

.400 Colt Magnum

By Lee Martin
Arlington, Virginia

Over a century has passed since Colt chambered their 1873 in .38-40, and there's still demand for forty caliber handguns. Predominantly, these firearms include autoloaders that are chambered in either .40 S&W, .400 Corbon, or the nearly defunct 10mm Auto. Revolvers have also seen their fair share of .40 calibers, but most never achieved commercial success. A lot of this is attributable to the .41 Remington Magnum, which is an outstanding middle-bore cartridge. The .38-40 is still chambered in single-actions however, to include Colt and a few Italian Peacekeeper clones. Even Ruger produced limited runs of .38-40/10mm convertibles for both Buckeye Sporting Goods in the late 1980s and more recently a Vaquero version for Davidson's (the second cylinder for the latter was in .40 S&W). Other than these examples, the .40 revolver never caught on with the masses.

Modern .40 caliber revolver rounds evolved in the 1920's when Pop Eimer developed his .401 wildcat. Essentially, the .401 Eimer was a Winchester Self-Load case that was trimmed back to 1.21" and shot in altered Colt single-actions. Its performance was impressive with 200 grain bullets topping out around 1,200 fps when placed over 2400 powder. Gordon Boser further developed the round in the 1940's and in time a few Colt double-actions were converted to .401. It's hard to speculate on how many handguns were ever chambered in the Eimer and Boser variants. I have seen numerous pictures of Colt double and single-actions that had been reworked to this wildcat; I'm also aware of a few Great Westerns from the 1950's that were gunsmithed to shoot the round. Though these cartridges seem to be underground oddities, Colt did consider a commercial offering of similar power around 1932. Deemed the ".41 Colt Special", it would have significantly advanced handgun ballistics (remember, the .357 Magnum wasn't released until 1935). A couple of versions existed to include case lengths of 1.18", 1.24", and 1.26" with the brass being produced by Remington. Unfortunately, Colt never marketed the round and the prototype cartridges have become extremely collectible.

Nearly 30 years pass and by the late 1950's, there seems to be a call for a cartridge that fills the gap between the .357 and .44 Magnum. Such demand is prompted by gun writers and law enforcement alike, with the ideal bullet weight being roughly 200 grains. Whether any of this discussion was based on the Eimer/Boser experiments from years past is unbeknownst to me. Nonetheless, this is where it gets interesting. The question of the day quickly became which major arms company would introduce such a round? (the obvious candidates were Smith & Wesson, Colt, and Sturm Ruger). As it would turn out, a small mail order firm from Waseca, Minnesota provided the answer. Specifically, Herters Incorporated unveiled its .40 caliber magnum in 1961, and based it on a very strong Sauer & Sohn single-action. It was called the .401 Powermag and was a good performer with bullets ranging from 160 to 200 grains. It sold, but was never distributed in a way that promoted a national following. Remington and Smith & Wesson followed suit in 1964 with the .41 Magnum, which was loaded at two power thresholds. The first was a reduced, lead load that was geared towards law enforcement whereas the second consisted of a 1,400+ fps offering (210 grain bullet). Ruger adopted the .41 Magnum for their Blackhawk, while S&W catalogued both fixed and adjustable sight double actions. This coupled with the Gun Control Act of 1968 killed the mail order Powermag. What many don't realize though, is that a third middle-bore magnum almost came to be.....namely, the .400 Colt Magnum.

There isn't a lot of history on the cartridge, other than the fact that it was devised in the early 1960's. As I understand it, Bob Roy of Colt originally modified .30-30 cases to create the .400 Magnum, and Winchester latter provided loaded prototypes. I was fortunate enough to obtain two of these and found the headstamps to read "W-W, 400". Both are issued with what appears to be the same 200 grain soft nose bullets that Winchester used in the .38-40. Also, one of the cases is grooved, while the other is not. In terms of its dimensions, the .400 is quite similar to both the the .401 Powermag and .41 Remington Mag as illustrated below:

	<u>.400 Colt</u>	<u>.401 Herter</u>	<u>.41 Magnum</u>
Case Length	1.275"	1.285"	1.290"
Web Diameter	0.420"	0.426"	0.434"
Case Mouth	0.417"	0.425"	0.434"
Rim Diameter	0.463"	0.483"	0.492"

Two theories exist as to why the .400 never materialized. The first is that Herters released the Powermag and that the Colt was too close

dimensionally to be considered “new”. The second, and more probable explanation is that Colt was just slow in the development of the round and the .41 Magnum beat it to market. Either way, there wasn’t much of a need for the cartridge with .41 Magnum availability, and to a lesser degree, the .401 Powermag (though a .400 Colt on the Python would have been an outstanding combination). I have no clue as to how rare these prototypes are, but I’ve seen a few auctioned for over \$50.00 per.

If you have any questions or comments, I can be reached at sc429@yahoo.com.



.400 Colt Magnums