



Most of the greats start young: Lee E. Jurras in Santa Monica, California, at age three.

Photo courtesy Lee Jurras.

LEE JURRAS:

The Man Who Gave Us Hollowpoints

Jeremy D. Clough

The firearms industry loses its own history. Like any other industry, survival depends on sales, and sales depend on new products. The irony is precious few of these innovations are new. Most are reruns of an idea that's come around before and faded away, sometime repeatedly, until someone can make it functional and/or successful. When it finally does hit the big time, the source is long since gone and forgotten.

When I began tracing the history of the pistol in the sidebar — an elegant Swenson Hi-Power built for Lee Jurras — I was surprised to find out Jurras, the founder of the meteorically popular Super Vel ammo company, was still

alive! Especially considering his demise had been mentioned in these semi-hallowed pages some months before. After I found the father of hi-perf handgun ammo, he agreed to give a rare interview. Thus it was I packed up his old Hi-Power and my battered Nikon, and pointed the blunt nose of my Fox-body Mustang up I-75 to Washington, Indiana, to meet the man they call "The Curmudgeon." And here's what I brought back from Washington.

Lee Makes History

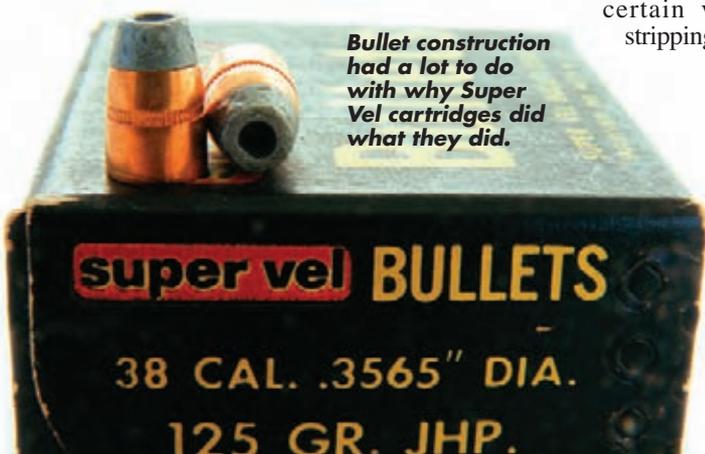
In the beginning was ball — round, soft-nosed lead bullets that came out of the barrel fairly straight, but didn't deform (read: expand) reliably. You also couldn't push them beyond a certain velocity without stripping them out into the

rifling of the barrel. Then, with the advent of the autopistol, came hardball — full metal jacketed bullets that could keep their shape at blistering velocities, and were hard enough to survive the rattletrap rollercoaster ride through a pistol's feed mechanism. That hardness also meant they zipped through a living target like a laser, leaving a hole that was, if anything, smaller than the bullet itself.

The next big step came from the hunting world, in the form of Elmer Keith's "Keith-style" bullet, which we usually call a "semiwadcutter." With its flat nose and crayon-looking shoulder, the SWC tended to cut tissue rather than tear it. Though it seldom expands, at least it made the most of the hole it made.

When Super-Vel came on the scene in 1963, it would take a while before people began to realize what had truly

The .500 Jurras Howdah pistol round pushed a 500-grain slug at 1,200 fps.



Bullet construction had a lot to do with why Super Vel cartridges did what they did.



The legendary Lee Jurras. Modern high performance handgun ammunition is a direct result of the revolution begun by his Super Vel ammo company.

Left to right, John Amber, sculptor Adolf Wolter, and Lee Jurras unveiling the OAHA bronze at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Wolter's work was internationally known. Photo courtesy Lee Jurras.



Jurras (second from left) and Maj. George Nonte (far right), with a pair of blesbok taken in Africa. Close friends — “more like brothers” Jurras says — they hunted on several continents, and co-authored Handgun Hunting together.

been accomplished by the light, fast little jacketed hollowpoints in bright little yellow boxes coming out of Shelbyville, Indiana. Once the idea caught, it was wildfire. Ten years later, when they closed their doors, Super Vel had made over 300 million cartridges, at times selling more pistol ammunition than Remington, Federal and Winchester. Like all things that come on the scene with a bang, Super Vel had been years in the making. And, like all truly great things, it was more a reflection of its founder than anything else.

Although now known almost exclusively for Super Vel, Lee's career in the firearms industry shaped the gun world in ways long lost to this generation of shooters. Aside from the brilliant star of Super Vel, he's is also largely responsible for the popularization of handgun hunting, metallic silhouette shooting, the *Outstanding American Handgunner Awards*, as well as for his work with the massive Auto Mag autoloader, and the Howdah single shot pistols.

Early Experiments

Born on a strawberry farm outside of Plant City, Florida, Lee, an only child,

was loading ammo for other people — for money — at age 12. Fascinated at first by long-range rifle shooting, he struck up a correspondence with many of the great riflemen of the time. “I was an astute 12-year-old,” he shrugs. “Why *wouldn't* they answer me?”

After college, and a brief stint in the Marine Corps at the end of the Korean War, Lee was beginning the uneasy settling into adult life that, in his case, involved stepping into the family construction business and doing commercial photography as a stringer for the

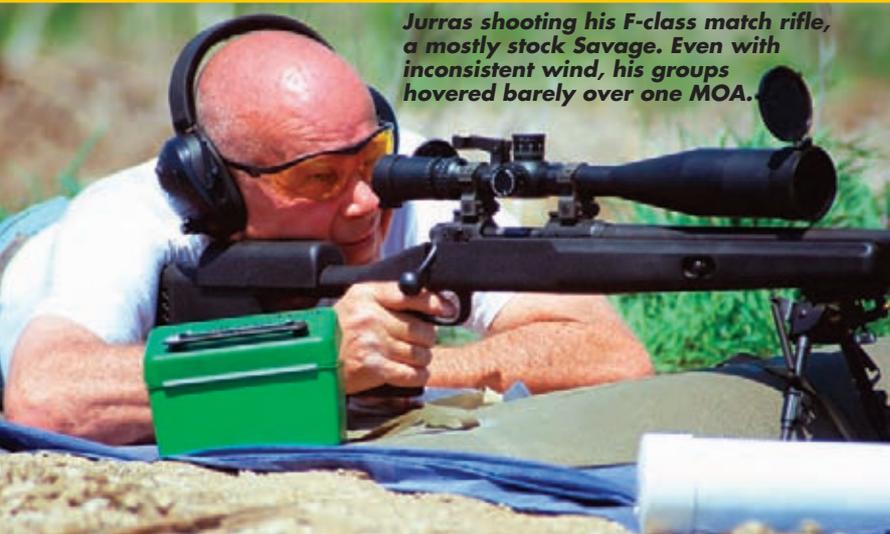
Associated Press. All the while, he loaded ammo on the side, creating the 110-gr. .38 “Snub-Nose Special” that would later become the flagship load for Super Vel. Equally significant, in the late 1950s, he started experimenting with jacketed pistol bullets by taking .35 caliber rifle jackets and turning them down on a small lathe. Ultimately, following experimentation by Jim Harvey, he would be the first to commercially produce a true jacketed hollowpoint.

A chance comment to a friend got the financial backing for things to go



100 Jurras Howdah pistols were made, chambered for cartridges that ranged from .375 to the ground-stomping .577. Even for a T/C Contender, these laid down some serious power.

Photo courtesy Lee Jurras.



Jurras shooting his F-class match rifle, a mostly stock Savage. Even with inconsistent wind, his groups hovered barely over one MOA.



This ashtray is one of the rarer pieces of Super Vel memorabilia. One was said to have sat on the desk of J. Edgar Hoover.

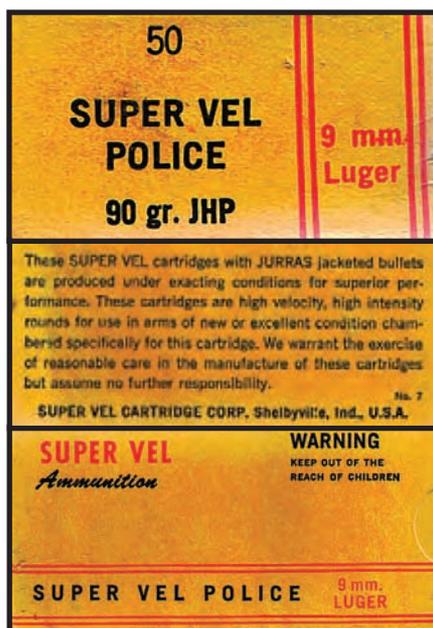
from Point A to Point B, and in 1963 Super Vel officially opened its doors in Shelbyville, Indiana. The “Vel,” obviously, was short for “velocity” and was one of the defining features of the ammo line. Lee’s pistol cartridges pushed a fairly light JHP out of the barrel at velocities high enough to cause it to expand — all the while staying within SAAMI pressure specs. “Not to replace, but to offer a different concept in pistol ammo,” notes Lee. “Full power and Super Vel are two different things.”

Bullets expand because of the hydraulic pressure caused by liquefied tissue within the hollow cavity of the nose. Anything increasing that pressure makes the bullet expand more reliably. Modern hollowpoints, specifically the “second generation” types, use a variety of things to increase and focus that pressure, such as posts or flutes in the cavity (Federal’s Hydra Shok, for instance).

Lee Innovates

In the early hours of the 1960s, jacketing a hollowpoint was an innovation in itself, and second-gen JHPs were

Three sides of an original Super Vel box: End flap (top), back (middle) and front (bottom).

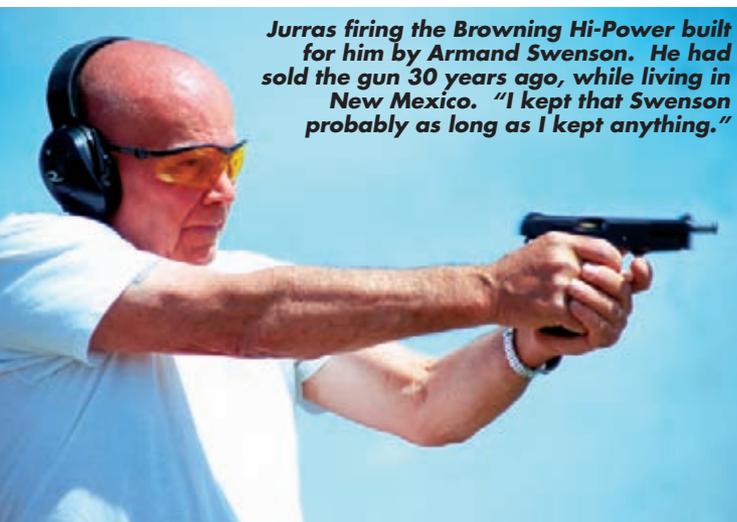


decades away. Most pistol bullets either had a full metal jacket, or if they were hollowpoints, had a half-jacket serving largely as a gas check. The jacket had nothing to do with bullet expansion.

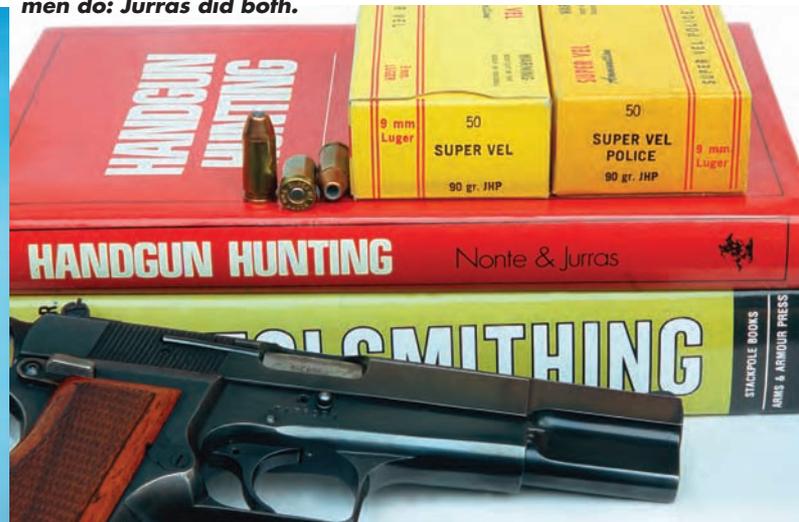
In any configuration, hollowpoints were still subject to the 1,000 feet per second threshold, under which bullets simply wouldn’t expand. So Lee pumped Super Vel ammo well beyond the threshold, such as the legendary 90-gr. 9mm load pushing its conical bullet out at a blistering 1,485 fps. The line expanded, and soon they were producing ammo in all the major pistol calibers. The demand was overwhelming, especially among law enforcement, with a good portion of production going to the Federal government. “We were the world’s biggest for eight or nine years,” Lee told me, looking up. “No one’s ever disputed that.”

The hot stuff caught on quickly among the cognoscenti, where it became so popular the term “Super Vel” became a generic term for all high-performance ammunition. One 32-year FBI vet I know still refers to all hollowpoints as “Super Vel.” It also quickly became

Some men talk, some men do: Jurras did both.



Jurras firing the Browning Hi-Power built for him by Armand Swenson. He had sold the gun 30 years ago, while living in New Mexico. “I kept that Swenson probably as long as I kept anything.”



the stuff of legend. I was talking to a retired State Trooper recently about the .357 he used to shoot in PPC. "I've still got some of the old Super Vel ammo," he confided, and began a story about a shooting where a Super Vel slug went through both sides of a car and the felon between them. This is typical of the Super Vel stories you hear.

There were, of course, those who didn't jump on the train. In one period piece, Lee wrote about receiving a letter of complaint about ammo that hadn't even come out yet!

In the beginning, bullets were constructed in-house, and cartridge cases (with the appropriate "Super Vel" head-stamp) were made by Norma, Sako and later on, Federal. Ultimately, this outsourcing is what caused their downfall. One case vendor began shortening payment terms from 30 days to seven, and delivery became slow and inconsistent, at a time when Super Vel was ordering *one million* .38 cases a week. You can't make cartridges without cases, and things quickly grew desperate. An inopportune strike left much-needed brass sitting on boats at the dock, and cases had to be flown in.

On November 28, 1974, the doors were closed for good. In hindsight, the rapid growth, the combination of competitors supplying crucial components — and then shortening terms while slowing delivery — may have well been the death blow. Draw your own conclusions.

Hunting

As much of a watershed event as Super Vel was in the field of defensive ammo, it had its roots in Lee's first passion — hunting. Specifically, handgun hunting, the pursuit that led him to look for more effective pistol ammo. During and after the Super Vel years, he began experimenting with the massive Auto Mag pistol, hunting extensively with it in Africa and other exotic locales. Perhaps the first semiauto purpose-built for hunting, the Auto Mag was designed around features gathered from five different pistols (including the Walther P38, the M1911 and the esoteric Finnish Lahti), and was phenomenally accurate. It also handled loads that would make a .44 Magnum blink — such as the 240-gr. slug at 1,800 fps it was designed around. The only ammo problems the .44 AMP pistol had was getting loads stiff enough to cycle its massive stainless-steel action.

Sadly, the Auto Mag Corporation had financial problems, but, luckily, when they went under, the pistol lived on. The *Standard Catalog of Firearms* lists no less than eight manufacturers, the last of

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SHOCKING!

I recently returned from the **Shot Show**, the world's largest gathering of shooting sports manufacturers—and wow, was I surprised at the prices! We have always strived to give the reloader the best possible value, but what I found shocked me.

Lee has been making full length reloading dies for more than 25 years; reloading tools for nearly 50 years and have been profitable every year. We buy the steel and raw materials from US manufacturers and our workers are all located right here in Wisconsin. Yet our prices are on average **one half** that of our competitors. We hope they include a tube of lube with their products as you deserve it.

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— JOHN LEE, PRESIDENT, LEE PRECISION, INC.

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HORNADY	546228	39.06
REDDING	80111	55.50

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HORNADY	390556	7.84
RCBS	09210	7.95
REDDING	11010	10.35

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LEE JURRAS

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which was L.E. Jurras Custom, in 1977. Of the less than 10,000 made, Jurras Auto Mags are valued at 35 to 50 percent over production ones, not counting the elaborate cased sets, which were serial numbered LEJ-xx.

After the Auto Mag slipped into cult status (Lee still gets calls about them) another purpose-built handgun boldly ascended as the king of hunting handguns: the single-shot, break-barrel Thompson/Center Contender. From this starting point Lee created the Howdah line of pistols, named after the short, devastatingly powerful pistols once used in India as backups while hunting tigers.

And powerful they were. After serious modification, which involved strengthening the receivers and fitting rear sights by the late Austin Behlert, the Howdah's custom barrels were chambered for proprietary cartridges based on the classic African calibers: .375, .416, .460, .475 and .500, the last of which fires a 500-gr. slug at a cool 1,200 fps. Twenty-five carbines were made, and 100 pistols, five of them in .577

Legends

One of the marks of a great man is that they see greatness beyond them-

selves. "I've been fortunate," Lee reflects. "I've had a lot of good mentors." Among them were J. Frank Hargett, Morris Van Way, Frank Hempstead and Jerry Gebby — names sadly lost to my generation of shooters. It was in this spirit of recognizing the accomplishments of others, however, that Lee and close friend Ernie Wallien founded the *Outstanding American Handgunner Award*. Beginning first under the auspices of Super Vel, the OAHA was an honor bestowed annually at the SHOT Show, and consisted of a bronze statue of a *pistolero*. In its 26 years of operation (from 1973 to 1999) the OAHA was received by such greats as Bill Jordan, Rex Applegate, Jeff Cooper, and in 1979, Lee himself.

The bronze pistolero stands on the shelf above Lee as we speak, sighting his pistol nobly over our heads. Next to him are mementos of Super Vel: a wall chart and an ashtray. Beneath it, the shelf is well-stocked with gun books. Among them are several Lee contributed to: Maj. George Nonte's timeless *Pistolsmithing* (Lee wrote the section on tuning pistols for hi-perf ammo), and *Handgun Hunting*, which Lee teamed wrote with Nonte, who was a close friend. "Obsolete by the time it came out," he says of the hunting book.

Page 69 of *Handgun Hunting* features a photo of the Swenson Hi-Power I've brought with me. Also in the book are incredible stories about Lee's

marksmanship with a pistol — taking a pronghorn at 217 yards, for example. Frankly, I would have dismissed them as fabrication until my last day in Washington, when he and I drove out to meet some people at the vast expanse of a farm where he practices for F-class rifle competition. Two other shooters met us, one middle-aged, one in his 20s. Both had rifles tuned by Lee. After watching them do the serious work with their rifles at 500 yards — Lee shot barely over one MOA with a stock Savage — the pistols came out. I slipped his old Swenson P35 out of its leather Seventrees holster and handed it to him, and it came alive.

The stories are all true. At 70, Lee is a far better shot than I. He points out he was blessed with good eyesight, and he owned an ammo factory. Of all the shooting we did, breaking rocks at unbelievable distances, one shot stands clear in my mind. As we looked for targets of opportunity down the length of a broad irrigation canal, a copperhead slipped into the water some 30 or 40 feet away. Jurras neatly took off his head with the Hi-Power. 

Much historical information about Super Vel, as well as up-to-date technical data on a variety of firearm-related topics, is available on Lee's Web site, www.leejurras.com, including his "bull session" forum.

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