

## HISTORY OF THE LEGENDARY SMITH & WESSON KIT GUN

**\*\* THE MOST PERFECT REVOLVER EVER DESIGNED \*\***

by Tom Clapper

The origin of the term "kit gun" came about many years ago when the need was felt for a small, accurate .22 cal revolver that could be packed easily in a hunting or fishing kit. Such a gun would be ideal for bagging small game, snake protection, economical plinking fun or in an emergency, self defense. Smith & Wesson fulfilled this need with a series of small-frame, adjustable-sight high quality revolvers with 2 and 4 inch barrels.

### This is their story ....

It all began back in 1896 with the development of a series of revolvers S&W called the "hand ejectors". The main feature was a cylinder which swung out to the left side for loading and ejecting cartridges. The first of these to be produced, with a small frame size, was known as the "I" frame. It was first chambered for the .32 S&W Long cartridge. This initial revolver was manufactured from 1896 to 1903, and was incrementally improved over the following years. Production of the various .32 I-frames continued until World War II halted production temporarily.

In 1910, a San Francisco gun dealer, Phil Bekeart, discussed with S&W the possibility of a .22 long rifle target revolver built on the .32 I-frame. He was so convinced that this would be a good seller that he prevailed on the company to build and sell him 1,000 guns. Accordingly, S&W tooled up, and by the spring of 1911, they began production. However, only 292 of these ".22/32" Target Models were completed and sold, as demand did not meet the expectations of Mr. Bekeart. In fact, additional production was not initiated until 1914. The Bekeart guns, now offered in the S&W catalog, represented the first marriage of the .22 caliber and the small I-frame.

In 1934, in response to some inquiries as to the possibility of a shorter-barreled .22 LR small frame revolver as a handy take-along for hunters and fishermen in their travel kits, Smith and Wesson crafted a prototype. This gun, numbered 527712, was kept in-house by a member of the Wesson family. Other prototypes might possibly have been made. Actual production started in 1936. These were built on the I-frame, and featured 4" barrels and target sights. Stock configurations varied,

with three styles. These were round butt regular checkered, rebated-frame extended square butt checkered (Regulation Police type), and Bekeart-style extended square butt "two screw" checkered stocks that fully enclosed the rear grip strap. The first gun bore serial number 530,003 in the .32 Hand Ejector series. It was called the .22/32 Kit Gun. Production continued until World War II, with the last serial numbers of the "pre-war" guns probably coming in the 529,450 to 534,600 range, although the opinions of experts vary. It should be noted that S&W did not produce complete guns with sequentially progressive serial numbers, nor did they ship them, necessarily, in serial number order. It's been estimated that anywhere from 1325 to 1500 "pre-war" kit guns were assembled from 1936 to 1940.

Some completed guns were not shipped until after the war, at which point they were upgraded with the new hammer safety block and shipped with a combination of pre-war and post-war features. These guns, known as "transition" guns are quite collectible and valuable today. Interestingly, some gun dealers who received these pre-war/post-war guns rejected them in favor of newly-manufactured guns, not realizing, of course, that they were being blessed with future collector prizes!



**S&W Pre War Transitional**

Following the war, production started anew on the Kit Guns, beginning at serial number 551,123 of the 32 Hand Ejector series. The numbers were intermixed with the .32 guns' serial numbers. These first post-war guns used pre-war frames, but incorporated newer components including the now-standard hammer block safety.

### 1953 Ushers in the Final Standard and most significant .22 cal Kit Gun Design



**S&W Post War Transitional**

In 1953, a new series of Kit Guns was produced. The official designation was "22/32 Kit Gun, Model of 1953". These differed from previous production in having a new "I" frame with a coiled mainspring and micro-click sights. They had 4 screws, coil mainsprings, larger trigger guards and larger grip frames like the new "J-frame" revolvers then being produced for personal defense purposes. This began a separate serial number series starting with number 101. This serial number series continued until October, 1968, when the serial numbers had progressed to number 136,465.



**S&W "I" Frame Kit Gun**

*Comparison of the "I" Frame to the "J" Frame*



**S&W "J" Frame Kit Gun**

The top side plate screw was authorized for elimination on December 13, 1955. This change was phased in gradually between serial number 11,000 approximately 14,000.

It was in this Model of 1953 series that a 2" barreled version was offered for the first time by S&W.

In 1957, Smith & Wesson renamed its repertoire of revolvers with numbers, and the Kit Gun became the Model 34. The

model number was stamped in the frame side of the yoke hinge.

A significant change came about in October, 1960 when the Model 34 Kit Gun was produced using the complete "J" frame, which was slightly larger. It simplified manufacturing, and the change was implemented at serial number 70,000. These J-frame revolvers are stamped "Model 34-1". A new "M" serial prefix series was started in 1969, beginning with serial M1. An extremely rare bunch of about 15 guns, chambered in .22 LR and with fixed "groove" rear sights, were crafted in March of 1972. Only four were completely assembled and shipped.

The 1988 Model 34-2 models had a new yoke retention system.

An Airweight Kit Gun was introduced in November 1954 with pilot production beginning at serial number 5000. However, actual mass production and distribution did not begin until January 1958 with serial numbers starting at 32,244. This was first known as the Model of 1955, and later officially as the Model 43 22/32 Kit Gun Airweight. Since it was based on the J-frame rather than the I-frame from the beginning, there was never a 43-1 variation. Although there are perhaps 3 existing Model 43 examples with 2" barrels, it appears that the 43 production was officially only offered in the 3.5" barrel length. The Model 43 was discontinued in 1974.

In May of 1960, the .22/32 Model 51 Rimfire Magnum Kit Gun was introduced, chambered for the .22 Winchester Rimfire Magnum. The 51 was S&W's initial entry into .22 magnum Kit Gun production and began with serial number 52,637. These were made only on the J-frame and 4" barrels, produced until 1974. Both round and square butt along with blue and nickel variations were available, with the round butt type being the rarest. Models 43 and 51 were both numbered in the standard Model 34 series.

Smith & Wesson's first stainless Kit Gun, the Model 63, was offered from 1977 to 1998, in both square and round butt configurations. Both 4" and 2" barrels were produced with the 2" barrel being somewhat scarce.

A .22 magnum Model 650 stainless was introduced in 1983. The 650 is the only Kit Gun ever produced with a 3" bull bar-

rel, only in round butt and non adjustable frame rear sights. During its production years a "Special Order" with accompanying .22 LR cylinder was occasionally available. These highly desired 650 Special Order sets are estimated to be less than 100 produced. The 650 was discontinued in 1988.

Also in 1983 the stainless .22 magnum Model 651 was introduced and became the final classic Kit Gun production. A very scarce "Special Order" 651 with accompanying .22 LR cylinder was offered. This last Kit Gun model was built only with a 4" barrel until its last year of production. In 1999 a unique single 651 special manufacturing run of 1241 units was produced with a 2" barrel and an Uncle Mike round butt stock, making it one of the rarest of Kit Gun variations.

However, all good things must come to an end, and in 1991, the Model 34 Kit Guns were dropped from the Smith & Wesson lineup. Still, the demand for these small guns was such that S&W continued their J-frame model 63 and model 651 production for another 7 and 8 years respectively.

The 651 was discontinued in 1999 and is considered the FINAL YEAR of the true original Kit Gun production.

Good specimens of all the Kit Gun variations are in high demand today with some variations being very scarce. Prices have escalated rapidly in the last few years, now considered a true S&W Classic and suggested by many as being "The Finest Revolver Ever Designed".

*Life Member Tom Clapper has been with OGCA since 1970. He has graciously displayed his collections many times at the OGCA Annual Display Show and as a Featured Displayer.*

*Thank you, Tom, for setting the record straight on the Kit Gun!*



**Tom Clapper with his fabulous collection of S&W Kit Guns on display at the 2014 OGCA Annual Display Show.**



Post-war Kit Guns made after 1953 were offered with either 4" or 2" barrels. Both blue and nickel finishes were available, as well as round and square grip frames. The central "diamond" pattern of the checkered grips was eliminated in 1968. The pinned barrel was dumped in 1982. As a point of information, all Kit Guns since the beginning have chambers recessed for the cartridge rims. As a special note, these little gems were offered in many options and limited "Special Order" configurations. Rare and unusual examples appear on occasion.

These handy revolvers continued as a very popular gun with sportsmen, fishermen, plinkers, and anyone who just wanted a small, handy, accurate .22 revolver.

**May Meeting Stats**  
709 Tables inc. 26 Display  
494 Guest Passes, 145 Applicants  
**July Meeting Stats**  
690 Tables inc. 31 ROCS  
374 Guest Passes, 115 Applicants

**Thank You FEGA! Over 14 Tables were filled by the Firearm Engravers Guild of America at our May Meeting. You added a touch of class, and we enjoyed your artistry!**