

Vintage American Classics

In the three-plus decades I've been into collectable airguns, I've owned most of the classic American air pistols other than ultra-rare and expensive collectors' items. But many affordable (still) vintage/classic air pistols are very impressive in various ways, including good power, great accuracy, nice quality, historical significance, and pure nostalgia. Many possess more than one of these fine qualities. And some have them all.

Some are also excellent platforms for customizations. Though it might not be the best idea to compromise the originality of an extremely rare or valuable piece, that still leaves a treasure-trove of relatively common and affordable guns available for worthwhile 'personalizations'. This chapter highlights some vintage American air pistols I've found memorable, impressive, or otherwise endearing. And, all very affordable!

As far as I know, Co2 was first used as a propellant in the late 19th century in the form of dry ice to power some of the most impressive and collectable airguns ever produced- the French-made Giffards. Then and now very expensive, I've not owned a Giffard. But just handling one leaves me in a state of complete and utter awe.

In the late 1940s American airgun manufacturers embraced liquid/gaseous Co2 as a propellant, sending Crosman into a frenzy of innovation and subsequent marketing success sometimes referred to as the Golden Age of American airguns. Co2 paid off big time for Crosman, with production of many models numbering in the tens of thousands.

Crosman rose to its position as the dominant American airgun manufacturer through a century of producing good, affordable airguns; most of them Co2 powered. For the better part of their history, Crosman produced more models, **more innovative** models, and vastly greater quantities than anyone else. The number, variety, and production numbers of Crosman models boggles the mind.

Crosman's Golden Age also paid off for collectors, since production numbers of just a few 1940s-1960s Crosman models totaled **hundreds of thousands** of cool Co2 guns sold. Many thousands survived the abuse of generations of rug-rats like little Ronny Robinson, now ripe for the picking by old farts like me who never really grew up!

This (whole) book not being about collectable Crosmans, I'll have to concentrate on my favorite vintage Crosman pistols and limit descriptions of each to just highlights. But due to many favorites and highlights, this won't be a short chapter.

My first of many collectable air pistols was a Crosman Model 150. The impressively powerful and accurate, 1950s-1960s vintage 150 Co2 pistol and 160 rifle models kick-started my airgun collecting passion. The surprising performance of those 150s and 160s piqued my curiosity about their hunting and competition potentials, leading to my earliest airgun customizations, writings, some national records and State and National Champion titles. Three Crosman Model 150 variants now residing in my closet still get shot regularly, poignant reminders of the 150s' timeless performance.



Top- Author's scoped, second generation 150 with his own custom grips. **Middle-** A Sears & Roebuck Ted Williams Match Pistol. **Bottom-** A first generation, 2-piece barrel 150 with RR custom grips. Healthy 150s are powerful, accurate and yet still affordable.



This cottontail dropped instantly to a 35 yard offhand shot to the brain.

Much of my success in exposing the potentials of vintage Crosmans has to do with developing an adjustable-sear trigger job and unearthing mounts to scope various vintage Crosmans early in my involvement with them. Once excess sear-engagement could be adjusted out to achieve creep-free trigger actions, I found accuracy potentials of many vintage Crosman models astonishing. As my trigger job evolved and sear surfaces wore in, the trigger actions and accuracy results continued to improve.

Its trigger now breaking like a glass rod at just 24 ounces, my current 150 small-game rig wears a 3X pistol scope, gets 450-460 FPS in summer heat with 14.3 grain JSB Exact pellets, and shoots 3/8" to 1/2" groups at 25 yards. That is power enough and accuracy aplenty for excellent small-game hunting to normal pistol ranges of 25-30 yards, in a **handgun**-sized package powered by convenient, disposable Co2 cartridges.

Based on the same second-generation, one-piece barrel 150 model, undoubtedly the sexiest 150 variant was the Sears and Roebuck, Ted Williams Match Pistol model. The most distinctive features of the Match Pistol are an aluminum 'ventilated rib' atop the barrel, and a windage *and* elevation-adjustable rear sight. Given the adjustable sights, and since the ventilated rib is not compatible with my scope mounts anyway, my Ted Williams Match Pistol goes unscoped. Nevertheless, it consistently shoots 1" five-shot groups at 25 yards with the factory sights; meaning from a sand-bagged bench-rest it probably shoots to my (65 year-old eyes') capabilities.

Another pistol I still use with iron sights is the first-generation, 'two-piece barrel' Crosman 150. Though the rear sight is windage-adjustable only, I've found they shoot to point of aim well and give a very functional sight-picture virtue of the top of the rear sight's slightly convex profile. The first-gen Model 150 barrels' smaller diameter imbues them with a lighter heft that carries nicely in a blue-jeans hip pocket. The first-gen and Ted Williams 150 models seem naturally suited to iron-sight use, so that's how I use them. Having scoped both models in the past, it's clear they're accurate as other 150s.

Crosman's very first Co2 pistols, produced from 1949 to 1954, were the bulk-fill Models 111, 112, 115 and 116 that use ten-ounce-capacity Co2 cylinders to fill their under-barrel chamber-tubes. Virtue of eight-inch barrels and long Co2 chambers, both the .177 caliber Model 111 and .22 caliber 112 were unusually powerful for their time. They remain impressively powerful today, especially with simple hop-ups. Moly-lubing the hammer while installing a slightly stronger hammer-spring was all it took for my 111 to zing medium-weight .177 pellets over 550 FPS, and my 112 to break 500 FPS with medium weight .22 pellets. I haven't found the bulk-fill pistols quite as phenomenally accurate as Crosman 150s, but they'll usually average 3/4" or better groups at 25 yards.

Another awesome Crosman classic of the 1960s and 70s was the Model 600, a true semi-automatic .22 Co2 pistol. What it lacks in tack-driving accuracy, the 600 makes up for in exhilarating fire-power with ten shots as fast as you can pull the trigger!



All these in .22, it may be debatable whether the Crosman 38C revolver or 600 semi-auto repeaters justify optics. But the accurate and powerful custom 112 certainly does!



Benjamin's first Co2 guns, the early-1950s vintage 250/252/257 models use eight-gram disposable cartridges and utilized blued-steel and black-nickel brass construction.

From the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties Crosman also produced Co2 revolver models patterned after .357 Magnum Smith & Wessons firearms; right down to similar size and weight, true single/double-action triggers, and choice of 4" or 6" barrels. Of considerably less power and knat's-ass accuracy than the vintage single-shots we've covered so far, to their practical range limit of about 20 yards I find the 4" Model 38C (Combat) and 6" 38T (Target) similarly accurate to the .357 Mag firearms they imitate.

Benjamin started producing Co2 guns around 1952 with their BB Model 250, .177 Model 257, and .22 Model 252. The little Benjamins produce about the same power as Crosman 38s and 600s; about 325-350 FPS. Utilizing short, eight-gram disposable cartridges as the propellant source contributes to their compactness. Blued steel and black-nickel plated brass construction contributes to their solid heft. That they easily slip into a tackle-box, glove-box or hip pocket may explain why most surviving examples have most of the black worn off the nickel-plating, and much of the nickel plating worn off the brass. The mint-condition example pictured above was an absolute showpiece; so much so I was hesitant to use it much for fear of **defacing** such a mint collectable!

None other than Smith and Wesson produced excellent air pistols in the 1970s. Powered by twelve-gram disposable Co2 cartridges by then (and still) the standard propellant source for American Co2 guns, the .22 caliber Model 78G and .177 Model 79G were well-made imitations of Smith's legendary Model 41 .22 rimfire target pistol. Since parting with it, I've sorely missed the .22 Model 78G I found very powerful, accurate and of impressive heft, features and quality. In fact S&W 78Gs are among the most powerful Co2 pistols I've tested in my thirty-year love affair with Co2 guns. A trigger job produced the crispest, breaks-like-glass trigger break I've ever felt. Some day I'll replace that 78G.

I've owned a couple of vintage Hy-Score spring-piston pistols I found interesting. Perhaps I should qualify that statement with, "despite them being spring-piston pistols". I found the quality of the Hy-Scores surprising, being far more impressive than what I usually associate with stamped-and-formed construction. The fact that well-used and abused Hy-Scores older than me not only survive, but can still have decades of service left in them speaks to the quality and longevity of their blued-steel, stamped and formed construction. Some years later, stamped-and-formed steel construction was employed in Ruger's Mark 1 model .22 rimfire semi-auto pistol that **literally** put Ruger on the map!

Unfortunately and no matter how high the quality, non-recoilless spring-piston pistols are among **the** most difficult guns to master of any kind. Depending on individual interpretations of the words *master* and *accuracy*, I feel it humanly impossible to master a recoiling spring-piston pistol to any high degree of accuracy. Not only have I never managed it, but I've never seen or heard of it being accomplished.

I enjoy casual plinking with a spring-piston pistol. But invariably, plinking sessions become more serious as tin-can ranges increase with every hit.

A typical spring-piston session starts innocently enough at 10 yards. But as ranges approach 20 yards the fun devolves evermore to frustration with each additional yard. By the time ranges approach 20 yards, plinks become rare enough to either abort the session or switch to arms more appropriate to the task (like Co2 or PCP pistols); whereupon the fun returns to 30-40 yards with iron sights, and 40-50 yards with optics.

I must confess complete lack of interest in, or experience with, some vintage American airguns that simply don't appeal to me. Some of which other airgunners might consider classics. For example, had I bonded with a Crosman Skanaker ten-meter Co2 pistol I owned for awhile, it would appear in the chapter on ten meter classics. But I didn't, so it gets no further mention in this book. And the .22 caliber (lead-ball) Schimel semi-automatic comes readily to mind as also victim of my personal prejudices, since I was never drawn to them or the Luger firearms they imitate. I've handled a couple and find they have nice heft, but otherwise just don't pique my interest.

The title of this book, *Custom, Classic and Otherwise **Awesome Air Pistols*** purposely allows the author ample latitude to apply praise and adjectives as he sees fit. And while some may disagree with my assessments, I'm okay with that. As always, my primary hope is the information in this chapter (and book) provides some level of entertainment or reading pleasure. Regardless, here's another **awesome airgun** photo-



Four consecutive five-shot groups at 25 yards averaged 1.13" with the Ted Williams Match Pistol's open sights. Truth be told, that's probably about the limit of my abilities.



Of nice quality, good accuracy and excellent power, the Smith & Wesson Model 41 Co2 pistol (above) does justice to its famous .22 rimfire namesake pictured below.

