

PIETTA 1851 COLT NAVY "YANK" .44 REVOLVER KIRST .45 COLT/ SCHOFIELD KONVERTER PROJECT

BY TUOLUMNE LAWMAN, SASS #6127 LIFE

The setting is Springfield, Missouri on July 21, 1865. It's a sultry, hot, humid summer evening in this thriving town in the southwest corner of the still volatile border state. For the last twenty years, violence has been a daily occurrence for the residents of Missouri.

First there were the "Border Wars" over slavery. Then in 1861 with the outbreak of the Civil War, it was a state still very much divided, and a frequent guerrilla war battleground. With the end of the Civil War, there were plenty of angry men accustomed to violence who were re-entering society. Personalities the likes of Dave Tut and Wild Bill Hickok were right at home in this environment of turmoil and violence.

At approximately 6:00 p.m. that warm summer night, a feud between Tut and Hickok would come to a fatal conclusion. This deadly feud had all of the classic ingredients – gambling, a love triangle with a woman, alcohol, and hard feelings. The feud culminated when Tut and Hickok faced off about seventy-five yards apart across the town square. Both Tut and Hickok drew their revolvers and fired. Tut missed, but Hickok and his 1851 Colt Navy revolver sent a single .36 caliber projectile through Tut's chest between the fifth and seventh rib. Tut staggered a short distance, said to the onlookers, "Boys, I'm killed," fell to the ground, then died a short time later.

This famous Tut-Hickok gunfight was one of the few documented, one on one, face to face in the street gunfights of the American West. The use of the Colt .36 Caliber Navy revolver by Hickok in this fight, and the fact it was favored by many others of the time, helped the Colt revolver to forever become an American icon of the Wild West.

Those of us who prefer the weapons of the early period of the American West and the Civil War have an excel-



AUTHOR'S ".44 COLT/MARTIN DUPLICATION LOAD" .45 SCHOFIELD RN BETWEEN TWO ORIGINAL .44 COLT/MARTIN CARTRIDGES FROM AUTHOR'S COLLECTION. AUTHOR'S REPLICIA BOX IS ABOVE.



PIETTA 1851 YANK WITH KIRST COMPONENTS TO BE INSTALLED.

lent source for these percussion firearms. One of the foremost producers of black powder firearms is F. Ili Pietta in Italy. Pietta is producing a wide selection of replica firearms, both percussion black powder and metallic cartridge, at very modest prices. Alessandro Pietta, otherwise known by his SASS Alias of "Alchimista," has been involved in Cowboy

Action Shooting™ for quite some time, and is a driving force of the sport in Europe.

Just as in the days of the original 1851, people have figured out ways to convert modern built 1851s into cartridge revolvers, just as they did in the early 1870s, and Walt Kirst's Kirst Konverters is one of the easiest ways to do

the conversion.

Pietta 1851 Navy "Yank" .44 Caliber Model

I have always loved the Colt 1851's classic lines, but unlike Wild Bill, I have never been a fan of the diminutive .36 round! While not historically correct, the .44 caliber "Yank" version is more to my liking. The Pietta 1851 Navy is a peach! It has the smaller "Navy" grip that is nearly identical in size and shape the later Colt 1873 Single Action Army revolver. The 1851 has a one-piece walnut grip that is set in a brass trigger guard and grip frame. The wood to metal fit is about average for a single action revolver.

My Pietta 1851 has a four-and-a-half-inch octagonal barrel with a stepped profile underneath. This stepped profile houses the loading lever and ram assembly used to seat the projectiles from the front of the cylinder and compress the powder in the individual chambers under the projectiles.

While the grip frame and trigger guard are brass, the barrel assembly and cylinder are nicely dark blued. The cylinder is roll stamped with Colt's trade-

mark naval battle scene, honoring the Texas Navy's victory at Campeche on April 30, 1843. The frame, hammer, and loading lever and rammer assembly are nicely color case hardened. This combination makes for an aesthetic combination of wood, brass, blue steel, and color case hardening.

The front sight is a period correct brass bead set in the front on the muzzle end of the barrel. The rear sight is a notch in the tip of the hammer that is visible in the sight picture when the hammer is cocked. This would seem like a very inaccurate arrangement, but it really isn't. It works very well, though the short brass bead front sight causes the weapon to pattern very high at 25 yards. I have heard Colt percussion Navy and Army revolvers were sighted in to be dead on at seventy-five yards. That's an optimistic hope in anyone's book!

The 1851 Navy Model has one very interesting feature in its barrel assembly. The revolver's bore is octagonal just like the exterior of the barrel. This is a good feature for a black powder revolver. This deep octagonal rifling allows fouling room to accumulate in the corners of

the octagonal pattern, the buildup having less effect on accuracy. It also allows for a better engagement on the soft lead round balls generally used, as it makes the rifling deeper than normal. Round balls, though swaged into the cylinders, do not have as much bearing surface as traditional bullets.

The original 1851 Navy was manufactured only in .36 caliber, using a .375 round ball. Besides this original .36 caliber, the Pietta 1851 is also available in .44 caliber, using a .454 caliber round ball. Colt never offered the 1851 Navy in .44 caliber, despite some claims by various importers of replicas.

Why would Pietta deviate from history and offer this option? Possibly because there are many shooters like myself who prefer the small grip and archaic lines of the 1851 Navy but want the oomph of the .44 caliber. Another scenario is a shooter who already has either an 1860 Colt or 1858 Remington .44 caliber Army Model and wants the same loads for all handguns. The final reason may be unintended by Pietta, but a benefit for shooters, The .44 caliber 1851 uses 1860 Army cylinders, so they are able to use either a Kirst or R&D

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GRINDING THE EJECTION CHANNEL.

conversion cylinder for .45 Colt metallic ammunition. This is ideal for the Cowboy Action Shooting™ competitor. I chose Walt Kirst's .45 Colt Konverter for my project because of its gated breech ring and availability of the 1851 Colt ejector rod assembly that replaces the rammer assembly.

Kirst's Konverter

Walt Kirst has been interested in Cartridge Conversion revolvers for many years. A talented machinist and inventor, he had done some custom conversions of percussion revolvers. About 20 years ago, he came up with the idea of a drop-in cylinder to convert an 1858 Remington into a .45 cartridge revolver. His initial design had a solid back plate and a 5 shot cylinder. A little later, he came up with a gated version that required a channel to be cut in the recoil shield. After that he came up with a five shot conversion cylinder for



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the 1860 Colt clones. These are gated and also require milling or grinding out a channel in the Colt recoil shield for the cartridge ejection. He even came up with original-style ejector rods for both the Remington and Colt designs. Walt was kind enough to send me one of these 1860 Colt Gated Konverters and 1851 ejector rods to complete the conversion of the 1851 Pietta .44 into a cartridge revolver.

Kirst Konverters are SASS legal, even though they use five-shot cylin-

ders. In the case of the 1858 Konverter, there is a small "safety chamber," that is a smaller recess between two of the cylinders in which the firing pin can rest in when not being fired or in the holster. When you cock the hammer, the cylinder rotates to the first cartridge and locks in place for firing. The unit is basically "drop in" and in Pietta's seldom requires any modification to cycle correctly. (Uberti's, especially recent ones, can have some timing issues because of Uberti relocating the cylinder hand

farther from the arbor than older ones.) With that said, even the gated Konverter can be used without modifying the recoil shield. You simply remove the cylinder the same way you do with an R&D conversion cylinder.

I wanted to go the gated route and found it was not hard at all to grind the channel in the recoil shield of the Pietta. I disassembled the Pietta, and placed the Kirst gated recoil shield in place. I opened the gated and marked the area on the recoil shield that needed to be removed with black marker. Removing the recoil shield, that left a black shadow that guided my grinding.

I used a Dremel grinder with a 1/2" sanding drum, and began to slowly grind. It took about five drums, but I changed when the grinding slowed. When I got close, I would install the cylinder and recoil plate and attempt to eject the shell. After about 45 minutes, it was done. I polished the ground out area with fine emery cloth, then hit it with Birchwood Casey cold blue. I was actually surprised how easy it was.

The ejector assembly was just a direct replacement for the rammer assembly, and installed with the same screw. The wedge came through the barrel. I made a small notch in the edge of the ejector rod to allow the spring on the edge to catch and keep it from backing out.

The project from start to finish took less than two hours and that was not a solid two hours as I did some multi-tasking. In the end, I had an 1851 .44 caliber converted into a .45 Colt/Schofield cartridge revolver, complete with ejector and loading gate.

How Does it Shoot?

The load I used was in a .45 Schofield, using a 200-grain RN hollow-based bullet that I also use in my 1911. In the Schofield case, it approximated the appearance of the original 210 grain, healed bullet .44 Colt/Martin cartridge. The load was 5.5 to 6 grains of Trail Boss.

The Pietta 1851 shot dead center, but about three inches above point of aim at ten yards, using a traditional two-hand hold. As I said before, this is very common with all of the Colt percussion revolvers, including originals. I aimed at a six-o'clock position on the four-inch bulls-eye and hit about three inches above in the black. At a match, I could use a low, just below dead center, hold and generally hit.

Kirst Konverters and made to be used with either black powder ammo or "Cowboy Action" loads that approximate BP loads (under 1,000 fps). DON'T shoot Buffalo Bore ammo or any +P cartridges from a Kirst Konverter.

Conclusion

Much of the early Old West was dominated by percussion revolvers like the 1851 and 1860 Colts. Many of these were converted to cartridge revolvers by the factories and even frontier gunsmiths. The importance of these early West firearms in the history of our country cannot be overstated. Whether you are a Cowboy Action Shooter™ interested in recreating a persona from the early West or just a shooter who enjoys the classic looks, the .44 caliber Model 1851 Navy by Pietta and Kirst Konverter combination is a good choice.

Check out their web page at <https://kirstkonverter.com/>.



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