

# An Interview with Max Gera & the Auto Mag

By Bruce Stark 04/27/09

First, who is Max Gera ? In the March 1970 issue of Guns & Ammo magazine, Jeff Cooper twice credits Max Gera as the designer of the Auto Mag and refers to him as Auto Mag Corp.'s Design and Engineering Manager. Max was also named as co-inventor of the Auto Mag on the first patent application which was later abandoned. Max's name didn't appear on the final patent.

In October of 1970, Max sold off his interests in the Auto Mag and left Harry Sanford.

After Auto Mag Corp. declared bankruptcy in May of 1972, Max was blamed by some for causing Auto Mag to fail. These were mostly just rumors. However in a letter to Deputy Ed Lippert in July of 1972, Jeff Cooper of Guns & Ammo explained why Auto Mag Corp. went bankrupt. The letter blamed Max and typified the type of rumors that were flying around at the time. Max has asked me to remove this letter from this work as it "is inflammatory, libelous and damaging to my reputation."

Max was being used as a scapegoat. It should be noted that that the bankruptcy happened 18 months after Max left Auto Mag. Max only went to the Pasadena factory one time after his departure, to discover he wasn't allowed to enter the building.

Over the years rumor had it that Max was deported back to Italy, was in jail, or was dead.

Harry Sanford would be cursed for the remainder of his life by people asking him who had invented the Auto Mag, he or Max Gera. Harry would usually respond by saying, "Max was just a guy who worked for me."

After the interview I will tell of how I located / stumbled upon Max Gera. Now – on to the interview.

An Interview with Max Gera, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Max Gera and Bruce Stark.

**Q** " What is your given name and what name do you use ?

**A** The name is Gera. G E R A. Unfortunately, I have one of those names that people come up with all kinds of different ideas on how to spell it, and every conceivable spelling that you can imagine, somebody has used for my name.

**Q** When and where were you born ?

**A** I was born in Venice in 1945, July the fifth, and I came to the United States when I was twenty-two years old, for the very simple reason that I was ambitious, driven, and Italy was not the place for me. In Italy you are considered a pariah, that's the word, if you want to do anything with your life other than getting a job at age twenty and staying on the same job until you get the gold watch.

**Q.** How and where did you acquire your gunsmithing skills ?

**A.** As far as my gunsmithing skills, I've always been good at playing with mechanical things, with designing devices, and making things, whether it be metal or wood. I built my first muzzle loading rifle, actually it was a shotgun, when I was probably fifteen. Actually I built it from scratch, using -- I believe it was -- a Jeep steering wheel tube for the barrel, and I actually made the action from scratch.

**Q.** Where did you first work after coming to the U.S.A. ?

**A.** Once I came to the United States, I had a couple of jobs for a short period of time. Then I went to work for Pachmayr, I believe it was early 1968, and I was with them for probably six to eight months. I worked as a general gunsmith there, but I did mostly work on accurizing 45ACP pistols.

**Q.** How did you first meet Harry Sanford and how did you end up working for him ?

**A.** It was shortly after I got married, Frank Pachmayr called me, gave me a big speech of how proud he was of my job, and gave me a ten cents an hour raise, I considered that an insult and I quit. Through an acquaintance that I had, I was told that Harry Sanford was looking for a gunsmith in his Pasadena store. I went to see him, he was pleased with what I said, and he hired me immediately. Basically I was hired as a general gunsmith to do all the conventional repair, and everything else that they did at the time, at a conventional, general gunsmithing store.

**Q.** When did you first hear about the Auto Mag ?

**A.** Ah, you got a trick question here. When did you first hear and start to work on the 44 AMP? Well, I never heard of the 44 AMP, because it never existed. What happened was at one point, and I believe it was either very late 1968 or early 1969, give or take a couple of months, Harry and I were talking about the fact that nobody made a 44 magnum automatic pistol, and of course as a braggart guy I said, "Well, I can do it."

I did a certain amount of research on this subject. There are so many pistols that try to use a rim cartridge, like I believe the Smith and Wesson Model 52 and the Colt MK111 in 38 special. They all seemed to have problems functioning with rim cartridges to be fed out of a magazine. So with that, I simply came up with the idea of taking a 30-06 cartridge case or a 308 and cut it to exactly the same length as a 44 magnum case, and essentially have an exact 44 magnum cartridge rimless so it will have less problems feeding from a magazine.

At that point I had no idea about the article that Guns & Ammo ran a few years earlier showing the picture and actually that cartridge. Somebody else had the same idea a few years earlier.

**Q.** When did you start working on the Auto Mag and how did the work progress ?

**A.** I began working on the Auto Mag I believe again probably in the early 1969 or very late 1968. One of the first things that I did was try to get an idea of what size the grip will feel to hold the cartridge. And that's when I took the famous two P-38 frames that I cut up and welded together to the correct size, just to get an idea of how the thing will feel.

Then I had pretty much a blank mind, I don't know if it was weeks or months, before I decided that such a big cartridge, such a powerful cartridge should be handled by a rotating bolt. Once I got the concept I probably did the first sketches in a period of a few weeks or months, and over the next several months I built an entire prototype at the Colorado store. I remember well that the first thing that I did was to get a block of steel. I had a company nearby, I believe they were called Electronic Machining Company, actually EDM a hole all the way through it, which was to be called the magazine slot.

After several months of working and making all of the parts, I completed the first prototype, which was rather crude, and I'd still like to know what happened to it. The first prototype actually fired and cycled the first time out. I fired it I believe from a vise. It ejected – didn't feed the second cartridge because I had no magazine, but it did eject the round from the first time. After a couple of other trials, I actually broke the hammer.

At that point I was convinced enough that the basic concept of the overall design was a viable design. Then I told Harry that I needed some help, and we needed to get some mechanical drawings done, and then actually build some

prototypes as in a tool room with a machine shop setting. And pretty much that's what we did. It took several months to actually have a complete set of drawings based on my original handmade prototype.

Then we hired Gross Instruments, and I believe they were commissioned to make three or four pistols. They actually had the ones that they made, if there are any surviving, the blank surviving. They are very easy to spot because the frame was made from a round blank, like if somebody sliced a big piece of 4140 big enough to make a frame, inch and a half thick, and they had an EDM slot going all the way through, and the entire frame was then cut around the position of that slot.

At this point here, when we had the first pistol completed from the mechanical drawing, the pistol simply wouldn't work. I spent several weeks, firing after firing after firing. The pistol would fire but it simply would not cycle.

At one point I decided that since I didn't know why it was not cycling, I decided to temporarily make people happy because everybody was breathing down my back. I added the accelerator to it, and the accelerator did make the pistol cycle.

Now that left us with another problem. The original bolt on both the first one that I made myself and the prototype that we had built by Gross Instruments, the bolt had a dual action cam. The pin that goes to the ring in the frame caused the bolt to open on recoil, and it also made the bolt close as it was moving forward. This presented a problem that the motion of the bolt and the motion of the receiver – they call it now barrel extension -- had to be perfectly synchronized so the bolt wouldn't start turning until after it had cleared the lugs in the receiver.

I played around with that for about a month and I could not come up with a satisfactory method, so finally I gave up on that one too. I introduced into the system a little coil spring to rotate the bolt. At that point we had a pistol that would both cycle and close reliably. Even so I wasn't too thrilled with the spring idea, I decided that would have to be good enough for the time being.

**Q.** How did the investors affect the project ?

**A.** Once the investors started showing up, the entire operation became almost like a pack of hyenas. People from every angle from everywhere showed up at the store, and every one of them had a better idea on how to make the gun. Everybody was an expert on one field or another, none of them had ever made a gun, but they were all expert at something. Most of them were experts in "sophisticated aerospace technology."

Quite frankly after a month or two of this, having to defend myself against every single new person showing up, I sold my stock with the Auto Mag. I sold it to Jerry Ognibene, and I got out of it. So essentially the investor thing pretty much spelled the beginning of me leaving the company.

**Q.** What guns existed when you left Auto Mag ?

**A.** When I worked on the project there were essentially two pistols. There was the first one that I had made, the one that I made in the Colorado shop, and then there was the second one that was made by Gross Instruments that I had modified from the original drawings by adding the accelerator at one time, and then adding the turn spring at another, to get it to function.

At the time that I left I do not believe we yet had received a magazine for the pistol. So I did not get involved. I may be a little, how can I say, unclear on this one, but I don't remember that we had a working magazine at the time. At the time that I left the project essentially we had a pistol, the one that you see on the cover of Guns & Ammo magazine, I believe the March issue of 1970. This pistol cycled, fired, extracted, ejected a cartridge, and it had a working safety, and

it had a holdopen device that would work by hand. I don't know if it would work with a magazine because we did not have any magazine at the time. So that was pretty much the extent of my involvement with the pistol.

At that point I left. The way I left in there, quite frankly I felt very exasperated because I got to the point that I believed that Harry was willing to listen to anyone except me. The only thing that a person would have to do to ingratiate himself with Harry was to tell him that he did not agree with me. So that's how I came to the point of no longer working with Harry.

**Q.** How much of the design of the Auto Mag was yours and how much was Harry's ?

**A.** **HARRY HAD ABSOLUTELY NO INPUT IN THE DESIGN OF THE AUTO MAG.** He had no clue whether it used a turning bolt, or a folding block or a rotating slide. The only input that Harry had in the original design was that he told me that he liked very much the grip angle on the 1911 pistol. And I kept that angle to go along with him. The entire concept of the rotating bolt, the short recoil rotating bolt, the ring around the bolt, was all entirely mine.

**Q.** Did Harry do any of the physical work to create the prototype gun ?

**A.** No, Harry did not do any kind of machining on any drawings or anything to do with the pistol. About his only contribution was one of his cigar boxes that I used to make the grips on the prototype on the cover of Guns & Ammo magazine.

**Q.** I believe your next endeavor was to create the Gera Double. How did that go ?

**A.** Shortly after I sold my stock on the Auto Mag, I immediately opened a gunshop with the idea of doing general gunsmithing. Within a few months of that I decided that I should probably try to have a product again on my own. I didn't know what I was going to do, and I decided to do something that I thought, very mistakenly so, that it would be easy enough to make, because it required very little design and development. That's when I started making the Gera double rifles. You have seen those in some of the magazines. Guns & Ammo magazine had a write-up on them in May of 1971. I believe there was some picture in some of the other magazines. I believe I made about fifteen of them or so in two calibers. I made them in 270 Winchester and 458 Winchester magnum. I didn't make any money on them. Even so I started at a rather high price for those days.

The amount of labor involved was prohibitive. So once I was only supporting the production of the rifles, if you want to call it production, with the general gunsmithing that I was doing from my shop, and also on a wholesale level for different gun shops. And those were the days I believe that the economy started going down the tubes. And pretty soon the gunsmithing work started running out and so did orders for the rifle, and pretty much I went under. And that was the end of Gera Arms. This happened somewhere toward the middle to the end of 1971. Once in a while, you see one of my rifles sold or for sale on some of the gun trading web sites

**Q.** What other jobs have you had since the demise of the Gera Double ?

**A.** That was about the time what I worked with Charter Arms in Connecticut. I worked for them probably six months or so, definitely less than a year. And the work that I did there was involved with redesigning and modifying some of the production tooling to be able to hold better the tolerances during the production of the parts. They were having a lot of problems with the gun being out of tolerance and a lot of difficulty with the assemblies. And I worked in there for let's say, around six months, maybe a little less, maybe a little more, improving some of the production tooling for them.

Shortly after that I got involved mostly working in machine shops, as tool and die maker, and designing production machinery to manufacture different items, quite a variety of items, anywhere from designing tooling to machine some

of the large turbines that they were doing for some of the atomic power plants in those days, all the way to retooling a couple of sheet metal shops in the Philadelphia area in which they were making up high speed production sheet metal machinery to produce gutter spouts, air conditioning ducts and all kinds of the construction type sheet metal products. I spend a few years doing that.

And I spent pretty much the rest of the time in the general type of work, except for a short period of time in the late seventies to early eighties when I had my own boat company for a couple of years, made a few sailboats. That did not work out that well either.

Around 1985 I decided I was tired of working in machine shops and making things, and I actually had a rather strange career change. A friend of mine suggested that I should try working at a car dealership. So I actually sold cars for about six months and shortly after that I became leasing and finance manager, and I did that until the early nineties. At that point, as a byproduct of my experience in financing, I started my own company involving the credit repair business, pretty much involving disputing with credit bureaus and negotiating with creditors to improve people's credit report.

In the early years of that I started developing software to run my own business and when my partner and I split in 1993 I sold him one copy of my software for his own personal use. And I continued to develop it. Well it just so happened that shortly after the split he started selling franchises and giving everybody a bootleg copy of the software that I had given him. Well at this point with my previous experience my software was quite nicely copy protected so they could load it on the computer but it wouldn't work. So with every one of the franchisees that he sold a franchise to, they ended up having to buy a working copy of the software directly from me. And I did quite well with that until the mid nineties.

I stayed in the same business until around 1999. Business started slowing down, I was getting older, and at that time I decided to close the shop, to reduce the business down to a very very minimal base, and go into a semi-retired state, which is what I have been doing for the last ten years.

**Q.** What are you doing now ?

**A.** I'm pretty much in a semi-retired state. Until I started finding out what was going on with the Auto Mag, I was pretty much very happy to stay retired, do as little as possible, and simply take care of and feed all my deer, and the squirrels, and all the other things. And now I must say that after reading your book, and seeing all the websites and finding out the incredible amount of splash that the Auto Mag has done, I don't know, I may have to revise that thinking.

In 1984 I was plant manager of a well-tooled machine shop in Folsom, Pennsylvania. Somehow I got the bug to work on the Auto Mag again, and this time I was strictly on my own, on my own timing in the evenings, and I started doing some of the changes that I believed the pistol needed.

You probably remember what we have talked about. Everybody wanted to make changes to the pistol for no better reason than to say that they did something different. The changes that I wanted to make are the things that actually were needed from day one because the pistol was not working properly.

By that point I had arrived to the conclusion that the unreliable cycling of the action that needed the adding of an accelerator was due to the fact that the bolt has insufficient mass. The big slot that I used the bolt to cam, close and open, was actually removing so much weight from the bolt that once you released the bolt from the receiver it did not have enough momentum on its own. That's why it needed the accelerator to increase the speed so the bolt would have the necessary energy. Also the turning spring for closing of the bolt was a last minute kluge that I had to use and that did not work very well.

I was convinced that I needed to have the bolt to be closed in a positive way, similar to what happens when the bolt carrier moves forward, slams the bolt against the cartridge, and turns in one swift motion like on the M-16, and also as

on some of the Auto Mag spin-offs, such as the Desert Eagle and the Wildey. I know they look very different but they both use a rotary bolt system! This brought me to the changes that I made to the pistol. Essentially I eliminated the outside ring and I had a single internal cam so the bolt had only one slot on the bottom, making the bolt considerably heavier, and I modified the interphase between the bolt and the cocking piece in such a manner that the cocking piece moving forward at the last minute moved, turned the bolt, after the bolt had actually passed the locking lugs in the receiver. This completely eliminated the synchronization problems that I had on the early prototype.

Anyway I worked on the second prototype for probably four or five months. It didn't take me that long to do because I was able to recreate the drawings from memory. The pistol was very similar to the original. The only visible difference was that I put the combat trigger guard with a reverse curve on the front of the trigger guard rather than the streamlined curve, for a better two hand hold. And anyway, I had the pistol ready, finished, everything seemed to be working fine. I loaded it one evening.

Oh, incidentally, one change that I made on the pistol was that I made it for the 45 Winchester Magnum, so I didn't have to deal with the handloading and everything else. I remember I had to make the reamers and everything else because nobody had the reamer at the time. But I made it in 45 Winchester Magnum.

So one evening, probably in 1984 or early 1985, I was by myself in the shop, had a big bucket of sand, put a round in the chamber, pulled the hammer back, pointed at the sand. And then I said to myself, "Do I want to go through this again?" I sat there holding the pistol for probably a solid five minutes. I pulled the bolt back, ejected the round, put it in the case, and it has stayed there ever since.

**Q.** What would you like to say about your experiences with the Auto Mag ?

**A.** How do I feel about my experience with the Auto Mag? It was such an entire disaster, and it was something that could have been done profitably if people had actually accepted the fact that when you want to manufacture something you have to go through a step by step manufacturing process. You cannot have a production line based on the idea that you are going to have this shop making that part, the other shop making a part, and the other guy making the other part in his garage. And you cannot have everybody involved trying to change something just so they can say, "I did that." And that was pretty much the history of the Auto Mag. Incidentally, it was with very great pleasure that I saw in your book all the constant bickering between one guy to the next one, one guy wants the screws on the inside, the other wants on the outside, one wants a thin rear site blade, the other wants a thick one, and constantly making changes that serve absolutely no purpose.

By the way one of the changes that I saw I was appalled about. It supposedly was one of the great improvements on it, that accelerator block. The only thing it does is it prevents the accelerator from falling off once you remove the slide. On the Lahti it also falls off. But what the accelerator block did, it created a much deeper slot on the side of the chamber which caused all kinds of problems and probably was responsible for all the gas blowback that you mentioned that happened when you tried to fire the pistol without the accelerator.

I was just making a point that of all of the changes that they did, none of them solved what the basic problem with the pistol was. It was an incomplete design that needed more work, but everybody completely avoided touching that in any way, shape or form. Because quite frankly the more I've been reading your book and everything else, nobody seems to have a clue of how that pistol works. I would say this probably wraps it up on the concluding thought also.

**Q.** After reading the book Auto Mag the Pasadena Days, what comments or corrections do you have ?

**A.** Quite frankly you did a fabulous job in there. I don't think there is anything that I can add to the book except the timing on the chapter one. I believe you had it 1966 to 1972. O.K., I was not even in the United States until September

of 1967. I did not go to work for Harry until sometime in 1968. So there was no thought, no work done on the Auto Mag whatsoever. There was never a mention of the Auto Mag, there was no name of the Auto Mag until at least late 1968. It more likely was early 1969 when I actually started working on the pistol.

Other than that, your book is fabulous. I did get a kick out of all those memos back and forth with Mark Lovendale and Bob Barbasiewicz. That reminded me of an assembly line that I had at one time, putting together some crimping tools with five or six women. They were consistently fighting with each other about who got to use the red screwdriver and who got to put the screws closer to her than the other one. But that's why I got a kick out of that one there, as you can see, constant bickering about totally irrelevant things that had absolutely nothing to do with getting the pistol to work.

**Q.** Any concluding thoughts ?

**A.** In conclusion, after reading your book, yes, I do have the fire in the belly. And under the right circumstances I would definitely be interested in reviving the Auto Mag with all of the good changes. I believe I can probably come up with a perfectly working prototype in less than 6 months. However, some things have not changed. In order to produce it reliably with interchangeable parts, it will require a very large pile of money. I would say the biggest difference of opinion that we had in those days was that I wanted to do real production tooling. And at the time I had come up with an estimate of four million dollars, 1970 dollars, to set up a production facility to produce the Auto Mag that could be sold and made a profit at the original price of \$217.50.

Now I've been out of the machine shop business for many years now. I know that there are a lot of more versatile computer machines and all of that. However, you still have to have dedicated machinery to make most of the parts in an efficient and inexpensive manner. And I would guess right now that to put the pistol into production -- which by the way my original idea was about a thousand guns a month -- would probably cost in the ten million dollar range.

Well, this is pretty much answering all the questions. Although I rambled a little bit, but what do you want from me. I'm talking about things that happened forty years ago. And anything else you want to clarify, please call me. And I'll talk to you soon. Bye. "

[end of interview]

Besides the May 1971 Guns & Ammo article on the Gera Double there was also an article in the August 1971 issue of Gun World about the Gera Double, titled "The Double Image" by Tommy L. Bish. Two months later in the October 1971 issue of Gun World, page 6, there was a response to the article by Auto Mag Corp. Here is that response [emphasis added]:

## " SCATTER SHOTS

### PROTEST DEPARTMENT

In your article, " The Double Image." (August. '71, Tommy Bish states that Max Gera is the "...inventor and patentee of the .44 magnum auto pistol..." The reference to your June '71 edition makes it clear that Bish is referring to the .44 Auto Mag. Bish goes on to state that Gera sold the manufacturing rights to the .44 Auto Mag pistol to Auto Mag.

The facts are as follows: Harry W. Sanford, president of Auto Mag Corporation, had conceived how a magnum automatic pistol might be designed long before **Max Gera accepted employment in 1966 as a gunsmith with Harry W. Sanford Firearms**, a retail firearms and sporting goods store owned and operated by Mr. Sanford.

Following Mr. Sanford's direction, Gera aided in reducing Mr. Sanford's ideas to practice. In recognition of Gera's participation in the activity, **Mr. Sanford named Gera as co-inventor in the original patent application** dated May 10, 1969. On that same date, Gera executed a complete assignment of any interest which he might have in the original patent application to Mr. Sanford. At no time did Gera ever own the manufacturing rights to the .44 Auto Mag pistol.

All rights in the original patent application were assigned to Auto Mag Corporation by Harry W. Sanford, their sole owner.

Gerard D. Ognibene, Executive Vice President. Auto Mag Corporation, Pasadena, California.”

In early January of 2009 I was called by Mark Lovendale. Mark was the Vice President – Engineering & Manufacturing at Auto Mag from October 1970 to January 1971. Mark asked me if I would rewrite the Wikipedia article on the Auto Mag as he felt it was full of misinformation. I rewrote most of it and Mark helped me get it posted.

On January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009 I was contacted by Jon Gera. She said she had just started a search for her father Max. She hadn't seen him since 1982 and just saw my write-up about the Auto Mag on Wikipedia and wanted to know all she could about him. I sent her two copies of the book, Auto Mag the Pasadena Days as it contains a picture of Max. I sent one book for her and one for her brother, Max Jr. In the next few weeks Jon would contact me with new information she had found out about Max. One story was that Harry Sanford had scoured all of Europe for the best gunsmith to design the Auto Mag for him and that was how he found Max. This story was from Wally Sanford. The next story she told me was from a supposed old friend of Max's. This fairy tale was about a murder scene found at Max's apartment. I told her that this was a sad way to end the search for Max.

Late in the evening of February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009 I announced to the wife that I was going to bed. I was later woken up by her shaking me and thrusting the phone in my face. She said, “You'll take this call, it's Max Gera.” Max explained that he has a friend in Belgium who had seen the new Wikipedia write-up on the Auto Mag and emailed Max to see if he was the same guy.

The conversation was a frenzy of questions and answers. I told Max of my contact with his daughter. He was excited and said it was O.K. to call her and give her his phone number. I called Jon and gave her the good news. She was speechless. She called Max and within a week or so she flew to New York City to meet her long lost daddy.

Max called and told me how very very happy he was to be in touch with his daughter after so many years. Not to take advantage of a situation, but not to miss an opportunity I asked Max if he would agree to do an interview with me. He agreed and I sent him a copy of my book to review before the interview.

We spoke on the phone for over an hour on several occasions before the interview. Max revealed that he first named the gun Auto Max. Somebody later said it should be Auto Mag. Max said that was O.K. because the MA in Mag would be for Max and the G in Mag would be for Gera. Mark Lovendale had claimed that when he started at Auto Mag there were no blueprints or drawings. Max insists that there was a complete set of drawings for the Auto Mag when he left Harry Sanford. Max said it is obvious by looking at the picture of the prototype Auto Mag on the cover of the March 1970 Guns & Ammo. The gun is burning a hole through an Auto Mag blueprint !

Max is a good cook and says “Don't burn the garlic!”

It stinks up the whole house !