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The term “velocipede” may be foreign to most today, but it was familiar in 19th century Europe, where it was another way of referring to a bicycle. At the time, these unusual, human-propelled devices opened up a whole new world of possibility in terms of transportation. No longer did you need a horse (and all of the assorted expenses that come along with it) in order to travel faster than you could walk. This new mode of transport did, however, come with some drawbacks, mainly those of the four-legged variety: dogs.



Lot 3351: Rare and Excellent Smith & Wesson .32 Safety Hammerless 2nd Model Double Action Revolver with 2 Inch Bicycle Gun Barrel.

Just as dogs today chase cars because they're unusual and scary, they also chased bicycles in the 19th century. Outrunning an angry dog in a car is easy, but if you're travelling by velocipede, you can only escape as fast as you can pedal. For some, this was slower than a dog could run and the end result was injury to the rider. Apparently, this happened frequently enough to spawn a new type of firearm with a new name that is familiar with gun collectors even today: the velo-dog revolver.

As the name suggests, a velo-dog revolver was designed to protect velocipedists against dogs when out for a ride. This kind of gun was made by a variety of different manufacturers over the years, but most have two main components in common: a concealed hammer and a short barrel. These pocket pistols were designed to be carried and drawn with ease, which was facilitated by the short barrel and lack of a hammer spur to get caught on one's clothes.



Smith & Wesson's Safety Hammerless revolvers were introduced in 1887. They were an instant hit with consumers looking for a quality, concealable handgun that could be carried with ease. Looking to the success of the velo-dog in Europe, Smith & Wesson decided to offer something similar in the States. While "velocipede" was a common term in Europe, "bicycle" was much more prevalent in the United States. As such, Smith & Wesson chose "Bicycle Gun" as the name for these new Safety Hammerless revolvers with short barrels.

With barrels ranging anywhere from 1 ³/₈-inch to 2.5-inches, Bicycle Guns were most often produced as small batch, special order guns. Because of this, they number far fewer than their longer-barreled counterparts and are much rarer and highly prized by collectors. Because of their high value, many fakes have been made over the years by skilled gunsmiths cutting down longer barrels and reattaching the front sights. The surest way to verify the authenticity of a Bicycle Gun is through a factory letter. The Smith & Wesson .38 Safety Hammerless "Bicycle Gun" with a 1.5-inch barrel offered in the May 2019 Premier Gun Auction is one of those rare bonafide revolvers.



Lot 3350: Smith & Wesson .38 Safety Hammerless 5th Model Double Action Revolver with Ultra Rare 1 1/2 "Bicycle" Length Barrel and Factory Letter.

A prime example of the special order nature of these guns, factory records indicate that this Bicycle Gun was a one-gun order for a blued revolver with checkered, black hard rubber grips and a 1.5-inch barrel. It was shipped on December 7, 1932, to Wheeler's Company in Utica, New York, at a cost of \$26.50. The gun is in its complete original configuration. It has matching serial numbers on the butt, right grip panel, cylinder, barrel, and barrel latch. It has a pinned blade front sight, is correctly lacking barrel and rib markings, and the right side of the frame is stamped with the S&W monogram and "MADE IN THE U.S.A." Smith & Wesson's Bicycle Guns are rare in any of the barrel lengths, but this 1.5-inch example is believed to be one of approximately 15 made with pinned front sights, which are not found on the rest of the 5th Model variations of this gun. The Standard Catalog of Smith & Wesson notes that 5th Model guns with 2-inch barrels will bring a 100% premium over the standard lengths. The 1.5-inch guns are even more rare, noting them to be "worth substantial premium."



It's hard to explain just how rare this gun is, so here's a bit of simple math. There were 41,500 5th Model guns made, and only 15 in this specific configuration. If all of them survive (which they likely don't), they make up just 0.0003% of all the Safety Hammerless 5th Models ever produced. It doesn't get much rarer than that, and the opportunity to own one is yours at the May 2019 Premier Gun Auction. With this Bicycle Gun in your pocket, you'll feel safe enough to ride past even the meanest junkyard dog!