

# MISTER MAGNUM – ELMER KEITH

*By Wes Dillon*

*Photos and article courtesy of James D. Julia Auctioneers, Fairfield, Maine - [www.jamesdjulia.com](http://www.jamesdjulia.com)*

To most firearms aficionados, Elmer Keith needs little introduction. Keith's iconic trademarks were his love for tobacco, his ten-gallon Stetson hat, right of center point of view, and practical expertise. Elmer became arguably the most famous and prolific gun writer in all of America over the span of his 60 year career. Even today his articles and books are widely reprinted with the content being as applicable, timely and entertaining as the day they were written.

Elmer Merrifield Keith was born March 8, 1899 in Hardin, Missouri, the heart of "Red Leg" guerrilla country during the Civil War. The Keith clan knew many of the legendary characters of the day and baby Elmer was fed tales of gunfighters, outlaws and cowboys while in the cradle, instead of Mother Goose and nursery rhymes every day. The age of the wild frontier was coming to a close and the new gilded age of progress and innovation was at the doorstep... at least in more urbanized America east of the Mississippi. Elmer's father, growing restless from the relative hustle and bustle of borderline Missouri, set out for western Montana, to raise his family and earn his keep tending the mercantile in a more comfortable environ... Elmer was six and his boyhood role models were the old war heroes, gunfighters and vigilantes of the frontier. As a young boy he spent many Montana summers in the company of such characters which served to mold and shape Elmer's unique outlook and shooting skills.



*Fabulous Factory Engr S&W Pre-M29 .44 Mag,  
Pres to EK by S&W boss Carl Helstrom  
(Elmer Keith Estate Coll.)*

As a young man, Elmer was primarily a ranch hand and big game wrangler/guide in Oregon and Idaho. His tools were of the trade were a horse and a gun. He had a keen understanding of what worked for him and why, and began modifying his guns and ammunition to suit his needs and insatiable curiosity. He began to share his ideas with some of the early gun writers of the day with bits of shared ideas appearing in print as a result of his observations in the field. The first

published article was in the American Rifleman in 1924. His writing style was pure and wreaked of frontier Americana as this excerpt, describing his epiphany, a July 4th celebration with his Colt SAA .45LC; “When the gun rose from recoil of the first cartridge I unconsciously hooked my thumb over the hammer spur and thus cocked gun as it recovered from recoil. When I turned the next one loose I was almost deafened by the report and saw a little flash of flame. My hand automatically cocked gun and snapped again but no report. I stopped then knowing something was wrong.



*The Last Word in Sixguns, ca 1927...  
The famous Colt SAA Number Five  
(Elmer Keith Estate Coll.)*

The upper half of three chambers was gone. Also one cartridge and half of another case. Also the top strap over cylinder. My ears were ringing otherwise I was all O.K.” (American Rifleman, August 15, 1925). Little did he know at the time that this event would change his life forever. Elmer kept the blown up cylinder as a visual reminder to himself that using oversized rifle bullets in a Sixgun was a No-No and the importance of proper bullet sizing on performance. This innocent Independence Day accident opened the door to a new career and independence for Keith. It is amazing to realize how ignorant Keith and most of the shooting world was in 1925 and how much he subsequently learned and taught us all. If that old Colt had not blown its top strap and cylinder, Keith may have spent most of his life ranching on the North Fork of the Salmon River and shooting his old .45 LC at Johnnie rabbits, with no one ever knowing what he was all about.

During World War II, he served as a small arms inspector at the Ogden, UT Arsenal with his cartouche, a small rectangle with initials OGEK. Martial arms that bear this inspector’s mark are now considered quite collectable by devotees. Post-war, Keith subsequently devoted his full efforts towards the shooting sports (both hunting and target) and writing about the results. His works largely focused on the real world performance of the latest new gun offerings firing large, heavy bullets pushed to high velocities as well as his own “hot rod” hand-loaded creations. His field tests across North America and Africa provided a wealth of fresh material. During his career, he served on the editorial staff of The Outdoorsman, The American Rifleman, Western Sportsman, Guns Magazine, and Guns and Ammo. Elmer also wrote 10 books, beginning with Sixgun Cartridges and Loads in 1936 and ending with his autobiography, Hell, I was there!, from 1979. His works are considered required reading for neophytes and serve as refreshment for the seasoned gunny. Aside from his recognized and published works, Keith penned tens of thousands of personal letters that were hand-written to an ever growing throng of followers and antagonists from all walks of life and from all points on the globe. One might believe that his gruff exterior

and remote lifestyle would harbor a solitary persona, but Elmer was very approachable. He was comfortable passing time with the ordinary Joe on the street and his Salmon, ID home was always open to those who made the pilgrimage in search of the truth or an argument. Elmer was very opinionated on matters where his experiences dictated facts and yet was not afraid to admit when he simply did not know something... a rare trait for someone in the public eye.



*Elmer's Personal Carry Gun...  
S&W M 29 .44 Mag w /4" bbl  
in Milt Sparks FBI holster  
(Elmer Keith Estate Coll.)*

Elmer was keen to discuss Sixguns as they were his tools of opportunity, both as a young rancher and later as an accomplished scholar. He liked big bullets with big powder charges. This magnum mentality made Keith famous. His first contribution, the .357 Magnum, was the result of handloading the .38 Spl cartridge well past the red line, taking full advantage of the greater frame and cylinder strength of the revolvers of the day. The longer cased .357 Magnum first became available in 1935 and quickly became a favorite among law enforcement and civilian users. The S&W "Registered Magnum" was an overnight sensation.

The .44 Magnum was developed in much the same way, and was released commercially in 1956. Keith had earlier determined that the thinner chamber walls of the .45 Colt would not comfortably withstand the pressures generated by his own heavy loads (remembering the 4th). He subsequently began experimenting with the .44 Spl revolver, and used the same formula for pushing heavy bullets at high velocities. The resulting ".44 Special Magnum" was a formidable cartridge for handgun hunting, firing a 250 grain bullet at 1,200 ft/s, generating sufficient downrange energy to anchor most North American big game. Elmer himself extolled the virtues of the cartridge by writing about his dispatching a rifle wounded deer at 600 yards with his personal S&W Model 29. Where many will raise their eyebrows at the practice, few will question Elmer's execution of the task.

The .41 Mag, released in 1963, was an attempt to reach an efficient middle ground between the .357 and .44 magnums. However, while there was (and still is) a small community of shooters preferring the .41 Magnum, the round failed to achieve a similar high degree of popularity. Hunters generally preferred the more commonly available .44 Magnum, which could be used with full house factory loads, modest handloads, or .44 Spl loadings as needed.

Of course these higher horsepower cartridges would require projectiles designed to handle the increased workload. Keith was also responsible for a number of bullet designs still popular today, and collectively called “Keith style” bullets. These bullets were based on the lead semi-wadcutter design, but using a wider than normal front surface, and convex sides. These changes increased the volume of the bullet outside the case, thus allowing more room inside the case, needed for larger charges of slower burning powders. The side bearing surfaces were also enhanced for accuracy and the wide basal profile minimizes gas blow by. These more massive lead bullets remain popular for both target shooting and hunting even among today’s jacketed and geometrically engineered offerings.

Aside from his ballistic contributions Elmer Keith had his own ideas on Sixgun design. In 1927, Elmer Keith wrote an article titled “The Last Word” for the American Rifleman magazine. By default Elmer had a lot of practice with Colt Single Action Armies. He knew what worked well and what he liked. Elmer set out to create the ultimate Sixgun... this piece would be the culmination of his years of experience, using the noted gunsmithing talents of R.F. Sedgley, Neil Houchins, J.D. O’Meara, and Harold Croft to design and build “The Last Word” in single action revolvers. The team spared no detail in the creation of what has come to be known as Keith’s Number Five.

The Number Five started like as a Colt Single Action Army chambered in .44 Spl, of course. From there, everything that could be tweaked was tweaked. The top strap of the frame was welded up into a flattop target configuration, with an adjustable rear sight added. The front sight was changed on the 5 ½” barrel to a hi-visibility Patridge style. To eliminate the possibility of the base pin moving forward under recoil, an ingenious design was created that uses a swinging lever to retain the pin positively in its place. The head of the base pin is enlarged for an easy grasp to aid in removal. The hammer was modified with a Bisley-type target spur, and the trigger was curved and moved closer to the back of the trigger guard. The unique grip of the Number Five was created by marrying a modified Bisley backstrap to a Single Action Army trigger guard. Add contoured ivory grips and the resulting is probably the most comfortable-to-shoot revolver grip ever designed.

Whereas Sixguns were convenient, big bore rifles were a requirement when the job to be done involved extremes...such as weather, range or mass of target. Elmer Keith was no less proficient with a shoulder mounted firearm than he was with a handgun... perhaps even more so. Elmer’s first rifle was a brand new Winchester M94 in .25-35 given to him by his father in about 1914. He killed his first deer with that rifle, but it took four or five shots and a half-mile chase across a mountain to finish the job. That was enough .25 caliber action for Elmer. He moved right into the heavy artillery opting for a Springfield trapdoor carbine in .45-70 that had been given to Elmer by an old stager driver. The .500 grain bullet was a handful to shoot but it anchored game in their tracks. Bigger was definitely better, but Elmer wanted to be able to shoot further as well.... Out to 1000 yards! As a kid, Elmer had to earn a membership in the prestigious Helena, MT Gun Club by first qualifying as Expert on a full NRA course at their annual club match with a borrowed rifle... Elmer made Expert with three points to spare, which was no accident and the club was compelled to grant membership.

As a big game guide in Idaho and Oregon, long range opportunities on big animals were a fact of life and Elmer knew what it took to get the job done. His working rifles were much like his Sixguns, built for delivering big bullets on target at range. Whether it was an old fashioned .45 caliber Sharps Long Range Buffalo rifle or a newfangled Custom Rifle in a high octane Wildcat caliber, with which he was equally proficient, Elmer Keith was all about performance. It was Go Big or Go Home!

Keith was instrumental in the development of various engineered wildcat cartridges, a few of which were later adopted as factory rounds. The .333 OKH ("O'Neil-Keith-Hopkins"), was made from standard .30-06 brass necked up to take the .333" heavy bullets of the Jeffery family. The .338-378 Weatherby, introduced in 1998, was developed based on another one of Keith's wildcats, the .338-378 KT (Keith-Thomson), which he developed in the 1960s. Even at a half mile or more, trophy Elk were in danger.

Of course, any big bore enthusiast would also be an admirer of the classic nitro-breathing British stopping rifles as well. Indeed Keith was and had numerous examples in his personal collection. He used two of these doubles, a fabulous droplock Westley Richards chambered in .476 Nitro and a sidelock Jeffery in .500NE, to take dangerous game in Africa on two different safaris. Keith documented the first of these hunts in his 1968 tome, Safari. The most famous double rifle in his collection was one used extensively by British author and big game hunter, Jim Corbett, a best quality boxlock .450-400 by W.J. Jeffery & Co., with which he killed so many man-eating tigers for the Indian government, chronicling his adventures for in a series of widely read books.

Elmer Keith remained active into his eighties when a tragic stroke robbed him of his physical abilities, and eventually his life in 1984. Today, Elmer Keith lives through his timeless writings, priceless imagery, and his iconic personal collection of firearms accumulated over the span of his storied life. Until very recently, a selection of his personal firearms collection and memorabilia had been wonderfully displayed at the Elmer Keith Museum housed inside Cabela's Boise, ID retail showroom. The Museum display has since closed and the collection reassembled by the Keith family in preparation for its proper disposition to the people that loved Elmer the most... His fellow shooters.

Special Note: An exciting opportunity, which affects all those passionate about Elmer Keith and firearms history, has come to fruition. The highly anticipated and diverse array of firearms and accessories from the Iconic Elmer Keith Estate Collection will be a featured component of James D. Julia's March 15-17, 2015 firearms auction in Fairfield ME. The items being offered at Julia's includes treasures from Keith's battery of African stopping rifles, highlighted by the legendary "Corbett Tiger Rifle"; the famous Jeffery .450/400, once the principal weapon of famed Tiger hunter Edward James "Jim" Corbett. Classic Farquarsons and magazine rifles by Hoffman Arms and C-H, including his Wildcats, along with a host of specialized hunting and target Sixguns by Smith & Wesson, Ruger, and Colt... The prize being Elmer's much publicized, tricked out, and engraved Colt "SAA No.5" in .44 Spl which Keith called The Last Word in fine Sixguns. The importance of the Elmer Keith Estate Collection cannot be overstated. This truly represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to own a piece of firearms history. The Poulin Auction Co. will also be offering an important selection of Elmer's utility arms and ammunition from the Keith estate, the days preceding the Julia sale. All items in the collection have remained in the

possession of the Keith family since Elmer's passing. See the auction websites for more information. [www.jamesdjulia.com](http://www.jamesdjulia.com) and [www.poulinantiques.com](http://www.poulinantiques.com).

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