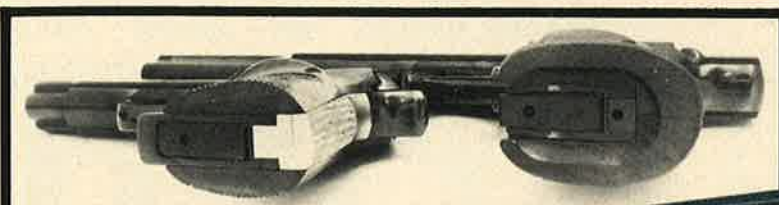


Detail shaping of the little guns varies according to Loveless's "feel" as he modifies them. Sights on test pistols were hand-made fixed units. A few of these .22 sporting pistols were given S&W Kit Gun adjustable sights.



OUTDOOR PHOTOS BY ALAN WEISS

Below: Grips, magazines and bottoms of the grip frames are all extensively modified in the conversion. New mag bases are fitted and a metal spur is added.



Skillful Conversion—Or, Butchery?

G&A Looks At A Back-Yard Modification—

THE "CHOPPED AND CHANNELLED".22

BY WHIT COLLINS / Today we're going to examine a pistol that will seem uniquely useful to some, and monstrous to others. There seems to be no middle ground to those who have seen and examined this peculiar little handgun, the Loveless/S&W Model 41 Conversion.

The term conversion is used for want of a better name, because this is actually a little hot-rod sort of pistol—it's been shortened and lightened and in the process has acquired a completely new character. The gun starts out as a standard S&W Model 41 .22LR Self-Loading Target Handgun, beloved to many of the country's top competitive handgunners. Designed before World War II, it was first produced in the early 1950s, and aside from different barrel options, has had no substantial changes since then. Patterned somewhat like the line of Walther Olympic .22s, it was the first pistol of target quality to carry its mainspring ahead of the trigger group, and carried its rear sight on a fixed extension rearward above the sliding breechblock. With a fine trigger mechanism, stationary sights, and a balance

that seemed made to order for paper-punching, it is so good that most would say, "Why fool with it?"

Simply because, in R. W. Loveless's opinion (and we'll cover his qualifications to that opinion), there was no first-quality field gun available from any handgun maker. Mark that phrase, **FIRST QUALITY**, because it is the key to Loveless's work.

Loveless is a professional knifemaker, one of those few men who earn their living by making fine knives to the order of the country's leading sportsmen, hunters, and collectors. A knifemaker for over 15 years, he stands high in the councils of the new professional Knifemakers' Guild, formed recently at the Tulsa National Gun Show.

There is something about the making of fine sportsmen's tools that has always fascinated R. W. His favorite activity is seeking out remote parts of the desert, armed with one of his choice battery of handguns, and busting jackrabbits.

Although he is known for his knives to such diverse buyers as U.S. Government survival specialists, professional guides and outfitters, and government hunters in predator control, he has also done a surprising amount of design work and research on handguns. He first began working with the Model 41 some eight years ago, and in 1964 was commissioned by the Smith & Wesson factory management to make up samples of his M41 Conversion. In the years since, he has been hopeful that the company would bring out such a gun on the commercial market.

Loveless has certain unorthodox ideas. A field gun to him is a small, compact self-loading .22 handgun, with an outside hammer, because, as he says, "There is no better safety device than a visible hammer." He feels that most small .22 semi-autos are too light, and incapable of shooting tight-enough groups. Such guns are for the most part simply rimfire versions of the small

European pocket autos, and never intended for high accuracy, with their rough triggers and loosely-fitted actions. "We must start with accuracy, the ability to hit the mark, and the pistol must have it, regardless of what else it has," says this handgun iconoclast.

Loveless starts out by dismantling the 41, and immediately cuts away the metal on the frame and slide that surround the concealed hammer, which is set aside to subsequently have a nice little spur added. New knurls are extended forward on the sides of the slide.

The barrel is shortened to 4¼ inches, breech to muzzle, and the sides milled with a radius cutter, to form a pronounced rib, with vents running the length of the barrel ahead of the chamber area. When I asked him why the vents, he very honestly said, "Strictly for looks, they don't do anything but cheer me up."

Each conversion is slightly different; Loveless has a certain whimsical outlook, and he sometimes changes the shape of something just to see how it will affect the overall job.

To the bottom front portion of the grip frame he adds metal, then reshapes it into a finger spur, which he feels is vital to lock the gun into your hand. The two magazines which he modifies for each gun are also reshaped, with new floor plates roll-pinned onto them, to fit the altered shape of the grip. The grips themselves are flattened somewhat, and a flat back-strap is fitted into the original skeletonized grip-frame in the rear. The new back-strap is often carefully checkered with a checkering file.

In some of the dozen or so of these guns he has made so far, R. W. has fitted small, hand-cut, two-color sights, regulated to the shooting eye of the final owner. In others, he has fitted the fine little adjustable rear sight assembly used on Smith & Wessons' Kit Gun. Of the two treatments, the latter is the


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Compared to original S&W Model 41, Loveless guns exhibit shortened barrels, lightened slides and external hammers. Rear of 41 slide is cut off and relieved to expose hammer, to which spur is added, and new slide knurls are milled in. The rear of the skeleton grip is filled with plain or checkered back straps. Safeties are cut down.

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"Chopped & Channeled"

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most practical, allowing for easy adjustment, and he prefers it.

In altering the slide, Loveless removes some 20 percent of its weight. When asked what result this had, he said, "The gun acts better. It strips the new round from the magazine, chambers it more positively, and the entire cycle takes place in a shorter time. Since the trigger guard on this gun is simply a large spring, or shock absorber, the net result is better functioning."

During the field testing of the two guns shown in the photos, Loveless told me something of his background and qualifications, and his reasons for taking a hacksaw to what most men would think is a very fine pistol as it comes from the factory. "Most all such things are the result of the thoughts of many people; Smith had to think of production problems, and it had to be saleable. I suppose they felt that the target handgunners were the logical market, when they were thinking about building this gun. But I've never had much liking for competitive paper-punching, although I have a vast respect for the men in the 2600 Club. What I wanted was a gun that could do what I wanted, with a fine trigger, and enough weight to hold better than the little European guns."

With Loveless looking on, a total of about 500 rounds of high-velocity hollow points were fired in the two guns, and this writer has come to a definite conclusion about R. W.'s work. With this gun, a box or two of .22s, and a small knife (the kind one is most likely to have when it's needed) a man could live off the land for a long time — if he had the other knowledge needed.

Shooting the little pistol is subtly different than with any other similar gun. The weight seems somehow just right for the job. Recoil is moderate, slightly more than the target 41 which was also fired as a test control, but the impressive thing is the overall feel of this gun and its trigger control.

As Loveless had said, the whole gun cycles more crisply, and no stoppages were encountered. He states that you can put this gun back on a machine rest, and shoot possibles all day long. The pistol is still a target-grade handgun, capable of, in his words, "making your mark where you want it." The one-gun man would have a hard time beating this gun as an all-round — even informal target — handgun.

Before the reader takes the all-round gun remark too seriously, we have to say that Loveless is firm on a number of points. First, the gun is not meant to be a "put-down" to Smith & Wesson. He has tried this "bobbing" approach on other big-name autos, including one selling for more than twice the money of the Smith. On that gun, he says, he

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didn't even bother to finish the job. No other .22 handgun, in his opinion, has the required degree of fit and finish, and internal design, or the needed strength, to lend itself to a practical conversion. Loveless believes that the S&W Model 41, whether converted or stock, is the world's best .22 auto pistol — in a forest of competitors.

Secondly, the gun is not constructed to be a real defense arm, although it isn't an impossible choice. In Loveless's approach, he has simply cut the thumb safety down in size, and this renders the pistol difficult to get off from cocked-and-locked in a real hurry. He prefers to carry the pistol with the chamber empty, simply priming it as it comes up to eye level for the shot. Of course, anyone who would pay both gunsmithing and the cost of a new or clean-used Model 41 might just want to have the left grip relieved a bit and a thumb lever added to the existing safety, to permit a Cooper-type high-thumb lever.

In line with the above, R.W. feels that anyone who would seriously consider this pistol conversion is the same sort of person who would buy — and have a real need for — a \$100 knife, like the ones he makes. Full-time hunters, "big-ticket" sportsmen and/or collectors of arms rarities are the logical users of such few-of-a-kind items.

Loveless's approach to handgun and knife design utilizes the principle, well-known among designers, that "form follows function." He comes by the discipline honestly, having attended Chicago's famed Institute of Design after a stint in the Army in the late 1940s. In those days, it was the U.S. center for the highly-advanced Bauhaus school of design thinking that still largely governs most practice in the field of product design. R. W. Loveless used his training to operate a close-tolerance prototype machining firm for some years prior to turning his custom knives into a full-time occupation.

Before he had made or shown many of his converted 41s, Loveless thought that few people would be interested in what he had done simply to satisfy his own tastes, particularly at the average cost involved. He's not interested in taking on many of these conversions, as they detract from his knife-making, but he has occasionally run through a small batch of a few at a time. The friends and business associates who own the little guns keep bringing more customers back.

R.W. thinks that the American sportsman is becoming more sophisticated in his technical tastes. Of course, G&A thinks so, too. It will be interesting to see whether handgun "hot-rod" like this type of conversion will take hold. If so, R. W. Loveless's little .22 field gun conversion, will, like his knives, become a known benchmark in the never-ending process of sporting-goods design.

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