



THUNDER RANCH MODEL 22: A SERIOUS CARRY GUN, RETRO-STYLE!

Despite what some may say, wheel guns still qualify as serious defensive firearms. Until the late 1980s, revolvers were the sidearms of choice for armed professionals. While I wouldn't choose a revolver today if I were the point man on a S.W.A.T. entry team, revolvers are far from obsolete. A lot of very serious operators rely on wheel guns for personal protection.

Revolvers have come a long way from the fixed sight, carbon steel, square-butt revolvers of years gone by. New offerings from Smith & Wesson offer high-tech, lightweight frame and cylinder materials; recoil-absorbing,

soft rubber grips; bright, fiber-optic front sights; and even laser sights. While all of these things have their place in the advancement of the wheel gun, Smith & Wesson has finally come full-circle and brought back the basics, distilling the revolver back down to the essentials of a fighting handgun. The very basic combat revolver is back with a vengeance! Last year, S&W started with the Model 21 Thunder Ranch in .44 Special. This year, however, S&W released the Model 22 Thunder Ranch in .45 ACP, and thereby perfected the retro-style, big bore, combat revolver.

GUN DETAILS

The Model 22 is an N-frame revolver, which means that it is pretty big. Until the recent introduction of the X-frame mega-guns (like the .500 Magnum), the N-frame was S&W's largest revolver frame. However, the "largeness" of this particular model is reduced by the four inch, tapered barrel that weighs far less and is less bulky than the more common, fully-lugged, N-frame barrels. The Model 22 also retains the old style, square-butt frame. The square butt limits grip choices somewhat, since most recent S&W revolvers have round butts, but the square-butt frame just seems right on this

THUNDER RANCH Model 22 with moonclips.

SHOOTING BEHIND BARRELS.



SMITH & WESSON MODEL 22 THUNDER RANCH SPECS

Caliber	.45 ACP
Barrel Length	4.00 in.
Overall Length	9.25 in.
Weight	37.5 oz.
Capacity	6
M.S.R.P.	\$885.00

retro-style gun. The African Cocobolo wood grips that come standard on the gun are beautiful and retro, but don't fill in the area behind the trigger guard enough for my taste. For shooting comfort, I replaced the factory grips with Jerry Miculek's excellent, smooth wood grips. Putting rubber grips on this classic design is certainly possible, but would somehow just seem wrong...

This gun has the standard, six round capacity, and utilizes moon clips. Since the .45 ACP round utilizes a rimless case, use in a revolver requires moon clips (flat metal clips that hold all six rounds together in the proper loading position). The moon clips stay on the rounds when in the gun (unlike a speedloader), and assist with positive extraction. There is not enough room here for a full discussion of moon clips, but this is the fastest method for loading and unloading a revolver. Plus, your chances of fumbling your rounds onto the ground are far less than with a speedloader. In the instances where you don't want to use moon clips, you can use .45 Auto Rim ammunition, which is essentially a .45 ACP round with a rimmed case. This is nice to have, but there are limited sources for this ammo, so you have to plan your purchases or reload your own.

The Model 22 comes with fixed sights in the old style, with a large, "half-moon," semicircular front sight blade. While fixed sights may require more effort to tune in your gun to your shooting, they are far more durable than adjustable sights. The inclusion of fixed sights on this gun is part of the real appeal of this model. For many people, me included, a real fighting gun should have good, visible, fixed sights. Too much can go wrong with adjustable sights when the chips are down.

This gun is a replica, of sorts, of the 1950 version of this gun. The barrel is roll-marked ".45 Caliber Model 1950." It is more accurate to suggest that this

model is a modernization of that classic design. One sure indicator of this gun's modern origins is the built-in key lock on the left sideplate to disable the gun. Many people find these locks offensive, but we are apparently stuck with them for now if we want new models from S&W. My suggestion is to put the keys away and try to forget that the lock is even there, since there are far better ways to secure your gun anyway.

THUNDER RANCH ENDORSEMENT

This new Model 22 was inspired by Clint Smith, a nationally known trainer and founder of Thunder Ranch, now located in Lakeview, Oregon. (You can find an interview with Clint Smith in the Nov./Dec., 2006 issue of CCM). Clint has a special love for combat revolvers, and was the driving force behind the recent Model 21 and Model 22 revivals. As such, S&W has christened both with the "Thunder Ranch" moniker.

The Model 22 Thunder Ranch is a limited edition, with a special serial number run that starts with "TR0000." The Model 21 Thunder Ranch was widely criticized for a gaudy, gold "Thunder Ranch" logo on the sideplate (for which Clint Smith denies all responsibility). The Model 22 has a much more subtle Thunder Ranch logo engraved on the factory grips. If you don't like logos, you can just replace the grips. Do what I did; put the factory grips away to preserve their collector's value later. This gun also comes with a natty, olive-drab, soft pistol case, embroidered with a Thunder Ranch logo.

Clint Smith has also lent his name and endorsement to a Thunder Ranch Illumination System (TRIS) from Streamlight. This package consists of an impressive TL-2 tactical light; a green, removable, flip-up filter; a "tiger ring" retention system; and a Key-Mate LED back-up light. This is an excellent package with attractive pricing that will compare favorably with the equivalent lights from other manufacturers. I had the TRIS for testing while writing this review, and it seemed like a natural complement to the Model 22. The real unique feature of the TRIS is the tiger ring retention system on the TL-2. This is basically just a rubber loop for retention of the light, but it is extremely useful with a revolver. Standard gun handling techniques have no answer to how to load a revolver while handling a flashlight. The tiger ring is worn around the thumb and permits the

light to be quickly rotated to the outside of the palm to free up the hand for gun manipulation, then quickly flipped back to deploy the light. The TRIS is a great combo with the Model 22, or any wheel gun. I keep my TL-2 near my bed, and right next to my Model 22. And the Key-Mate light that comes with the TRIS is the best key chain light that I have ever seen. Clint was correct to lend his name to both of these projects.



TL-2 Tactical Light.

SHOOTING AND CARRY IMPRESSIONS

The Model 22 is a great shooter. The tapered barrel balances well, and the overall reduction in bulk makes the revolver seem to have very fast handling for its size. More importantly, however, the size of the gun makes it much easier to shoot. The weight of the carbon steel soaks up the recoil, and makes the gun into a true pussycat. This gun is as accurate as you want it to be. There are no problems with achieving "combat accuracy," and well beyond.

My issues with the Model 22 were relatively minor. First, it needed an action job to really achieve its full potential. S&W revolvers have not been coming out of the box with the quality of trigger that S&W has produced in the past. However, this is nothing that a competent gunsmith cannot remedy. While the gun was being worked on, I also had the cylinder edges more aggressively chamfered to help the moon clipped rounds drop in easily. For this work, I sent the gun off to my friend, Marc Morganti, at Gemini Customs in Frankfort, Kentucky. Marc turned the gun around quickly, and did an excellent job of smoothing out the action and slicking up the charge holes. With these minor changes, I find the gun to run perfectly.

As for carrying this gun, there is no doubt that it is large. Depending upon where you live and how you dress, you may have problems concealing a revolver this size. However, it is quite possible to do. I believe that a retro gun like the Model 22 should have classic leather, so I contacted the legendary

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Milt Sparks Holsters.

holster company, Milt Sparks Holsters. Tony Kanaley provided me with a classic Summer Special inside-the-waistband holster, which I used together with a Milt Sparks PMK belt holster that I already owned. Both holsters are works of art in leather, and function exceptionally well. Tony hasn't figured out a way to make the gun lighter or smaller, but his holsters

sure make the size and weight easier to deal with on a daily basis.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I believe in the old adage, "Be careful of the man carrying a revolver... He probably knows how to use it." The Model 22 Thunder Ranch is a very serious fighting handgun. The retro-styling makes

for a pleasing appearance, but the retro-styling is also very functional, bringing back the true no-frills defensive revolver at its best. You will be very well armed with a Model 22 if you spend the time to master the wheelgun (if you haven't already). The Model 22 in this review is not a demo model; it is mine, and it has become my favorite handgun. I recommend it highly, and I recommend that you do not wait to get one, since this is a somewhat limited edition.

LINKS

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The author, Duane A. Daiker, is a Contributing Editor for CCM, but is otherwise a regular guy—not much different from you. Duane has been a lifelong shooter and goes about his life as an armed, responsible, and somewhat opinionated citizen. Duane can be reached at:

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