

The Fascinating .44 AutoMag

It's been 21 years since the last production run was completed, but its mystique lives on.

By Rick Maples

In the last few years there have been several articles written about the .44 AutoMag that have again sparked interest in this fascinating pistol. One thing that makes the AutoMag so interesting is that it is the first production stainless steel, semiauto magnum pistol. Its history, though, is somewhat checkered, considering that the various models have seven different manufacturing addresses.

Less than 9,000 total AutoMags were made between 1971 and 1982—a small quantity for a production pistol. The most common are chambered for the .44 AMP (AutoMag Pistol). Less common is the .357 AMP, and the rarest is the .41 JMP (Jurra's Magnum Pistol). The .357 AMP and .41 JMP case is simply a necked-down .44 AMP. This enables one to merely switch barrels and ammo in order to shoot all three

calibers from the same gun. There is no need to change the bolt, the magazine or anything else. There were also special-order barrel lengths available in 8.5 and 10.5 inches, and these came without the ventilated rib.

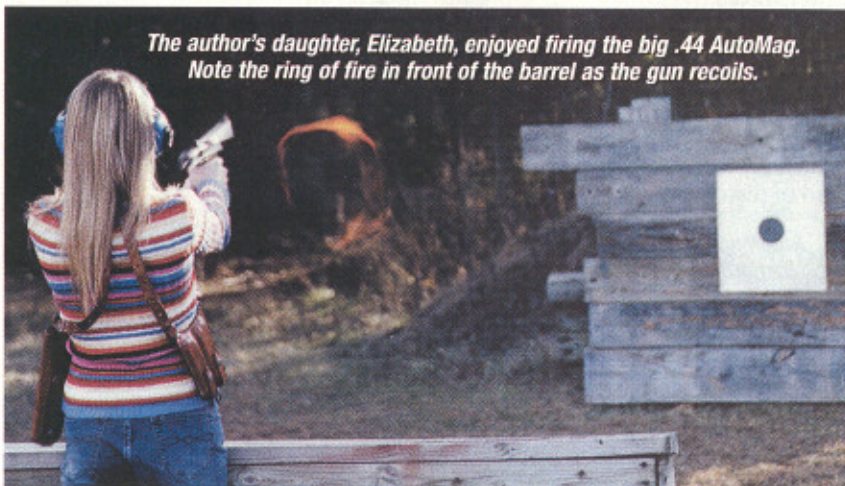
The .44 AMP round is not the same as Dirty Harry's .44 Remington Magnum round, although Dirty Harry did use a .44 AutoMag in one of his movies. The .44 AMP is basically a rimless .44 Magnum, but the AutoMag does not suffer from the barrel/cylinder-gap gas escape from which revolvers suffer. Thus, the AutoMag will generate slightly higher velocities than a comparably barreled revolver at the same pressures. The AutoMag pistol requires proper tuning to stay in good shape, and it must be well lubed.

AutoMags are in various collections throughout the world, and most indi-

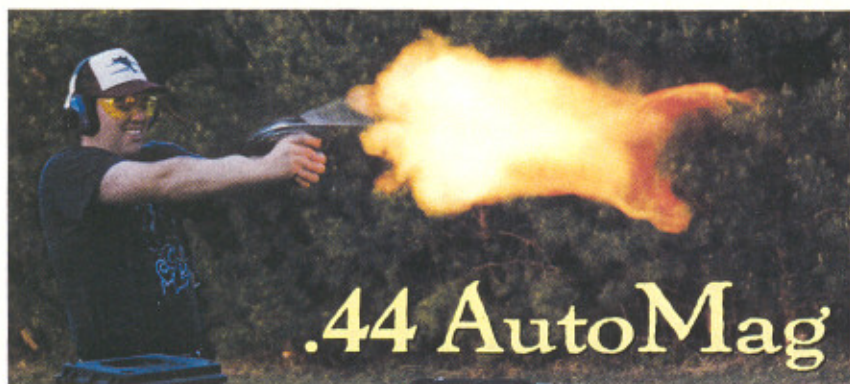
viduals only possess one or two. AutoMag collectors seem to be very private about it. Combine this with the small quantity produced, and you see why few AutoMags are found for sale.

When you first see an AutoMag in person, it is quite impressive. It is solidly built of stainless steel with a ventilated rib running down the 6.5-inch barrel. The fully adjustable rear sight is mounted on the barrel, and that makes caliber conversions even easier since you don't have to change sight settings when changing calibers. The AutoMag is big and futuristic-looking even by today's standards. The few screws that are used are hex heads of the 3/32 and 5/64 thread, and there were two Allen wrenches of the appropriate size supplied with the pistol originally. The bolt is similar to that used on the M16 and features six lugs that lock into recesses in the barrel extension.

The author's daughter, Elizabeth, enjoyed firing the big .44 AutoMag. Note the ring of fire in front of the barrel as the gun recoils.



You don't have to get them all in the black to enjoy shooting this pistol. With practice, though, anyone can learn to shoot these big magnums well.



.44 AutoMag

The author's son, David, unleashes the AutoMag. Firing the .44 AMP stoked with a 240-grain bullet over 22 grains of H110, it sure puts on a fireworks show.

Truly an aristocrat of handguns, I was not content with just owning and handling a .44 AutoMag. There is something neat about firing a magnum semiauto pistol. The recoil is much less than one would think. This hefty pistol absorbs a lot of recoil because of the semiauto action. The noise is very loud, however. The flame coming out the barrel is something to behold. It can even be seen in broad daylight. To me, the more kick, the more noise and the more fire coming out the barrel, the more enjoyable the experience. The .44 AutoMag is my favorite handgun to shoot.

The first .44 AMP ammo I acquired was original and very expensive. Today, collector-quality boxes of original Norma .44 AMP can fetch upwards of \$125. But new empty brass is available from Starline, and new production ammo is now available from Cor-Bon. Reloading dies for the .44 AutoMag are available as well, although you may have to special-order them. Reloading makes the .44 AMP affordable to shoot, and since it's just plain fun to shoot, that's important. The AutoMag is a very accurate pistol as well.

As my friend the famous AutoMag expert Lee E. Jurras said in 1975, "The AutoMag is designed for the true handgun aficionado, a specialist handgun for the hunter desiring maximum performance in the field." And Mr. Jurras was correct. The AutoMag was made for the hunter. It was also very successful in metallic-silhouette shooting. The AutoMag could be used for self-defense, but there are better self-defense handguns to be had.

When you pick up this all-stainless

steel pistol, the first thing you notice is the long, thick grip that only fits large hands well. The 3.6 pounds is heavy but not too heavy. You insert the seven-round, single-stack, larger-than-normal magazine, and it takes extra effort to pull back the large bolt. You let the bolt go and notice that the gun dips a little from the force of chambering a cartridge. Now you are ready to fire.

You take a deep breath and slowly let a little bit out. The anticipation builds as you slowly pull the trigger. Then you hear a loud bang, the AutoMag rears upward, and you see a jet of flame coming out of the barrel. You let the rest of your breath out, put the gun on safe and look at the target 25 yards away. Now you are feeling confident, so off the safety comes, and you're ready to let go of the next six rounds. This time you feel the force of the bolt coming back and slamming forward. The next five rounds go in rapid succession. You look at the target, and you only got two of the last six in the black, but who cares? It was the fun of shooting this most impressive gun that counts. Only now you notice a small crowd of people behind you wanting to ask, "What kind of pistol is that?"

AutoMag designer Harry Sanford (left) and Larry Grossman (who built the blank-firing version of the AutoMag) flank Clint Eastwood as he familiarizes himself with the .44 AutoMag used in the Dirty Harry movie Sudden Impact. (Larry Grossman photo)



Magnum pistols are loud; always wear eye and ear protection. Note the spent shell exiting the AutoMag while the bolt has already closed for the next shot.

As I tell all first-time AutoMag shooters, don't worry about hitting the bull's-eye, just be safe and enjoy shooting your .44 AutoMag. Accurate shooting will come with practice.

As mentioned above, approximately 9,000 AutoMags were manufactured from 1971 to 1982. However, from 1999 to 2000, Galena Industries, the company that bought AMT after its founder, Harry Sanford died, planned to make a run of 1,000 AutoMags to commemorate Harry Sanford's creation. These AutoMags were to be made from left-over parts. Unfortunately, Galena ran out of parts after only about 300 were completed, and the firm itself failed. The tooling and remaining parts were sold at auction soon after. The last MSRP was \$2,750. It seems doubtful that any more AutoMags will ever be made, mainly due to the high cost of manufacturing this intricate pistol. A fine firearm has passed into history. ■

