

The P-38



My Uncle Jake gave the pistol to Daddy just after World War II. Jake was in the army during the war and had been in, or near, Germany when the war ended. I don't know how he got the pistol. When Daddy first got it, it had the regulation, German issue, black plastic grips. Sometime, within the next few years, Daddy put the white grips on it that it now has.

The Walther P-38 was the German army's replacement for the Luger. The Luger was more expensive to make, less dependable and could not be fired double action. Like the Luger, it is chambered for the 9 mm parabellum pistol cartridge. The "P" stands for "Pistole" and the "38" means that it was adopted by the German army in 1938.

One of early things that I remember about the pistol is Daddy using it to "dispatch" one of our dogs that was afflicted with running fits. The dog had crawled under our house, would not come out and was howling and whining. We were living at the time in Ruth Teaster's house and it was fairly high up off the ground, maybe three or four feet. I don't remember exactly why Mama and Daddy decided to shoot the dog rather than just let him come out eventually. I'm sure Mama was a party to the decision because Daddy would not have just decided to do it on his own. Also, I don't remember much about the dog or being strongly attached to it as I was about some of our dogs.

It was night when it all happened and we were in the house. Daddy took the flash light and pistol and crawled up under the house. All of a sudden, we heard the first pistol shot followed by an out burst of profanity. We could hear pretty good even from inside the house. He had missed. Evidently, the dog would not cooperate with the program and went farther under the house. We could sort of follow Daddy's progress by the scuffling noise as he moved and the fairly frequent profane comments about the dog. Soon, there was another shot followed by still more oaths. I don't remember exactly how many shots it took before he finally hit it but it must have been 3 or 4. We all thought it was very funny but Daddy did not see the humor.

Another, potentially dangerous episode involving the pistol happened about the same time (1948 or 1949) in the same house. We had all been out somewhere, I think to the movies and got home late at night. We all went to bed soon after. Dink and I slept in a room with an outside door and Daddy and Mama slept in a room next door. Dink and I went to sleep in a few minutes and missed the excitement. About 15 or 20 minutes after we all went to bed, Daddy heard someone run through the house. They came from a back room, went through the room Dink and I were in and quietly unlocked and ran through

the outside door that way just beside our bed. Daddy had jumped up, grabbed the P-38 and ran into our room. By that time, whoever it was had already gone leaving me and Dink wide awake and confused by all the excitement. What had happened, evidently, is that we had interrupted someone that had broken into the house. He hid in a back room until he thought everybody was asleep and then tried to make a break for it. Daddy was drilling wells at that time and was often paid for his completed jobs in fairly large amounts of cash. Daddy suspected that someone was after that.

I remember another episode involving the P-38 when I was about 15 or 16. It sounded normal then but seems unusual in looking back on it. Dink, Skeet and I, with two or three others, had planned a camping trip. We were going to hike to some land that Skeet's Dad owned three or four miles out in the country. The place was out by itself and there weren't many people close by. As we started to get ready to leave, Daddy said "Why don't you take my pistol with you?" I knew how to shoot it and had been using my other guns alone for several years. So, along with my spam, spaghetti and assorted other camping supplies, I carried the P-38. There were probably few other 15 year olds in South Carolina "packing heat" like this.

I remember that in about 1957 or 1958, I bought Daddy a shoulder holster for the P-38 for Christmas. Your Grandma/Mama and I were at USC in living in Columbia. I passed a shoe store on Main Street and in the window there was a display of a couple of shoulder holsters. I went in to look at them. The man said that he had not made one for a P-38 but could if I wanted it. I ordered it and Daddy used it for many years. It was custom made for the P-38 and was worn over the left shoulder. The pistol was actually carried up under the arm. The holster had a special feature in that it swiveled to allow the gun to be carried vertically for carry but swiveled down so that it could be quickly drawn if needed. Daddy had to check on things at the various schools at night. There were break ins and vandalism occasionally and he always carried his pistol when checking the schools.

In the summer of 1958 or 1959 the pistol almost became the main actor in what could have been a nasty episode. That summer, Kay was about 12 years old. One day she was riding her bicycle towards Coleman's store, not more than 300 or 400 yards away from the house. A man in a car slowed down and rode beside her, saying something. She did not answer and he went on down the road, turned around and started back towards her. Seeing him do this, she turned her bike around and rode home as fast as she could go. He followed her and just drove past the house. I don't remember just how, but some of the men and boys that worked at the filling stations close by found out what kind of car it was.

I was working at the high school with daddy that summer. Mama called Daddy at work and he came home but the man was long gone by that time. The exact details are fuzzy to me after this long time but sometime within the next couple of weeks, the man came back. I think that Daddy and I had just gotten home from work or maybe we were home for lunch. Somebody at the service station came to the door and told Daddy that the same man and car were down at the service station and he was getting ready to drive

off. Daddy jumped up, ran for the P-38, told me to get Grandpa's pistol and to come on. By the time I had gotten Grandpa's .32 automatic, Daddy was already out the door and running to his car or truck, I can't remember which. I do remember that it was the fastest ride I ever had. We slid around all the corners on the way down to the service station. They came out, said the car was already gone and told us the make and color.

Daddy took off in "hot pursuit". I never really understood the term until then. The man had headed out of Pacolet towards Spartanburg. We went out past the high school and by the time we left the city limits we were probably going close to 100 miles an hour. But the man had too much of a head start and must have been flying because we never caught sight of him. In retrospect, it is probably a good thing that we never even saw his car. I have absolutely no doubt that Daddy would have made every effort to catch him, including running up on sidewalks, through red lights, etc. I also have absolutely no doubt that, if we had caught up to him, that Daddy would have shot him. He would not have tried to force him off the road or tried to get him stopped. He would have just pulled alongside him and shot him in the head.

The folks at the service station had gotten his tag number. It was traced to a divinity student at Bob Jones University of all places. He was arrested and brought to trial for, I think, attempted kidnapping. Mama, Daddy, and I think Kay, went to the trial. The man showed up with his father and a psychiatrist who testified that the man was being treated for "problems". He escaped jail with the provision that he continue treatment. Mama said that Daddy never spoke to the man. Evidently, however, Daddy did speak to the man's father. He said something like "I'm sorry about your son's health but if he ever comes around Pacolet again, I will kill him." Daddy wasn't big on rehabilitation.

(I'll digress a minute from the P-38 story. Daddy's driving skill in the chase stemmed a little from his experience in the bootleg whiskey business in his youth. The modern day Stock Car Racing industry says that its origins were in the fast cars and drivers in the Piedmont and mountain areas of SC and NC that hauled illicit whiskey and tried to elude federal tax agents ("Revenooers"). Daddy had done some of this in his late teens and early 20's before he was married. I plan to tell more of this in another story. A lot of it was comical. Daddy told the story that one time he was carrying a load of whiskey way up in the mountains in an "A model or T model" Ford. He had just climbed up to the top of the mountain and needed a quart of oil for his car. He stopped at a small country store and asked the man out front to put him in a quart of oil and then went on inside the store. Evidently, the man had not had much experience with cars. When Daddy got back outside the man was just finishing putting the oil into the car – directly into the carburetor not into the crank case of the engine. The car would not start. Fortunately, the little store was at the top of the mountain. Daddy said he started down the mountain on the dirt road and kept trying to start the car. After several miles of severe backfiring and producing clouds of white smoke, the car finally started. This was not the inconspicuous way that a person with a load of illegal whiskey wanted to travel.)

I remember an episode when Claudia was about 15 and we were visiting in Pacolet. We went with Daddy down to the Pacolet River and shot the pistol at sticks and bottles floating by. On about her first shot, Claudia broke a bottle out in the river and Daddy was very impressed.

There was another episode involving the P-38 when we were living in the Inn. It probably happened during the first year that we lived there. Daddy came down often on the weekends and helped us work on the Inn and to advise us on what to do. He had his own key. This night we were not expecting him. It must have been about 11:30 pm or so and everybody had already gone to bed. I heard a sound like a door being shut somewhere in the Inn, outside of the part that we lived in. There were many unidentified, strange noises often heard in the Inn, but this was absolutely the sound of a door. I quickly got up, put on my pants, got a flashlight and Grandpa's .32 automatic pistol. I put in the clip, chambered a bullet, and went downstairs to investigate. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I could definitely hear someone walking down the hall towards me. There was a door with a lock bolt between the lobby where I was and the hall where someone was walking. Not knowing what to expect but knowing that I might have to shoot somebody, I opened the door and shined the flashlight down the hall. It was Daddy coming in late from Pacolet. He grinned when he saw that I was carrying the little automatic. He patted the P-38, which he had stuck in his belt and said something like "What are you going to do with that little peashooter?" Luckily, another "Gunfight at the OK Corral" was avoided.

I inherited the pistol when Daddy died in 1991. The shoulder holster evidently had long ago worn out. The biggest use that I have had for the pistol was a few years ago when Claudia, Scott and I took classes to get our Concealed Weapons Carry Permit. The instructor was discussing the various pistols that we had brought and were going to use in our shooting practice. When he saw that I had a P-38, he stopped the class and talked for about 10 minutes about the merits of the gun and how much he had always wanted one. P-38 pistols are not particularly rare and even unfired pistols can still be bought. For some reason, the "bad guy" in action movies often uses a P-38".