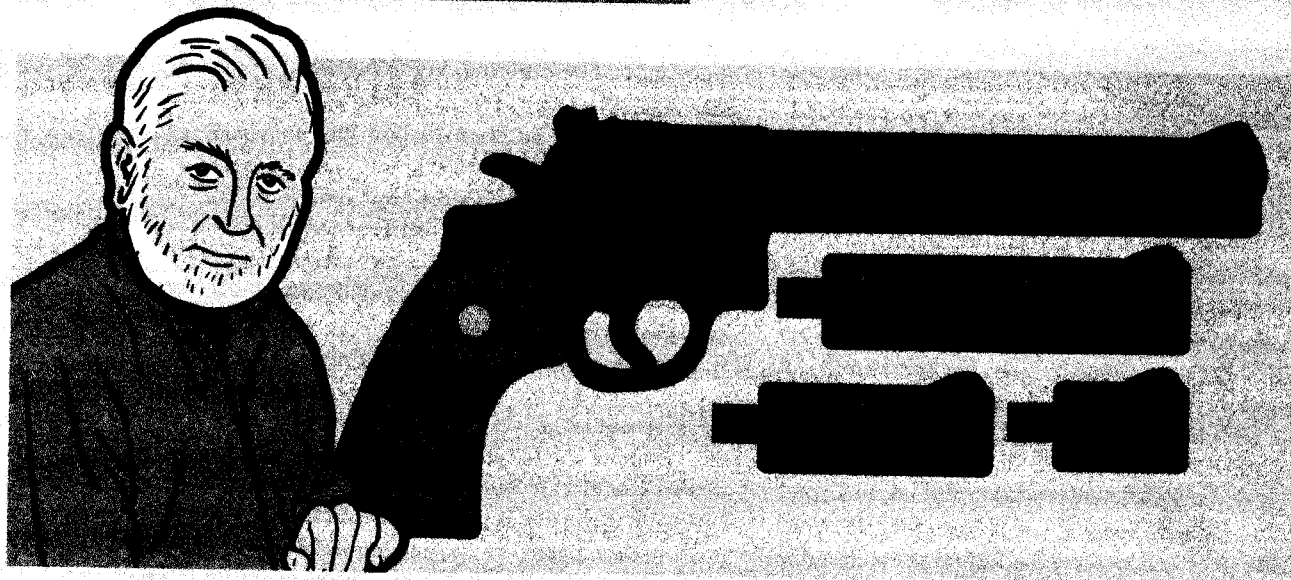




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# The Son of a Son of a Son of a Gun Designer

The great-grandson of a co-founder of Smith & Wesson formed his own gun company and created what many think was the most accurate revolver in the world. **BY JOEL J. HUTCHCROFT**

Dan Wesson worked as a machine operator, then a tool and die maker, and eventually plant superintendent for Smith & Wesson, the company his great-grandfather co-founded. In 1968 he founded his own firearms company and was determined to build the world's best revolver.

**EVERY SERIOUS GUN ENTHUSIAST MOST LIKELY** knows that John Moses Browning, one of America's most prolific gun designers ever, was descended from a gunsmith/gunmaker. Well, the subject of this column also had an ancestor who was a famous gun developer. I'm referring to Daniel Baird Wesson II, also known as Dan Wesson.

Daniel Baird Wesson II was born on April 22, 1916, in Longmeadow, Massachusetts. He grew up amid stories of the gun industry and his flamboyant great-grandfather D.B. Wesson, co-founder of Smith & Wesson. Dan graduated from Deerfield Academy and Amhurst College in Massachusetts.

On April 12, 1938, at the age of 22, he joined the ranks of employees at Smith & Wesson. Initially, he worked as a machine operator in a small toolroom making cutters and other small tools. In 1939 he transferred to the Smith & Wesson machine shop to learn the art of toolmaking and to use his skills to help design the tooling that the then-faltering company desperately needed. In 1941 Dan's ample skills and

abilities in machine-tool design were recognized by the company when he was made assistant plant superintendent. His responsibilities included keeping the 700 S&W employees productive during the large-scale World War II effort.

During the war years, Dan assisted C.R. Hellstrom, who had been hired to head up the company and ward off bankruptcy, in guiding the production of 1,110,392 revolvers for the Allied war effort. He was largely responsible for S&W meeting all deliveries on time and re-establishing Smith & Wesson as a major arms manufacturer.

In 1963 Dan was appointed plant superintendent, and he also served on the board of directors. When the majority of company shares were purchased by Bangor Punta Corp. in 1966, Dan resigned.

Back in 1948, Dan had started a business of his own while at the same time maintaining his position at Smith & Wesson. His small business was called D.B. Wesson Inc., and he made die molds, hand-rolled dies, and other related items. In 1968 he created a

subsidiary called D.B. Wesson Arms and located it in an old school building in Monson, Massachusetts. That year Dan and his two employees began building revolvers. D.B. Wesson Arms displayed its first revolvers at the 1969 NASGW show in Houston, Texas. The firm began shipping revolvers in 1970 and immediately began making improvements to the Dan Wesson revolver.

For anyone who is not familiar with Dan Wesson revolvers, they are double-action, six-shot revolvers with some very unique features. For one, barrels can be switched quickly and easily by virtue of an innovative and unusual design. The barrel proper is simply described as a tube that screws into the frame and is securely held in place by an outer shroud (or sleeve) and an end nut. Another innovation is the grip frame. There are no grip straps per se. Instead, the mainspring housing/frame is more like a rectangular stem. The one-piece grips slide over this stem and are held in place with a single screw through the bottom. And yet another innovation is the cylinder lockup. Unlike the familiar location on S&W and Colt revolvers,

the Dan Wesson cylinder latch is placed forward of the cylinder. These innovations add up to what some aficionados have called "probably the most accurate revolver in the world." I own a Dan Wesson Model 3220 chambered for .32-20 that was made between 1991 and 1995, and it is a very fine double-action revolver indeed. It has four different-length interchangeable barrels and shrouds; two sets of grips; a fully adjustable rear sight; and a fitted, foam-lined, lockable hard case.

Dan Wesson passed away on November 24, 1978, having suffered a heart attack while chopping wood. By all accounts, he was vigorous, youthful, humorous, generous, and likeable. Being the great-grandson of a co-founder of Smith & Wesson, he spent his entire life in the firearms industry. And he made his mark on the industry, first by helping S&W regain its footing as a major armsmaker after faltering during the pre-World War II years and then by creating a unique, effective, and successful revolver that bore his own name and was considered a mechanical wonder.



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