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Smith & Wesson New Model No. 3



Smith & Wesson New Model No. 3, opened

H. E.'s Smith & Wesson New Model No. 3

David Stroud

Large-frame, black-powder, single-action revolvers are historically associated with Texas Rangers.¹ The Smith & Wesson large-frame, single-action, top-break, New Model No. 3 Russian-caliber that was manufactured and cataloged from 1878 to 1908 is no exception.

The S&W No. 3 featured in this article was discovered and purchased in a San Antonio pawn shop by a part-time gun dealer about 1998. It has a four-digit serial number and non-factory, cut-barrel, ivory grips with carved "H.E." initials and is outfitted with a suspender shoulder holster stamped "Heiser HHH Make / Denver/125."² The identity of H.E. is not known.

- 1 Museums, history books, contemporary photographs, collections, and historical documentation. Note: Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum's Smith and Wesson collection isn't on display at this time (October 2008).
- 2 Jinks, Roy G., *History of Smith & Wesson*, 10th edition (North Hollywood, CA,: Beinfeld Publishing Inc., 1977), 59; Supica, Jim & Nahas, Richard, *Standard Catalog of Smith & Wesson*, 2nd edition (Iola, WI: Krause Publications), 61.



In 1870, Smith and Wesson began producing four “families” of large-frame, single-action, top-break revolvers to enable quicker loading and unloading. They seem “to be the most sought-after group of antique S&Ws,” for a number of reasons:^{3, 4}

First and foremost, the No. 3 was produced only during the time when the west was still considered wild.

Second, and not far behind, collectors like “first,” and the New Model No. 3 was the first metallic cartridge revolver with an “indisputably effect defensive round.”

Third, it was an Old West as well as international favorite.

Fourth, the New Model No. 3 provides S&W collectors multiple configurations.

Fifth, collectors like reading about the time period their prizes were used. There are numerous Smith & Wesson books and articles, as well as volumes of Old West histories for them to read.

Sixth, Smith & Wesson historical letters detailing factory shipment records of most Smith and Wesson revolvers are obtainable.⁵

The factory originally designated the New Model No. 3 as the .44 Single Action. However, the public called it the New Model No. 3, so that became the name for this last revolver in the series.

The New Model No. 3 was outfitted with Smith & Wesson monogrammed, black, hard-rubber grips until 1907, when walnut grips were introduced and S&W inlaid monograms became standard. The basic caliber was 44. The S&W Russian had a six-shot, fluted cylinder with either blue or nickel finish, a two-lined Smith & Wesson address on top of the 6 ½-inch barrel, and serial numbers from 1-1008.^{6, 7} Soon after introduction, shorter barrels were available in lengths of 3 ½ to 8 inches.⁸ Standard grips were available in black or red hard rubber or smooth walnut.

The gun featured in this article is a New Model Number 3, .44 Single Action, “Rack and Gear Extractor Variation, caliber .44 S&W Russian.” It was shipped from the factory on March 28, 1879, to M.W. Robinson in New York City, who was Smith and Wesson’s “largest distributor.” The gun is labeled a “standard New Model No. 3,” with a 6½-inch barrel, blued finish, and monogrammed, black, hard-rubber grips.⁹ Therefore, the original grips of H.E.’s New Model No. 3 were not ivory

3 Jinks, 92.

4 Supica and Nahas, 72. American: 1870-1874, Russian: 1871-1878, Schofield: 1875-1877, New Model, No. 3: 1878-1912. Those shipped after 1898 are still “antiques,” as all the frames were made before 1898.

5 Supica & Nahas, 72. Smith & Wesson historical letters are obtained for an nominal fee by writing Roy G. Jinks, C/O Office of Smith & Wesson, Springfield, Massachusetts, and providing the type of Smith, serial number 3, and as much information as possible. It is most helpful to provide a photograph of the weapon with the letter.

6 Supica & Nahas, 72; Jinks, Roy G., 92. Jinks reports the standard New Model No. 3 was available with black or red hard-rubber grips.

7 Flayderman, Norm, *Flayderman’s Guide to Antique American Firearms...and their values*, 8th edition (Iola, WI: Krause Publications), 20.

8 Jinks, 92.

9 Supica & Nahas, 72 & 80. Early two-line address is “Smith & Wesson Springfield Mass U.S.A. Pat’d Jan 17 & 24, 65. July 11 65” above “Aug. 24, 69. Apr. 20.75. Feb.20. & Dec. 18. 1877 REISSUE July 25. 1871.” H.E.’s No. 3’s barrel is shortened so the front sight’s back is atop “Jan 1.” Later address: “SMITH & WESSON SPRINGFIELD MASS USA.”

and had no “special” marking on the barrel’s side to indicate a shorter barrel. Also, Smith and Wesson did not manufacture a New Model No. 3 with a barrel length of 3 6/8 inches, so H.E.’s New Model No. 3 barrel was shortened by a non-factory craftsman, most likely a blacksmith.¹⁰ H.E.’s No. 3 shows no sign of ever having a nickel finish.

But why would someone—probably H.E.—want to shorten the barrel of his New Model No. 3? An excellent clue is the Heiser shoulder-holster #125 in which the gun was resting and fit “like a glove” when purchased years ago in that aforementioned San Antonio Pawn shop.



Heiser holster

Hermann H. Heiser, a native of Alternburg, Saxony, was considered “the indisputable leader” among “superior gunleather elements as a specialty line.”¹¹ Heiser had been making saddles and holster in Denver since the 1850s and was so famous by 1878 he “felt compelled to register his “Triple H” trademark with the state.¹¹ The stamped “125” indicates the holster’s style, in which the suspenders are secured, crossed in the back by oval leather marked, “E. VOMHOFE.”¹²

Why might someone, maybe H.E., want a shoulder holster? Even when the west was wild, some towns, even in Texas, passed laws forbidding guns. Therefore, if someone wished to “pack,” he had to carry concealed. A shoulder holster certainly hinders a hurried draw, especially if the revolver is long-barreled in a full-sized holster. But a short barrel? In a smaller, split holster? Tilted with the butt forward? If the barrel is rotated forward and downward quickly, all of the casing will be extracted. A slow rotation will allow the shooter to stop just as the casing begins to elevate and, then, only the empty casings can be removed and replaced.

10 Jinks, Roy G., *Smith and Wesson factory records*, March 27, 2007; Supica & Nahas, 19.

The special-ordered barrel mark is on the barrel’s side due to lack of space at its usual place, & Smith & Wesson historical letter 25 October 2997. Also, the majority of handgun collectors agree Blacksmiths’ most often shortened barrels, and those appearing factory short had to have been shortened by craftsmen.

11 Rattenbury, Richard, C., *Packing Iron: Gunleather of the Frontier West* (Millwood, NY: Zon International Publishing Company, 1993), 181.

12 *Holster 125* appears to have originally been a belt holster, altered for the E. VOMHOFE suspenders with “MAKER” above the dealer’s address, which is too worn to be read.



How would a New Model No. 3, delivered to M.W. Robinson in New York City, find its way to San Antonio? We'll never know for sure, but a historical hint is that weapon dealers shipped their guns to fellow dealers in other states. German immigrant Charles Hummel, gun maker and dealer at 275 (now 270) Commerce Street in San Antonio, was "one of the largest gun dealers" in Texas.¹³

As previously stated, there are two reasons the four families of the New Model No. 3 have attracted collectors: the historical time period and the men and women who used the guns. A few of the more famous were:

Virgil Earp, lawman

Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild West Show star and Medal of Honor winner (recanted)¹⁴

Annie Oakley, performer with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show

Dallas Stoudenmier, Texas Ranger before El Paso

Frank and Jessie James, bank robbers and gunmen

Bob Ford, killer of Mr. Howard

Pat Garrett, killer of Billy the Kid

Bob and Cole Younger, James Gang Bank Robbers

John Wesley Hardin, most infamous Texas gunman.¹⁵

So, who was H.E.? Lawman, outlaw, gambler, banker . . . or maybe, like Dallas Stoudenmier, a Texas Ranger? Since there is no master list of Texas Rangers, we may never know.

13 Hirsch, Chris, *The Texas Gun Trade: A Guide to the Guns Made or Sold in the Lone Star State, 1780-1899* (Woonsocket, RI: Andrew Mowbray Inc, 2008), 83-88.

14 Buffalo Bill's Medal of Honor was revoked and his name removed from the roll on June, 16, 1916, because the Medal of Honor was a military award, and he was a civilian scout serving with soldiers when he performed heroically during an Indian battle.¹⁵ Special Collector's Edition, Smith & Wesson Handguns, 2000; Taffin, John, Smith & Wesson's Magnificent Model 3, 32; Wilson, Jim, *Famous Shooters and Their Smith & Wessons*, 64-65.

15 R.L. Wilson with Greg Martin, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: An American Legend* (Chartwell Books, Inc. 1998), 21; Rattenbury, *The Regiment the Stars Fell On*, 151, 15-154.