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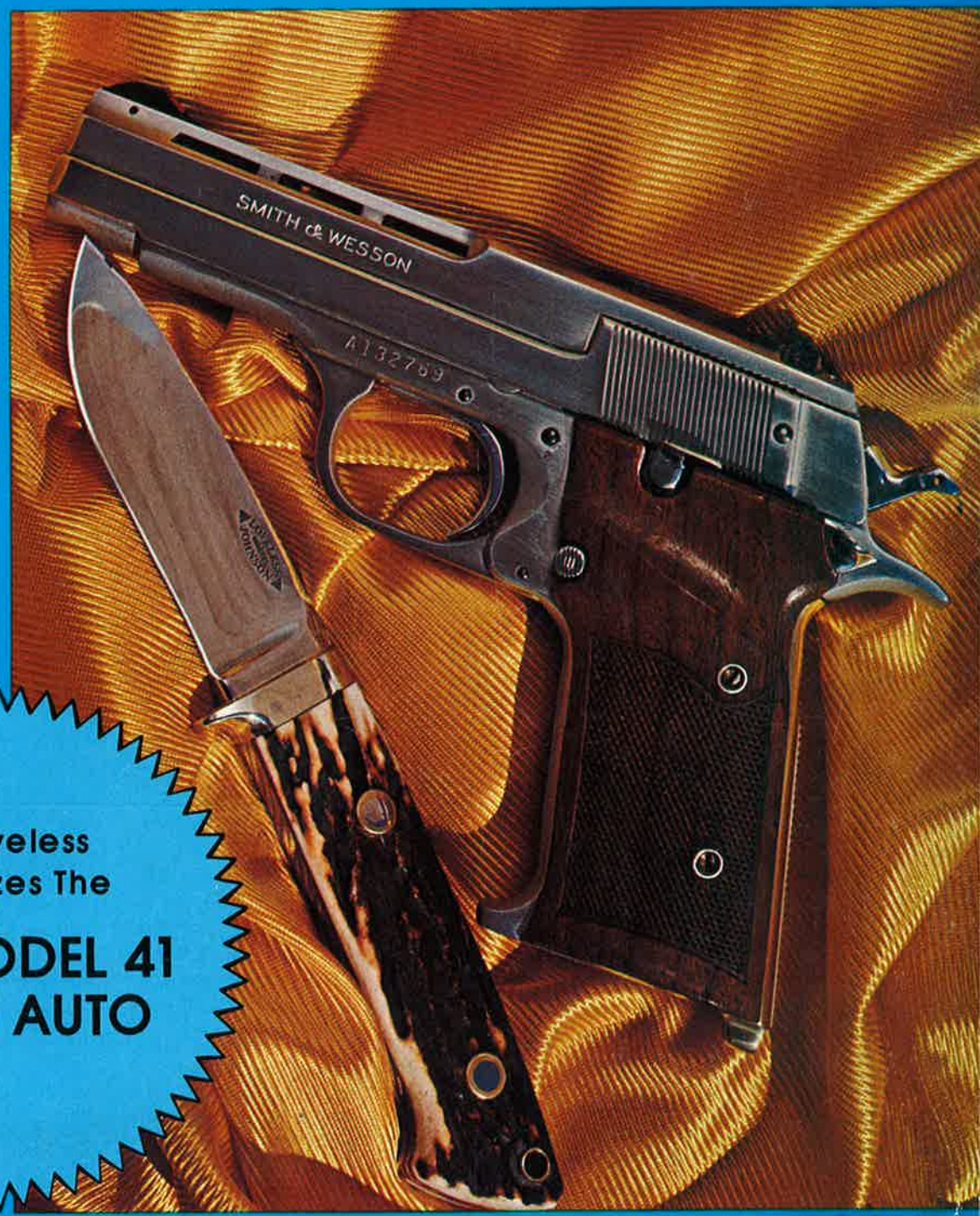


Bob Loveless
Customizes The

S&W MODEL 41 TARGET AUTO

GUNS FOR GALS

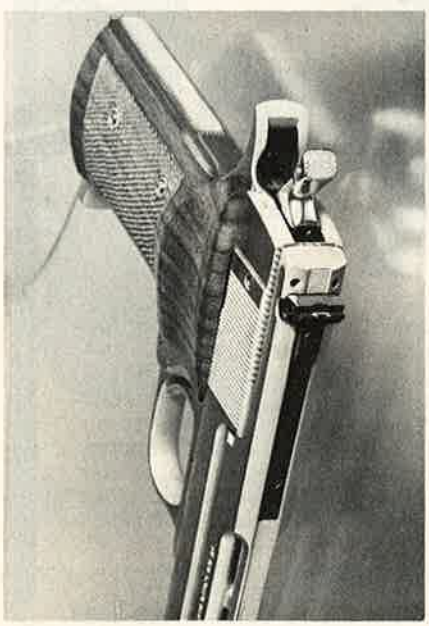
Bob Loveless examines the milling the ventilated rib on one of the Model 41s being modified into field guns. On completion of the numerous operations, the gun will be black-oxided or hard chromed, with other touches per customer specs.

A Noted Knifemaker's Canny Conversion Turns A Bulky Targeter Into A Handy Plinker!

By Dean A. Grennell

Field Gun Version Of S&W's Model 41

An adjustable S&W kit gun rear sight is installed to replace the original rear sight supplied on factory guns.



THOUGH BEST KNOWN for his superb line of custom knives – as discussed in GUN WORLD for September, 1974 – Bob Loveless holds a deep-seated conviction that few human activities are much more enjoyable than shooting. Of all the many aspects of the shooting sports, the one he finds most enthralling is plinking at tin cans, or perhaps at jackrabbits, ground squirrels and the like with a handgun. Focusing to a still smaller area, his tastes run strongly to an autoloading pistol chambered for the familiar .22 long rifle cartridge.

Loveless, who recently moved the custom knife shop he runs in partnership with Steve Johnson from Lawndale to Riverside, California, is one of those constructively malcontent souls who cannot seem to find total satisfaction with gadgetry the way it was built by its maker.

"I guess, at one time or another, I've owned just about every make of .22 auto pistols," he recalls, "but I couldn't seem to find one exactly suited to my personal taste. The ones capable of the accuracy I expected and demanded were all too big, bulky, clumsy and unwieldy. If they were small, light and handy, they just wouldn't deliver the slugs to the place I had in mind."

When S&W introduced their Model 41 target auto, in the latter years of the Fifties, Loveless bought one and found it offered many things to his liking, with a few features to which he objected. The good news was its capability for excellent accuracy, combined with trouble-free functioning. The bad news was that it weighed about forty-three ounces and, with the detachable muzzle brake in place on the 7-3/8-inch barrel, it stretched to about one full foot in overall length.

Most of the modern .22 auto pistols can trace some portion of their design concept back to John M. Browning, drafter of the blueprints for the Colt Woodsman, which several other makes and models resemble to greater or less degrees. The common traits include a relatively long breechblock that carries

the recoil spring, recoil spring guide and, in most instances, conceals the hammer. This adds a substantial length of slide assembly to the barrel, with little or no way to reduce the slide length. Thus, any modification must concern itself with bobbing metal off the barrel, with a resulting loss of velocity and length of sight radius.

Unlike most of its contemporaries among .22 autos in the U.S.A., the S&W Model 41 design has more of a European flavor, harking back to the Paul Walther approach of putting the recoil spring and its guide rod up front, beneath the barrel. With those components taken from the slide, its length is shortened slightly, though it continues to conceal the hammer in the unmodified Model 41, with a small pin that protrudes to the rear of the receiver to serve as a cocking indicator.

Among the Riverside cutler's many strong convictions is a preference for a visible hammer as a safety feature and, in taking a long, thoughtful look at the Model 41, he felt it would be an advantage to trim nearly an inch of metal off the back of the slide, thereby exposing the hammer and reducing the overall length without taking it from the barrel. Since the Model 41 does not have a floating firing pin, when its hammer is down and a live round is in the chamber it could be fired by a sharp impact against the hammer spur. Loveless chose to overcome this problem by utilizing the half-cock notch for the hammer. The sear mechanism of the Model 41 is not engaged until the hammer is drawn to full-cock. Thus there is no serious risk that the hammer could be dropped from half-cock by a pull of the trigger, this being a hazard with certain other auto pistol designs.

The barrel of the Model 41 is locked quite securely to the receiver, with the pivoting trigger guard serving as the lever for taking down or locking up on reassembly. The barrel assembly includes an upper extension, projecting rearward from the breech for about three inches to carry the rear sight. This has the desirable property of maintaining both sights in rigid relationship to the bore.

In the original Model 41 design, the front of the recoil spring and guide rod are about flush with the front of the slide extension, although the muzzle and muzzle brake of the 7-3/8-inch barrel continue forward for a good four inches beyond that point. Experience with several other guns indicated that the .22 long rifle cartridge could develop an adequate level of punch within a barrel length of about four inches.

Cutting off the barrel flush with the front of the slide leaves a dimension of about 4.350 inches from the muzzle to the face of the breechblock. At the same time, it gives lengths of 7¼ inches from the muzzle to the rear of the hammer spur and 7½ inches to the rear of the grip tang. This effects a net

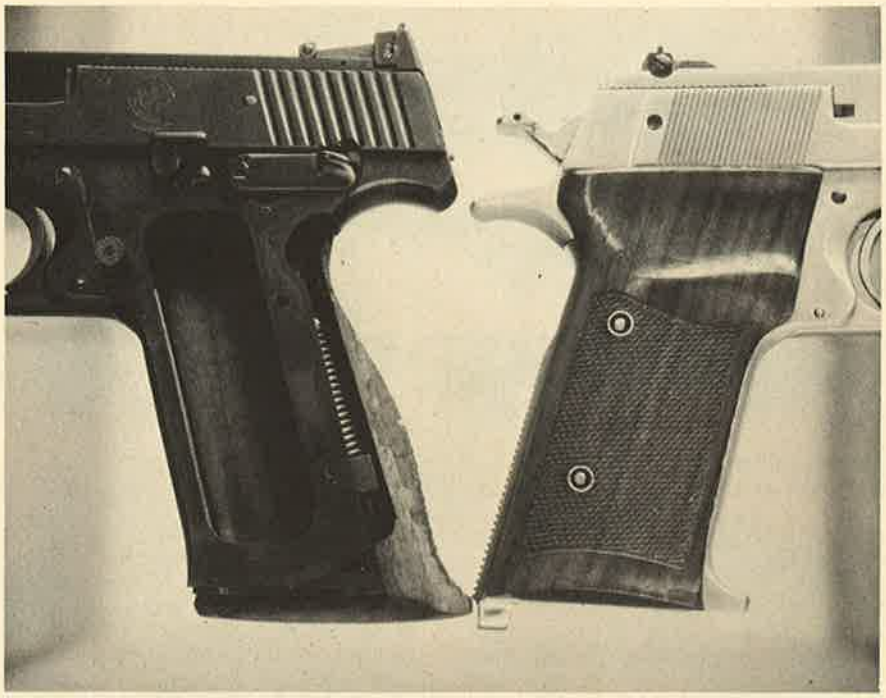
One of Loveless' personal field guns has been fitted with three different barrels, any of which can be attached to the receiver for use; center one is heavy pattern.

reduction of nearly five inches off the original length, meanwhile sacrificing a hair less than 2¾ inches of actual swept length within the bore. The muzzle brake, while offering some modest advantage to the target competitor in rapid fire events, was not deemed essential by Loveless for the applications he had in mind.

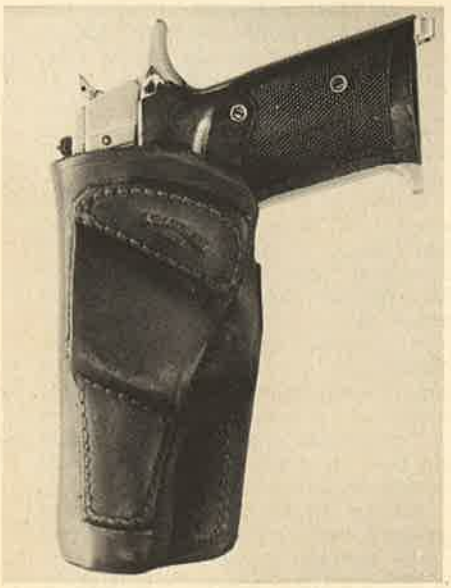
Another feature of the Model 41, regarded by Loveless as great for paper-punchers, but less than ideal for plinking purposes, was the shape and contour of the factory grips. These are fairly bulky, nearly symmetrical as to right and left, for use in either hand and the wood goes around the rear of the grip fully. This encloses the coil-type hammer spring and its guide rod that extends upward to serve as the hammer strut. These components are exposed when the grips are removed.

Loveless chose to make up a main-spring housing from scratch to cover the area. He chose a high-tensile aluminum alloy, contouring it in a straight line, parallel to the front of the grip and fairing it smoothly into the sweep of the tang at the upper rear of the grip. An area along the center of

Though noted for his custom knives primarily, Loveless developed the field gun modification in quest of a gun precisely tailored to his taste.



Unmodified Model 41, left, with left grip panel removed, shows exposed mainspring, guide and strut assembly that is covered by the aluminum alloy housing of the field guns. Note lanyard loop and projecting front tang.



Since he has been making knife sheaths for many years, Loveless finds it no great chore to produce holsters, too.

the lower two-thirds was left as raised checkering and he incorporated an integral lanyard loop at the lower rear corner. After polishing, the aluminum housing is anodized in a gold color.

The thumb/finger ridges, jutting from each side of the Model 41 factory grips, give the gun a maximum thickness of some 1.675 inches at that point. Loveless found that he could trim this dimension down to 1.275 inches, without notable loss of feel to the hand or security in holding. In the process, he trimmed about .130 inch off the projecting end of the magazine release button, leaving the exposed end grooved, rather than checkered.

A further area of grip modification consisted of building up metal around the lower front corner of the grip, reshaping it into a graceful tang to project ahead of the little finger of the shooting hand. The result is a grip that is considerably smaller, much less prone to gouge the user's hip if carried in pocket or holster but, at the same time, one that welds itself unobtrusively but solidly into the shooting hand in a most impressive manner.

In removing metal from the rear of the slide, the original finger groves are taken off and the surface is milled down flat where the three front ridges were located. A new series of finger grooves are cut into the slide, at a spacing of twenty lines to the inch. A portion of the rear barrel extension is retained, being inletted for installation of an adjustable rear sight originally supplied for S&W's kit guns. A rounded blade front sight, 0.180-inch in width, is fitted with a bright red plastic insert on its rear face and the rear sight notch is outlined in white. This particular color combination is favored for quick aim on moving targets, although it is less suitable for formal firing at conventional paper targets.

A small amount of metal is removed from the tang projecting from the front lower corner of the magazine, so as to fit the recess in the reworked butt. Model 41 magazines are custom-fitted to the individual gun and are stamped with the final four digits of its serial number by way of identification.

The standard safety catch of the unmodified Model 41 is quite incredible as to difficulty of function. By bracing the gun on a scale platform and watching the dial, it appears that the safety engages under about ten pounds of static force, with something like thirteen pounds being required to disengage it. That bit of scientific endeavor cost me a broken thumbnail, by the way, and I'm prepared to be impressed by anyone who can click the safety on or off with a casual sweep of the ball of the thumb in the usual manner of manipulating such

S&W declined to add the field gun variant to their production line for reasons that Loveless finds a bit mystifying. One point of objection, he learned, was that the ventilated rib was thought to give the guns unfortunate resemblance to Colt Python.

Standard factory production of the Model 41, upper left, with 7-3/8-inch barrel and muzzle brake, is nearly one foot in overall length. The Loveless modification reduces this by nearly five inches, of which only 2¾ inches are from the actual bore of the barrel. Lower left photo shows right-hand side of a field gun finished in black-oxide, while gun at upper right has been given the super-durable hard chrome plating. Lower right, same gun, with slide locked back.

things. For me, it requires both hands, patience and some amount of gritting the teeth.

Loveless' philosophy in regard to the refractory factory safety is to trim it down a bit and try to forget about it. He feels that carrying the hammer on half-cock serves the same function, at least as well and with vastly greater convenience. At the same time, he has designed the holsters that he makes and supplies with the cut-down guns in such a way that the muzzle is canted well to the rear. In this way, if the gun should discharge in the holster – which is highly unlikely – the muzzle is pointed in the direction least apt to cause injury. At the same time, it is a convenient angle for carrying the gun under routine conditions.

The original Model 41 design incorporates a magazine disconnect, so that a round in the chamber cannot be fired with the magazine removed or not seated fully. Loveless considers this a useful safety feature and has retained it in his field gun modification.

Many handgunners – definitely including yours truly – feel that a magazine disconnect is of dubious value in a gun that might have to be used against armed human adversaries. This envisions the possibility of having to keep someone covered while replacing a depleted magazine, without sacrifice of firing capability. Since neither the target nor the plinking/hunting applications are apt to pose the need of uninterruped shootability, the magazine disconnect makes good sense in the example at hand.

S&W offers three additional versions of their .22 target auto: two Model 41s with 5½-inch heavy barrels, one having an extendible front sight; plus a Model 46 having a satin blue finish in place of the bright blue, and moulded nylon stocks rather than checkered walnut. The Model 46 can be had in standard-weight barrels of five or seven inches, as well as a 5½-inch heavy barrel pattern.

Loveless has produced a few experimental modifications of the heavy barrel versions, but feels the standard-weight barrel is much to be preferred. One further operation consists of milling a quarter-circular groove down each upper corner of the barrel and milling slots into the resulting rib for vertilation. He admits that this step is purely cosmetic, beyond reducing the weight through removal of the steel involved.

An example of Loveless' Model 41 field gun – to use the term he prefers – tips the scale at 30¼ ounces; 1¾ ounces short of two pounds and nearly a pound less than the long-barreled factory version. Since he makes his own sheaths for the Loveless & Johnson knives, he finds it practicable to turn out custom-fitted holsters to accompany the field guns. These are open-topped, without a carrying strap, although the leather is wet-moulded to hold the individual gun with just enough snugness to keep it from popping out if the carrier decides to broad-jump across a creek, meanwhile being easy for a deliberate draw.

If S&W has a particular forte for which they're noteworthy, their trigger pulls would have to be listed as a strong contender. Even out of the factory box, the pull on the Model 41 leaves little if any just cause for com-

Dave Taylor uses a fine-cut file and generous amounts of patient care to smooth milling marks from a barrel.

plaint. By the time Loveless calls it a day, the pull is considerably better than factory-issue; just firm enough to be safe and almost sinfully light, crisp and delicious. Of all the many factors that can contribute toward handgun accuracy, excellence of trigger pull is one of the most significant, if not the single strongest consideration.

Quizzed as to the approximate number of shop hours required for each conversion, Loveless said he has not run an accurate accounting, but he estimated that somewhere between seventy-five and one hundred man-hours went into each gun. Since the operations must be sandwiched amid knife production and acquisition of a Loveless & Johnson knife entails several months of patient waiting, it becomes obvious that no one is going to bring in a Model 41 on a Wednesday afternoon and hope to take it a-plinking over the coming weekend.

A goodly source of the delay in completion is connected with ordering new parts and waiting for them to turn up. Several of the component parts are purchased new and reworked for installation. Few indeed are the gunmakers who can supply repair parts by return mail with any pretense of reliability and S&W is no exception.

Most of the guns in the current lot going through the works were turned in for modification about four years ago and have been inching toward completion as the opportunities presented and the availability of parts permitted since that time. Loveless admits that this poses severe problems, since the jobs were quoted in terms of 1970 dollars, a medium of exchange bearing little resemblance to the pallid buck of 1975 that can't quite purchase two gallons of gasoline.

Guns accepted for future modification will be taken solely on the basis that their owner will be notified when they are ready and the price of conversion will be quoted as of that date. Asked to cite some manner of loose, ballpark estimate, Loveless says that he would prefer to furnish each conversion with one of their knives, complete with matching sheath and holster and the tab well could run into the general neighborhood of $500, possibly higher. Since a gun accepted today might not be completed much sooner than 1978 to 1980, it becomes anyone's guess as to the economic climate and purchasing value of the dollar at that remote point in time.

Loveless agreed to let the GUN WORLD crew try out the field guns for performance capability, furnishing one apiece in black oxide and hard chrome finish. Since I had not fired the standard Model 41 within at least the past decade, he packed in a sample of that, as well. He cautioned that the field guns had not yet received their final firing tests and that any minor irregularities would be identified and rectified at that stage.

By way of establishing a yardstick against which to measure the field guns, we set up a target at twenty-five yards and fired a few groups from the standard Model 41, using various makes and types of ammo. Since the steadiness of the shooter's hand was of no relevance to the test, the groups were fired from sandbag rests off the bench.

The unmodified M41 was a considerable disappointment. The first ten shots yielded four malfunctions. Checking into the reason turned up the fact that the slide was not closing fully. It tended to hang up about 1/32-inch out of battery, requiring a strong amount of thumb pressure on the rear of the slide to get it closed.

Even when it was nursed into firing, the grouping ability left much to be desired. Typical groups sprawled to around three inches, which seemed discouraging for firing a nominal target gun from the bench. I had fetched along a High Standard Victor for possible use in comparison and a few ten-shot groups out of it with different loads served as reassurance that neither the shooting techniques nor the ammunition were at fault. Groups from the Victor held at the expected spread of 7/8 to 1-1/16 inches, which seems to be about as well as I can do with a handgun chambered for the .22 long rifle.

Switching to the two field guns showed quite a marked improvement, with typical groups down in the acceptable neighborhood of 1½ inches for ten shots at twenty-five yards. The field gun finished in black oxide was dead on the money at that distance, with no need for fiddling with the sights. The hard chrome job shot about four inches high at twenty-five yards and the rear sight was at the bottom of its available travel. It was obvious that this was one of the minor factors that Loveless planned to spot and correct when he conducted his own firing test.

Both of the field guns proved notably trouble-free in functioning, feeding magazine after magazine with total reliability and seeming to care little as to make or type of loads. Western's Super-Match Mark III and Mark IV ammo did particularly well, but some standard velocity loads by CCI-Omark and Remington came close to grouping as tightly.

Reassured that the Riverside version of the Model 41 was both reliable and accurate, differing in that respect from the sole sample on hand from the Springfield works, we ran through several magazines of assorted

This Model 9422, in .22 WRM, was modified to conform to Loveless' preferences, too. Barrel and magazine were shortened to a hair over 16", magazine loading port was turned to the side and rubber butt pad was fitted, not to cope with recoil, but to prevent slipping, when in truck.

loads, using a two-handed hold from the standing position. After all, this is the way the guns were intended to be fired. Again, results were well up to expectations and, when fired at the targets, groups came close to focusing as tightly as they had from the sandbags.

In the matter of the practical, two-handed hold as compared to the classic or Camp Perry stance, the only slight disadvantage of the former is that it puts the gun a matter of some eight to ten inches closer to the aiming eye, thereby making it just a shade more difficult to minimize the visual blur of rear sight and target. However, the added freedom from weave and wobble goes far to offset any optical handicap thus imposed.

Loveless notes that the rigid barrel of the Model 41 design should lend itself nicely to the installation of a scope sight and he plans to try dreaming up a mount that would position one of the little Hutson handgunner scopes as close as possible to the axis of the bore. The Hutson is about the only scope sufficiently small to avoid looking grotesquely out of proportion on the M41 field gun. The idea sounds as though it should offer promising possibilities.

At one time, Loveless had hopes of inducing S&W to introduce a factory version of his field gun modification. For many reasons, it seems the obvious route to take. Made in routine production, the cost should not be greatly more than the standard M41's $159.50 – to quote the most recent cost figure available – and it would seem a preferable alternative to shelling out the cost of the basic gun and then waiting a matter of years to spend a few hundred more for its alteration.

In recent times, however, S&W has had difficulty in keeping up with its military and police orders and perhaps it is understandable that they give these markets a greater degree of consideration than those concerned with sport shooting or target competition. For the present, there seems little chance that the M41 will be produced as a factory field gun version. To cite but one point of objection, they feel that the ventilated rib gives it an unfortunate resemblance to certain of the Colt revolvers, such as the Diamondback or Python and the love lost between Springfield and Hartford is about as minimal as anything ever gets.

Which leaves the Loveless M41 field gun with scant competition in today's handgun field. They are not for every shooter and do not pretend to be. It takes a touch of the fanatic's bright-eyed zeal – not to mention some amount of easy affluence – to feel inclined to lay out the cost involved. But it certainly is an interesting gun, by any standard against which you care to judge it, and the great pity is that they are scarce, costly and not too apt to improve in either of those respects. ●