullets in the .312-.313" range, so they had to be put on the back burner for a while ('tis a pity, because the older Ideal Handbooks show some very interesting handgun loads for the 31133 HP in the .32-20 revolver).

Accuracy tests were repeated with .314" bullets, starting with the 93 grain Cramer SWC (#52D) and 6.5 HS-6, along with 4.5 grains of SR 7625 (this time sparked with a CCI 550 primer), and 4.0 grains of HP-38 (Fed 100). The HS-6 load was first. The first shot from a clean barrel fell about 1" below point of aim, and the next 4 shots grouped into 1", about an inch to the right of point of aim. Velocities averaged 1001 fps (it is interesting to note that the velocity was similar to this load with the .312" bullets, but the point of impact was notably different). The SR 7625 (944 fps) and HP-38 (929 fps) loads also printed just to the right of the point of aim, and grouped much better than the .312" loads had, but not quite as tightly as the HS-6 load. All of these bullet holes were nice and round (no more keyholes!). This is what the Preacher's gun wants!

The Cramer #52D was also loaded over 4.5 grains of Unique and gave 961 fps, but with marginal accuracy (3"). This result surprised me as this bullet worked well with HS-6, and Unique is such a reliable performer in moderate pressure revolver loads.

Accuracy tests were repeated with the various other cast bullets sized to .314". The Lyman 311316 GC-SWC loaded over 6.5 grains HS-6 (CCI 550) was too warm and gave sticky extraction. It was necessary to reduce this load to 6.0 grains for regular use, where it settled in and grouped well. Loads with other powders that delivered less than 900 fps with this bullet gave poor accuracy.

The 85 grain RCBS Cowboy bullet (which drops from my mould at almost .316") was loaded over 4.0 grains of HP-38 and 4.5 grains of Unique (Fed 100). The HP-38 load (872 fps) showed some real promise, but tended to throw flyers up high (these flyers were the low velocity rounds). 4.5 grains of Unique produced

898 fps showed the same tendency to throw vertical flyers. Increasing these loads slightly to get velocities up around 950 fps or so may well tighten things up.

The 85 grain LBT SFN (short, flat nose) was loaded over 4.0 grains of HP-38. This load produced 882 fps and also produced poor accuracy. To be fair, this short bullet was intended for use in the .32 ACP and wasn't really designed for a revolver with oversized throats and a relatively large capacity case.

The way things are shaping up, HS-6 seems to be the powder to beat for the 93 grain and 115 grain bullets. The lighter, oversized RCBS cowboy bullet looks to have some promise as well with faster powders.

.315" bullets:

Given the marked improvement of the .314" bullets over the .312" bullets, I decided to try .315" bullets to see if they were any better. So, I got another .314" size die and polished it out to .315". I was lucky enough to find a 3-cavity Cramer 52F mould for a 93 grain SWC that dropped bullets right at .315". These bullets were used for these tests, as well as a few of the larger bullets mentioned above. Bottom line? .315" bullets didn't shoot any more accurately than .314" bullets, and in fact, they were generally much worse (at least the holes were all round this time, no keyholes).

The recipe for success for this fine old S&W is: cast bullets, sized .314", loaded over a suitable charge of HS-6 (6.5 grains for the lighter bullets, 6.0 grains for the heavier), sparked with a small pistol magnum primer, with velocities of at least 900 fps and no more than 1000 fps. So loaded, this fine old revolver groups well, and shoots to the sights. Thus endeth today's lesson.

I got the opportunity to take the Preacher's Gun out varmint hunting with my good friend Rob Applegate. I was using cast bullet loads as described above and was pleased with how accurate the little gun was, and pleasantly surprised with how flat it shot out to extended ranges (I took shots out to 100 yards or so). Both the Cramer 52D and the Lyman 311316 made a good showing for themselves on these skittish little rodents. We spent a sunny summer morning walking through the mountains stalking, shooting, laughing and just generally having a good time with some fine old Smith & Wesson's and cast bullets. Folks, it doesn't get much better than that!

We just had the latest of our Pacific Northwest Sixgunner gatherings this last weekend, in which 15 or 20 of us got together for a weekend camping trip in the Ochocos Mountains of central Oregon. This is a gathering of friends from around the Pacific Northwest that gets together each summer for a weekend of friends, family, shooting and lots of food (wild pork sausage and eggs, buffalo burgers, black-tail venison chops, homemade salsa and chips, some top-notch sirloins, and more -- yum!)! This gathering is a fine example of plinking as a social activity, and has become an annual tradition that we've had going for a number of years now (inspired by Taffin's writings of his Shootists' Holiday). This year we had a number

of very interesting guns show up (S&W #3 .44 Russian, a Registered Magnum, a pre-war .38/.44 Outdoorsman, as well as more modern and various custom guns), and we spent a lot of time plinking at pine cones up close, and rocks out on yonder hillside. The Preacher's gun was shared with the other shooters, and each appreciated this little gun, it's history, condition, and how well it shot.

Vaya con Dios Padre. Thank you for all the lessons you've taught me over the years. I have really enjoyed your writing. I'm going to invite some more friends to go plinking this weekend. We're going to take your lovely old M&P out again and go burn a little HS-6...

- Glen E. Fryxell

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