

BURN GUNS

By Paul Smeltzer

Part three of a series

In Part II we disassembled and cleaned our firearm "patient" and determined it is salvageable. One last question to ask before trying to restore a burn gun, is simply "should it be restored"?

This is the money question. It is going to be a more costly process to restore a burn gun than an average abused gun. It will take more time in all phases of the process, and time is money. You could almost buy a new Remington 870, or at least a good used one for what it will cost to restore a burned example. Probably not worth it unless that 870 has a value greater than the cost.

Value is not always measured against cost, Grandpa's 870 that he let you use to bag your first squirrel may have a value to you much greater than the retail price tag of Remington's newest. It's a different equation when you figure in personal value. Now that restoration cost doesn't matter as much, Grandpa's 870 must be restored. The 870 you won at the annual Squirrel Stew contest, not so much, might let that one pass.

If a burn gun can be restored it is up to the owner to decide whether it should. At this point the conversation needs to be about the details as you see them, costs, issues, time, and parts. Let the owner decide the "should it". Most of the time if they brought it to you, it is important to them, important enough to pay you to "fix it".

Things I have learned about firearms and fires:

I thought I would wind up this three part series on burn guns by sharing some miscellaneous tidbits of knowledge gained from my observations of fire damage.

Collateral Damage -

First, there is going to be damage wrought by the firefighters' efforts in extinguishing the fire. In addition to water, which we know to be a great oxidizing agent, there may be a variety of other chemical additives and/or, fire retardants which can eat through finishes and create permanent stains in wood gunstocks. Your

guns being in a safe does not seal them off from these hazards, firefighters sometimes want to break open safes to make sure nothing blows up later.

As soon as you are able to get to these guns they should be rinsed off and at least sprayed down with some sort of lubricant. One customer submersed them in kerosene (without wood), which seemed to do a very good job of preservation. If you get several guns in from a fire you are going to have to store them for some time as you work through them, cosmoline still has its uses, so does used motor oil.



Shrapnel -

Shot gets hot and pistons/wads collapse

Seems most folks just naturally have to store their guns with ammo. So we have an oven full of firearms and their respective ammunition and it is heated to temperatures great enough to cook off the ammo. When all that stops you can have bullets, pieces of bullets, and brass shrapnel embedded almost anywhere.

*Not where you'd normally expect to see
.223/5.56 bullet stored on your AR*



Wood seems to take a pretty good beating sometimes, with little shards of brass stuck in the middle of that fine checkering on that grade A stock.

Bullets and pieces of bullets do a good job of creating dings and dents in metal that were not there before, soft metals in particular get deformed somewhat when hit by an exploding cartridge.

If you really want to create some havoc, keep the guns in your safe loaded, after all "an unloaded gun is just a club", or so I have been told. The ammo in a loaded gun cooks off and you will probably have ruined the gun, and any loaded magazines are a mess.



That nice old Model 10 S&W just isn't looking as nice as it once did

Revolvers really don't seem to handle ammunition exploding in the cylinder well at all. I have had five revolvers which had been stored loaded in the safe, had their cartridges cooked off, and not one has been salvageable. Bad ending to a nice Colt or Smith, just because it made sense to someone to keep a loaded gun in a safe.

Gun Cases -

Those plastic gun cases that a new handgun comes in turn into an exercise in patience when they get enough heat. In fact anything synthetic, plastic, rubber, foam, etc. that can melt, will, and get into some incredibly challenging places. Those soft rifle cases, or gun socks, and slings sometimes are made of material that may not burn, but may melt. Again that is a bad thing in that it will create a lot more work having to clean that melted mess up. Incidentally cardboard boxes in a safe seem to act more like an insulator and protect the gun from heat.

Not this Leupold's best day ever.



Insurance -

Simple question: does your home owners insurance cover your guns, check yes, check no. "I don't know" is not a good answer. If you have insurance that will cover your firearms, do you update coverage as you acquire additions to your collection? Are you aware of your insurance company's requirement for record keeping? Some are fairly extensive and require photos. What about that expensive Night Force scope, is it covered?

This red dot reflex is probably not worth repairing, even if it was given to you by General Robert E. Lee himself.



Optics -

In general optics don't handle fires well, between the heat, water, and the batteries in some, not many survive "good as new." The less expensive ones are not even worth attempting. You might try contacting the manufacturer of the high dollar scopes, to see about the cost of a rebuild. I have not seen many that were useful after being in a fire.

Having your house burn down is probably among the worst things that can happen to you and your family. Your first concern is that everyone is all right; your second thought turns to rebuilding your family's life. Eventually you get down to the more mundane things like your guns.

If they are to have a chance of surviving a fire, they need to be in a safe. A safe protects against direct flame, which is considerably more damaging than being in the safe, which gets hot and acts like an oven, but does not have the same oxidizing effect that an open flame has.

Avoid the temptation to hose down your safe stored guns with excessive amounts of lubricants, with enough heat they will turn into an epoxy like substance. Do not keep any unnecessary plastics or anything that can easily melt in the safe. Don't store your guns loaded or with ammo, or powder. If the worst happens and you experience a fire, rinse off your guns as soon as possible, now you can hose them down with excessive lubricants. Don't write them all off, there may be hope in that pile. Perhaps Grandpa's 870 will survive for your daughter's first squirrel hunt.

*Written by
Paul Smeltzer,
Proprietor of Athens
Gunsmith Service*