

**20TH ANNIVERSARY COLLECTOR'S ISSUE**

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1996

**HANDGUNNER**

**AMERICAN**

# HANDGUNNER®

## .44

### AUTO-MAG

**Powerhouse!**  
Radical gas gun defines  
innovation!

**LOOK BACK**  
**20 YEARS OF**  
**HANDGUNNER**

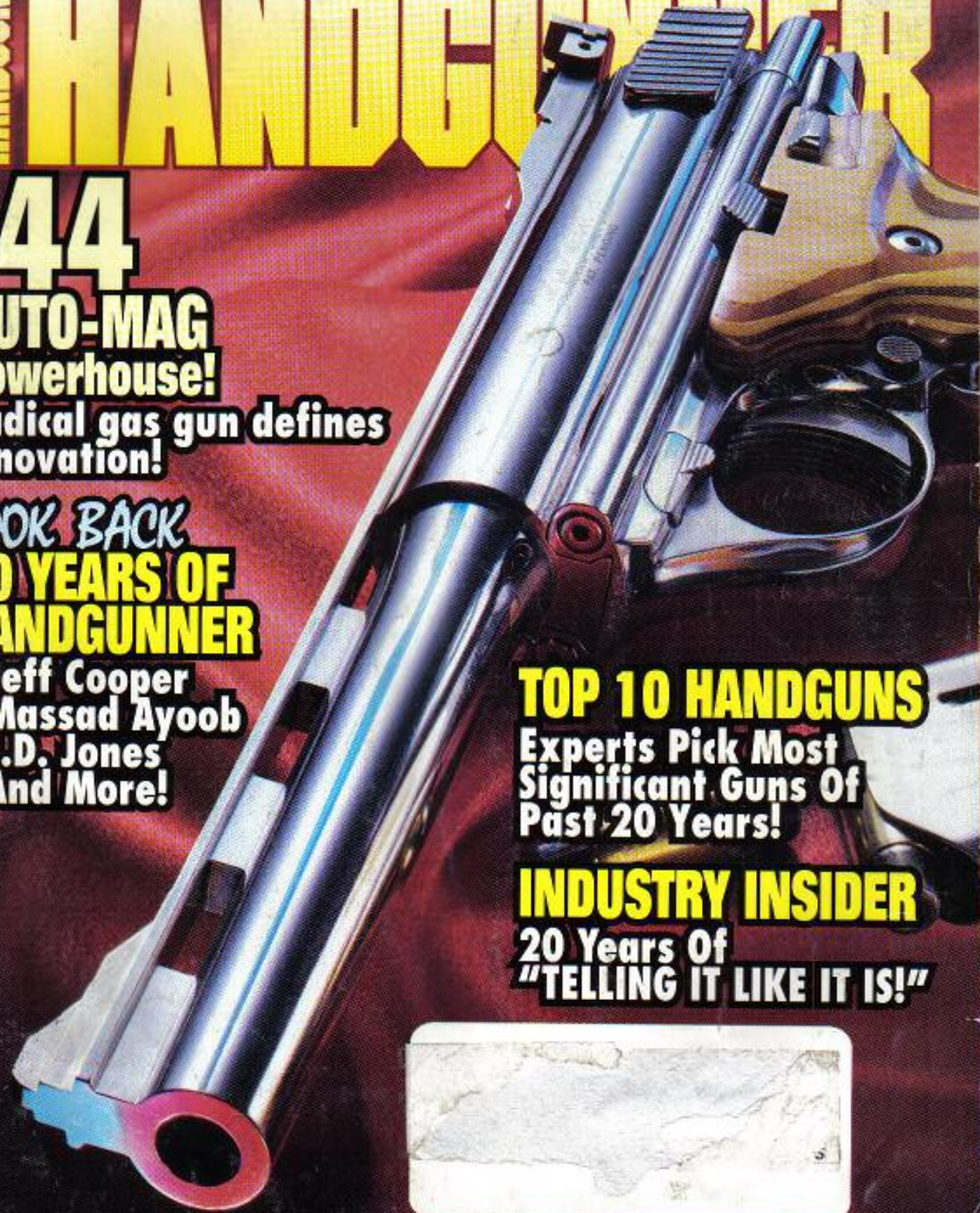
- Jeff Cooper
- Massad Ayoob
- J.D. Jones
- And More!

### TOP 10 HANDGUNS

Experts Pick Most  
Significant Guns Of  
Past 20 Years!

### INDUSTRY INSIDER

20 Years Of  
"TELLING IT LIKE IT IS!"



# AUTO-MAG!

Harry Sanford's futuristic .44 AMP pistol was ahead of its time in 1976. It still is.

By Cameron Hopkins    Photos by Ichiro Nagata

**M**ore bold and significant new handgun designs have been introduced in the last 20 years of *American Handgunner's* existence than during any other comparable period in the four centuries since the first primitive "hand cannons" were used in Medieval battles.

The 1976-1996 era brought forth the first polymer pistol—H&K's VP70Z, not the Glock 17—as well as a panoply of brilliant new designs from manufacturers large and small. To fully comprehend just how productive these years have been, thumb to page 64 for our story on the significant new handguns of the last 20 years.

The task of selecting the one handgun to grace our 20th anniversary cover was daunting. As the editor-in-chief of *American Handgunner*, I carefully considered which handgun would best symbolize this incredibly innovative era. Symbolize is the key word: our 20th anniversary cover gun would have to embody both the spirit and the genius that characterizes the American handgun industry.

Note well the modifier "American." This is the *American Handgunner* and absolutely no consideration was given to any European Wunderrmine or other foreign-made gun for the cover of our anniversary issue. As good as they may be, there would be no SIG, Beretta, Glock or H&K on the most important cover since the 10th anniversary (which, incidentally, featured a Ruger GP-100).

## Cover Gun Honor

The orchestration of our anniversary issue began over a year ago. The decision for the cover gun was anything but hasty. Finally, I settled on the one gun that best represents everything that this magazine and the handgun industry stands for: the Auto Mag.

The Auto Mag was the first stainless steel auto pistol ever made. This virtually hand-built gun was also the first magnum

auto pistol ever made.

The Auto Mag represented a huge landmark in handgun design, featuring a short recoil rotary bolt system. Every single part, including all the internals, were made entirely of stainless steel.

Even the sear was machined from solid stainless!

The Auto Mag was invented by maverick gun designer Harry Sanford who went on to found AMT, the company that popularized the use of stainless steel in the manufacture of auto pistols. The first



**Auto Mags copped a bad reputation for reliability, but it was due to improper handloads more than the gun itself.**

stainless steel 1911, the AMT Hardballer, was made by Harry as was the little AMT Back-Up. In fact, Harry has never made a firearm out of anything but corrosion-resistant steel.

Harry's infectious love of guns was every bit as important a consideration in choosing the Auto Mag for our anniversary cover as the gun itself.

The original Auto Mag fired a brand-new cartridge called the .44 AMP, a .308 rifle case trimmed down to 1.30" OAL using .429" bullets. Its ballistics featured a 240 gr. bullet at 1,300 fps and a 200 grainer at 1,500 fps. Factory ammunition was made in Mexico by Cartuchos Deportivos Mexico (CDM). Subsequent-

ly, a .357 AMP round was developed, which was simply the .44 AMP case necked-down to .357".

There were some .22 and .25 caliber wildcat Auto Mags made for noted firearms experimenter Kent Lomont as well as some highly collectible versions made for Lee Jurras of Super-Vel fame.

Auto Mags command collector prices today. An ad in a recent *Gun List* featured a mint condition "Pasadena Auto Mag" with the most common barrel length, 6½", in .44 AMP with one box of ammo for \$2,350. A custom-order Jurras gun, like a "Grizzly" or a "Backpacker" could easily fetch \$4,000.

The rarest of all Auto Mags are the three Bi-Centennial Models that never went into production. Ornately engraved and intended to be limited to 200 guns serial numbered USA 1776 to USA 1976, the run never was made due to business reasons.

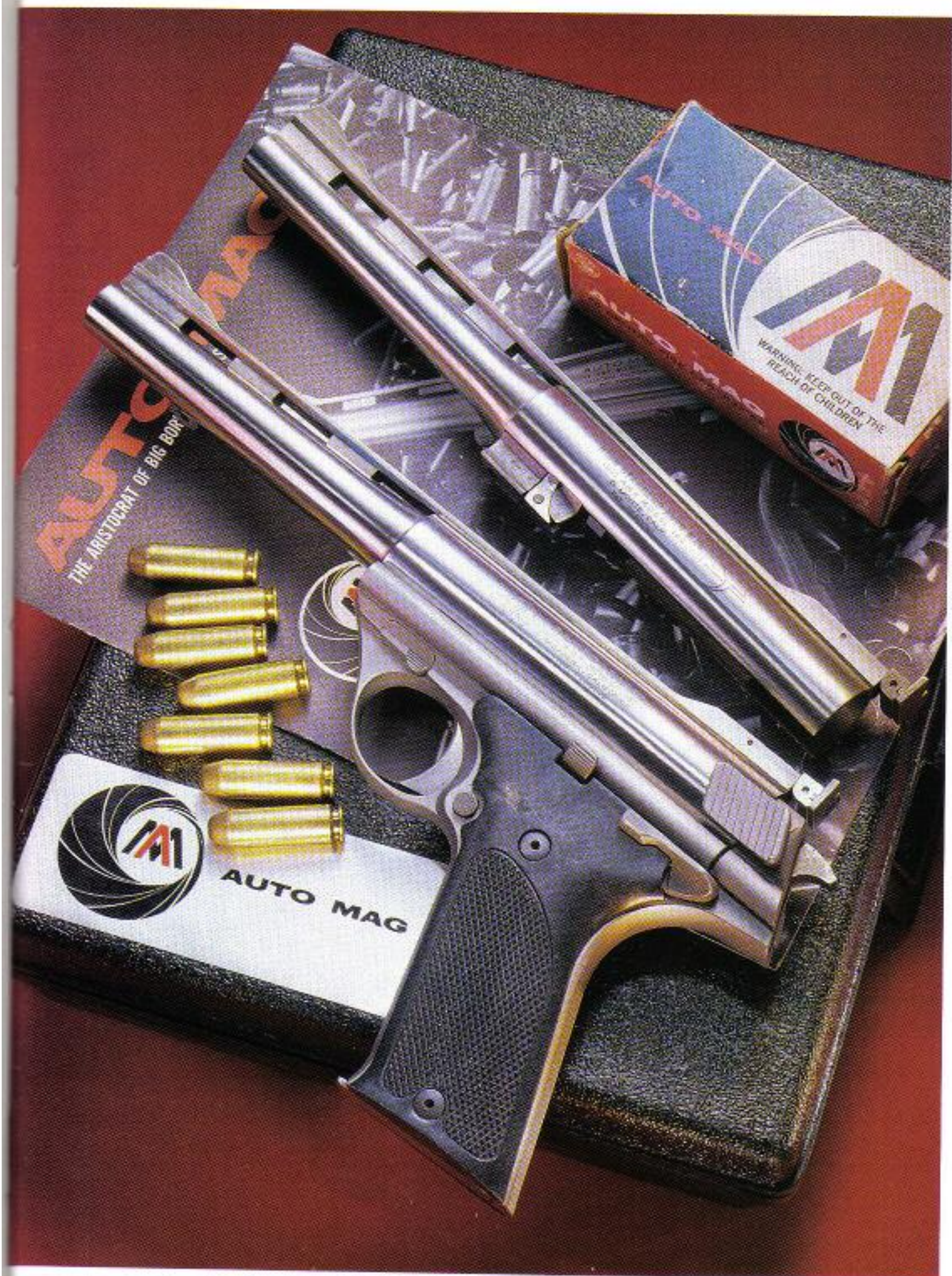
Serial number USA 1777 belongs to Larry Grossman, Harry's longtime friend and AMT's R&D expert since shortly after the Auto Mag's inception.

Harry owns USA 1976, and the first gun, USA 1776, is in the hands of an Auto Mag collector. Grossman estimates the value of a Bi-Centennial Auto Mag at \$30,000.

## Shooting An Auto Mag

Auto Mags unfairly earned a reputation for unreliability. The problem was not the guns, but reloaded ammunition—invariably handloaded too hot. The mechanism of the Auto Mag made it sensitive to the recoil impulse generated by the cartridge.

"The Auto Mag is a short recoil rotary system," Grossman explained. "When it's feeding rounds from the magazine, the bolt gets to a certain point, approximately .400" before it closes, then it rotates to the right and locks into the barrel with six locking lugs. After it fires, the barrel and bolt come back until the barrel stops against the frame when it hits what's





called an 'accelerator block' which gives the bolt an extra boost to come back.

"If you took an Auto Mag with an 8 1/2" barrel, you didn't need the accelerator block because the cartridge developed enough energy inside the barrel to cycle the gun."

### Auto Mag History

Harry fired up the original Auto Mag Corporation in 1971 with four investors. Grossman came to work for Harry at the fledgling company as a machinist and stayed with him through the different periods in Harry's colorful gunmaking career.

Colorful is a polite way of saying "sporadic failures." Harry has been bankrupt at least once that I was able to determine. He manufactured guns under six different corporations, but never was there any hint of unscrupulous business practices involved in his insolvencies.

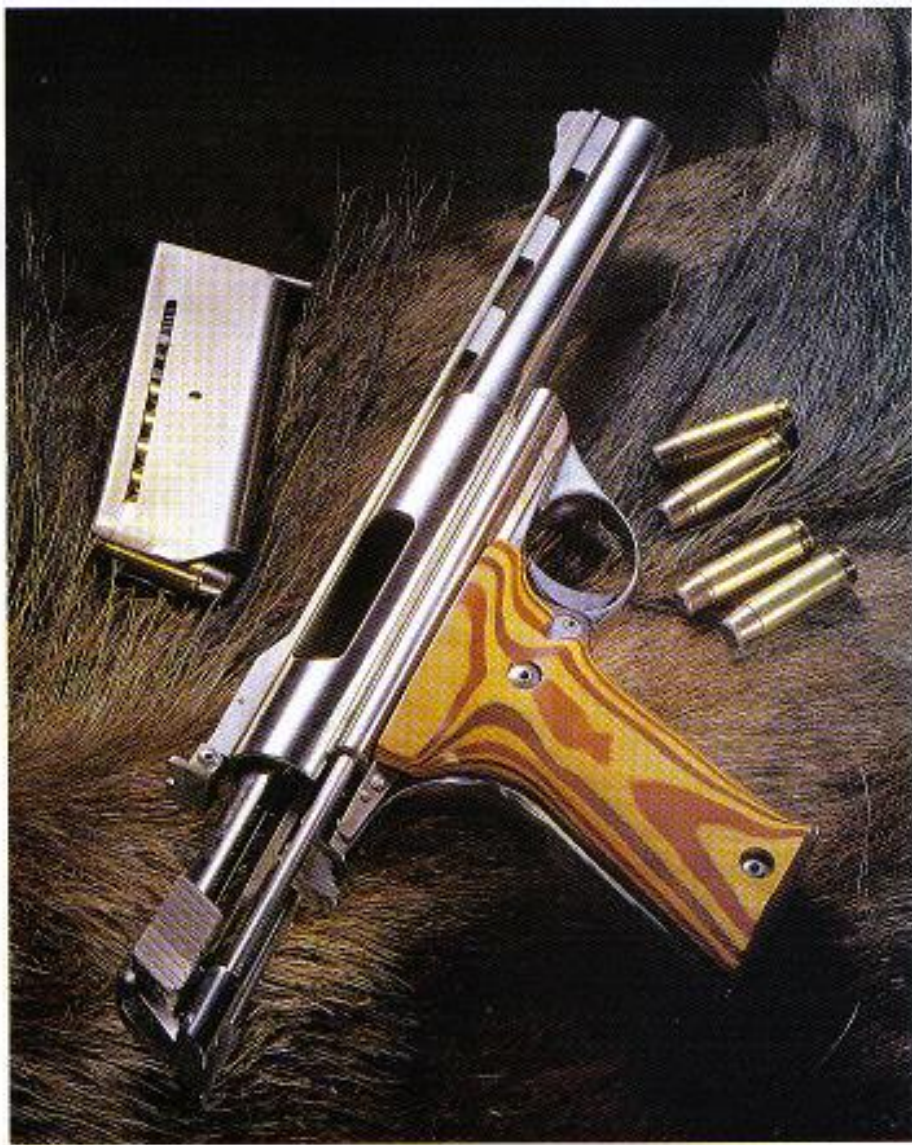
Harry's disappointments were always due to the same thing—running out of money by doing stupid things like not firing employees when times were tough.

"Harry treated his employees like family," Grossman said. "Even when times were rough, he'd do everything he could to keep things running and not lay anyone off. It might not have been the smart business decision, but that's just the way Harry was."

When a venture floundered, Harry rebounded with characteristic grit. After the Auto Mag Corp. went belly up, Harry bought the patents to the pistol he invented and, together with a partner, began manufacturing the Auto Mag under the corporate name TDE in El Monte, Calif. (TDE had been a defunct corporation of Harry's partner. It stood for Trust Deed Estates.)

Subsequently, TDE also manufactured Auto Mags in a North Hollywood location. Harry made some Auto Mags for High Standard which were marked accordingly. Finally, some Auto Mags

*The Auto Mag's bolt (above) rotated into battery via a unique accelerator block. The entire gun was machined from solid stainless steel. Today Auto Mags command collector prices. (Opposite, right) Clint Eastwood accepts an Auto Mag from inventor Harry Sanford after "Sudden Impact" came out.*



were made by a transitional entity called TDE/OMC. OMC stood for Ordnance Manufacturing Corporation.

The first Auto Mags, known to collectors as "Pasadena guns," were the best. Machined from billets of stainless steel, the Pasadena-made guns today command premium prices because of their quality, according to firearm expert and author Steve Fjestad who publishes the *Blue Book Of Used Gun Values*.

But the Auto Mag was unprofitable. The last Auto Mag was shipped in 1982 by Harry's new company, AMT. The last 35 guns were serial numbered LAST 1 through LAST 35 and, according to Fjestad, were the poorest quality of all the Auto Mags.

"A unique handgun, the Auto Mag has never been a commercial success due to high manufacturing costs and initial functioning problems, mostly attributed to handloading," Fjestad wrote.

"We used to joke that we should have rubber-banded a hundred dollar bill to every Auto Mag because we just lost money on them," Grossman recalled with a grim chuckle. "Harry sold them for \$295 retail and I think it cost us more than that to make them."

Less than 10,000 Auto Mags were manufactured in total.

### Farewell To A Shooter

A lifelong shooter and hunter, Harry

Sanford loved guns. He went to the range almost every day of the week, not to test-fire his wares, but just to shoot. Harry was active in the San Gabriel Gun Club since 1947. He was club president in 1967 and executive officer since 1990. If you've ever been involved with "gun club politics," you know just how dedicated you have to be!

I went to the San Gabriel range with Harry once, thinking he would roll out several different models of his own guns for us to shoot. You know, impress the visiting editor with a .22 Magnum Auto Mag II or a flame-breathing .50 AE Auto Mag V.

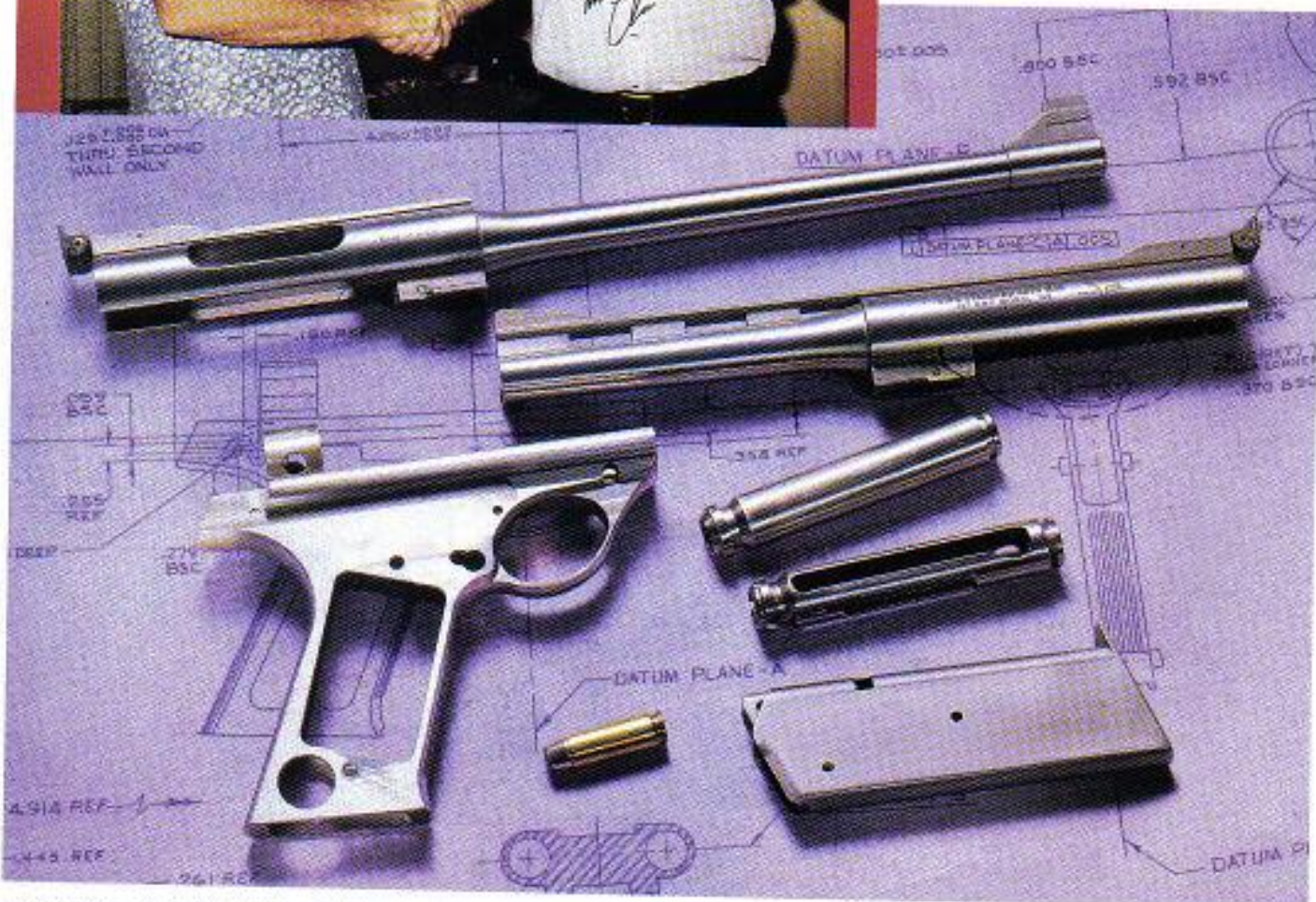
Wrong. That day Harry felt like shooting a Colt Gold Cup, a Smith & Wesson Model 29, and a round of trap with his Perazzi, so those were the guns we shot.

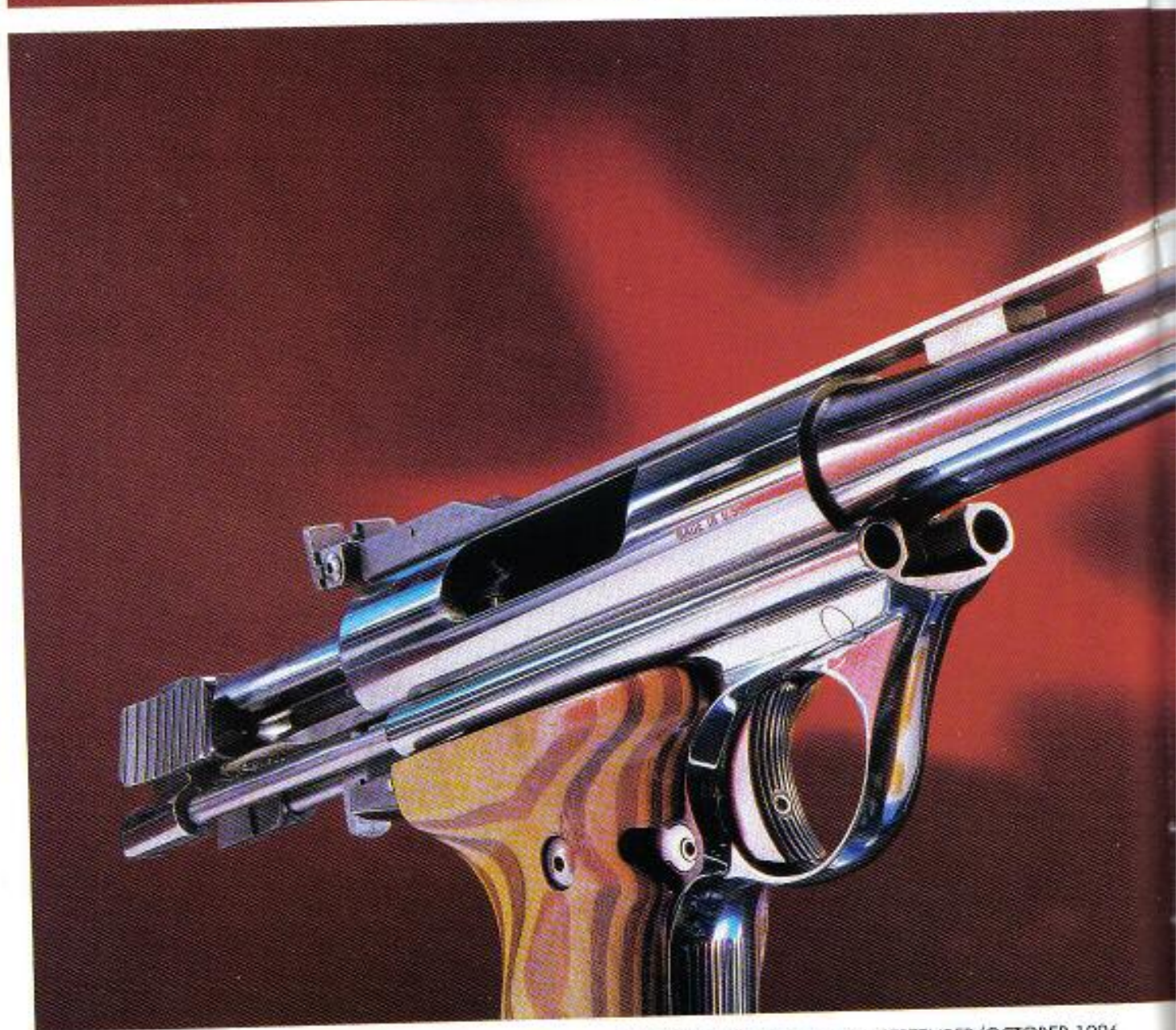
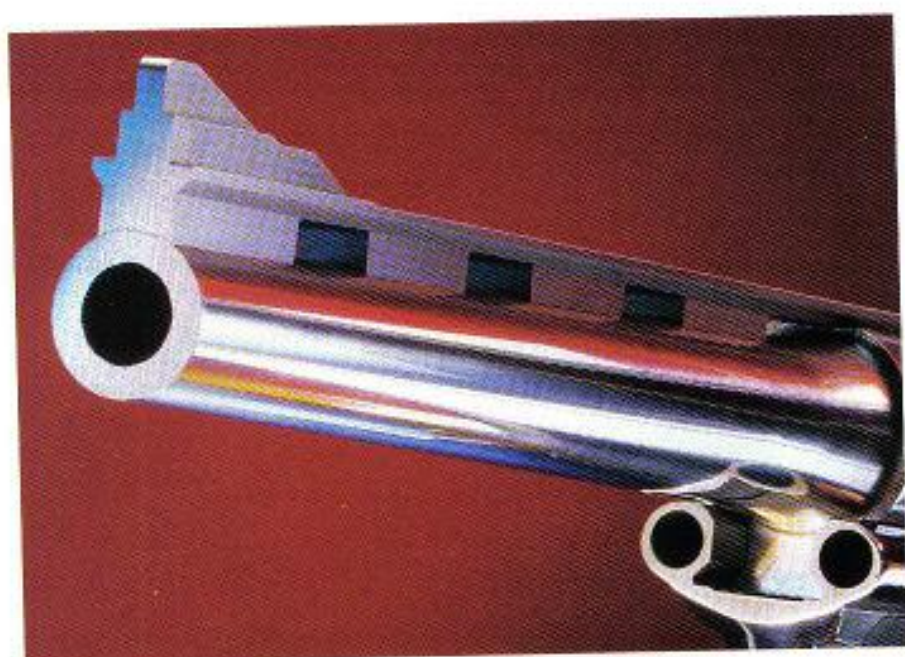
I cannot think of another gun manufacturer who would trot out his personal guns to shoot with a visiting editor. Harry didn't give a damn about schmoozing, he wanted to go shooting!

I pulled Harry's chain for years after that because I beat him, 25 to 24, with his own Perazzi on a round of trap. "Hey, Harry, let's shoot with that fancy Perazzi of yours!" I would tease.

Precisely five days before I was scheduled to drive to the AMT factory in Irwindale, Calif., to interview Harry for this article, he died of a sudden heart attack. He was 65.

Harry was a bull of a man, barrel-chested with a lean, powerful physique.

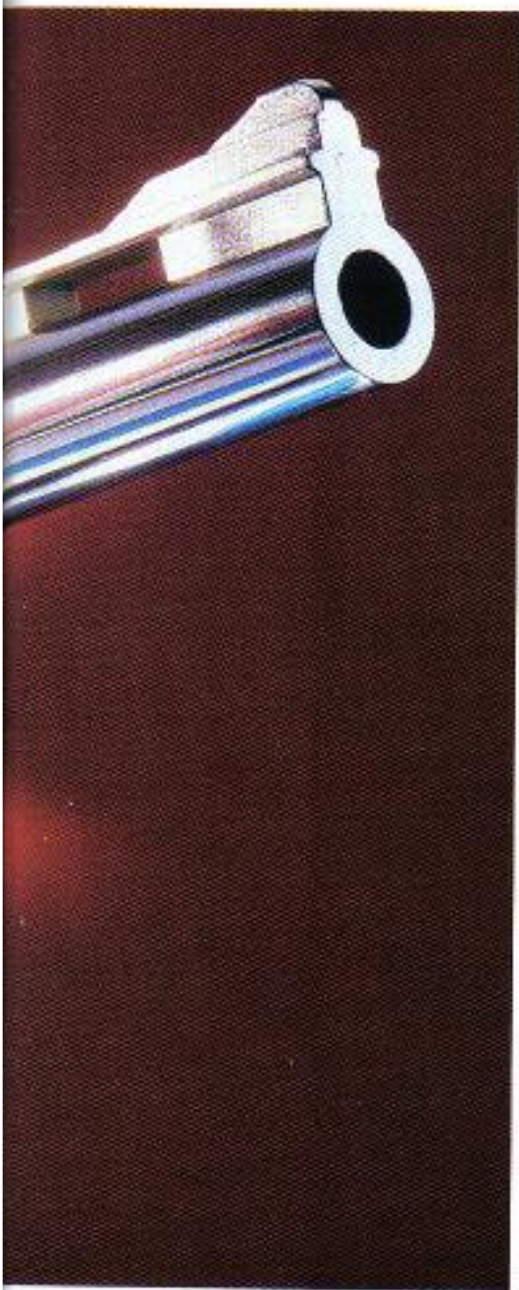






The barrel marking above indicates a late production AMT gun. The best Auto Mags were made in Pasadena by the original Auto Mag Corp. in the early '70s.

The most common barrel length was 6 1/2" with vent ribs, but other lengths and shapes were available by custom order.




Harry kept a set of barbells by his desk and whenever he talked on the phone, he would pump iron. His handshake was as firm and strong as his word. If Harry was feeling spunky that day, he could put a crush-grip on your hand that would literally make you wince.

Harry didn't drink or smoke. He ate a healthy diet years before it was trendy. He had no history of heart disease. It sounds trite, but his death was sudden and unexpected.

Harry's longtime friend and hunting companion, H.L. "Bill" Richardson, delivered the eulogy at Harry's overflowing funeral. Bill told several anecdotes about Harry, but perhaps the most poignant was about the time Harry and Bill were knocking around Monterey, Calif., a quaint seaside town in central California.

"Harry and I bumped into Clint Eastwood. Clint had just featured the Auto Mag in his movie *Sudden Impact*. He invited us to play golf with him the following day on Cypress Point. Some men would kill to play that famous, exclusive course—especially if invited by such a well-known celebrity. Harry's comment was, 'Nah, Bill and I got a

game some other place,'" Harry's friend recalled.

That was Harry. Unpretentious, down-to-earth. And arguably the last American gun designer with the spirit of rugged individualism that makes this country—and this magazine—great. 

*Readers should be reassured that AMT is continuing in business with its extensive line of quality-made stainless steel firearms. Nadine Sanford, Harry's high school sweetheart, whom he married in 1954, will operate AMT to, as she said, "Keep Harry's dream alive."*

*AMT manufactures the Back-Up .380 and Back-Up .45 as well as their 1911 series, and several chamberings of Auto Mag descendants such as the .22 Magnum Auto Mag II and .30 Carbine Auto Mag III.*

*Harry's last project was a stainless steel rifle action with an amalgamation of the best features from time-proven designs such as the Mauser 98 and pre-'64 Model 70.*

*For a catalog of AMT wares, you can contact the company at 6226 Santos Diaz St., Dept. AH, Irwindale, CA 91702; phone: (818) 334-6629.*

A detailed photograph of a semi-automatic handgun, likely a Glock, resting on a piece of rough, reddish-brown rock. The handgun is positioned diagonally, with its barrel pointing towards the upper left. A magazine is placed horizontally in front of the handgun, and five brass-cased rounds are scattered in a fan shape below it. The background is a solid, dark red color. The entire scene is framed by a thin white border with rounded corners.

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