

Elmer Keith: The Magnum Legend

in [Kat Ainsworth](#), [Revolvers](#)

Published On: August 30, 2025 Updated: August 30, 2025 BY [Kat Ainsworth](#)

Estimated reading time: 7 minutes

In this age of Insta-fame and YouTube celebrity, it should surprise no one that many of the men who built the gun industry have been either forgotten or minimized. These men are often referred to as outdated, out of touch, and the worst kind of Fudd. Of course, the vast majority of them have long since passed away. One gun legend who shouldn't be forgotten is Elmer Keith. Here's why.



Table of contents

- [Elmer Keith](#)
 - [Childhood Injury](#)
- [The Gun Writer](#)
- [Cartridge Development](#)
- [The Sixgunner, By Elmer Keith](#)
- [Long-Range Handgunner](#)
- [That 600-Yard Shot](#)
- [Hell, I Wish I Was There](#)

Elmer Keith

Google will tell you Elmer Keith is an “American rancher,” and while it’s true he did some ranching, that’s not what he’s best known for. Elmer was born in 1899 in Missouri and passed away at the age of 84 in 1984. In those decades, he did everything an outdoor enthusiast does, including ranching, guiding, tracking, hunting, and cartridge development. Above all, I’d describe him as a gun writer and hardcore handgunner.



Elmer loved revolvers and magnums, and that never changed. (Photo/Africa Hunting)

Elmer Keith was a regular guy who understood pain, hardship, and the importance of persistence. The event most pointed at to illustrate this took place in 1911, when Elmer was caught in a hotel fire that burned him horrifically over his entire body. As a result, he was scarred in a way that created a contracture pulling his chin toward his right shoulder. But that wasn't the worst of it. His left hand was so severely damaged that the top of his hand was twisted backward and permanently connected to his wrist. According to an article written by John Taffin, when Elmer passed, Elmer told his father he "had to have a left hand so [he] could hold a rifle and do normal things." When doctors flat refused surgical attempts to straighten out the hand, Elmer turned to his father (remember, he was still a child at this point).

Childhood Injury

Elmer said his father grabbed a gallon of 100-proof Old Grand-dad, a Kentucky bourbon. His mother gathered bandages. She treated them with deer tallow. It's a folk remedy that creates a skin barrier, reduces inflammation, and aids healing with vitamins A, D, E, and K.

His father proceeded to get him good and drunk and re-broke the hand to straighten it. Elmer passed out, and when he came to, his hand was straightened and laced to a mink stretching board (which is, quite frankly, genius). What came next was years of stubborn refusal to let the hand remain useless, and in the end, Elmer had a largely functional hand, which he admitted was quite ugly.

Why tell this somewhat lengthy story? Elmer Keith is the grandfather of everything magnum, a stellar sixgunner, and an accomplished shootist. And, oh yeah, he had a maimed hand as a child that he—as a child—forced himself to rehabilitate in an era where that just wasn't done.

The Gun Writer

Starting around 1924, Elmer spent decades as a prolific gun writer. He wrote for a variety of magazines, including American Rifleman, Guns & Ammo, Western Sportsman, and Outdoor Life (the latter of which was my first introduction to him, albeit years after he'd died). There was also a stretch in there where he was the executive editor at Guns & Ammo, and one can't forget the many books he authored. It's well known that editing his written work for publication was a rather hefty job due to various grammatical errors and words strung together. Even so, his written work is phenomenal, and I admit his books line my shelves.

Cartridge Development

Magnums are what Elmer Keith is most often associated with, and for good reason. He's responsible for creating the 44 Magnum, 357 Magnum, and 41 Magnum. If you get the impression he enjoyed big bores, you'd be correct. He was once quoted in Guns & Ammo saying, "I like one-shot kills where possible and prefer to do all my hunting before I shoot," and that's something we'd agree on. But it was more than just thinking magnums were a good idea. He enjoyed cartridge development, and he was good at it. I can only guess whether this had something to do with his already having overcome a near-catastrophic hand injury and wanting to make the best of it.



Cartridge development and fine-tuning loads were a passion of Elmer's, and he had the exploded cylinders to prove it. (Photo/Forgotten Weapons)

Over the years, Elmer was involved in the development of loads like the .333 OKH, .334 OKH, and the .338-.378 KT (Keith-Thomson). He also created what became known as the Keith meplat—a broad, flat-nosed bullet created for superior hunting applications and effective wound cavities.

The Sixgunner, By Elmer Keith

Yes, there's a book written by Elmer titled "Sixguns." However, his experience and skill with revolvers went far beyond the book itself. Interestingly, he was also known for doing dual-wielding demos, something that proves how hard he worked to get his left hand functional. It's worth noting that the two guns in question were typically 44 Magnums. Elmer didn't take shortcuts.



An accomplished hunter, Elmer had hunted a long list of animals with both handguns and long guns. (Photo/Guns & Ammo)

Long-Range Handgunner

Back when Elmer was trying to popularize long-range handgunning, it was absolutely not a thing. He was generally not taken seriously about it. He insisted handguns weren't for only up-close work, and he was right. While that might be what most of us use them for, they do have longer applications. That brings us to the next topic.

That 600-Yard Shot

An urban legend in the hunting world says Elmer Keith shot a mule deer with his handgun from 600 yards. He took the shot with his 44 Magnum—no surprise there. He said he had to walk the shots in to drop the buck. Another hunter wounded the animal. Elmer's shot stopped it from running off or making him do a lot of tracking. He fired the shots with his 6.5-inch-barreled 44 Magnum and had to go prone to make the shot.



So, did Elmer Keith shoot a buck with a revolver from 600 yards away? Yes, he did. (Photo/Jeff Tank Hoover via American Handgunner)

Did it happen? It did. Not only did Elmer have a witness, but he was straightforward and honest in his retelling of events. He never claimed to make a miraculous, shocking shot. Face it, the man mastered revolvers and likely forgot more about ballistics than any of us will ever know.

Hell, I Wish I Was There

Elmer's final book was his autobiography, "Hell, I was There." It came out in 1979, and if you're lucky, you can find old copies in used bookstores. Amazon occasionally gets copies of varying prices, but it's never cheap (although I did once grab one at a thrift store for two dollars).

If you want to understand the men whose shoulders we stand on in today's era of semi-autos and 9mm, you have only to look at those like Elmer Keith. I like to think he would've been a fan of the 10mm, but I'm pretty sure he wouldn't have liked how popular 9mm is. He loved revolvers, something that seems to be increasingly rare, and magnums were his

favorites. The man could shoot, write, and create new ammo. Elmer Keith is the kind of gun guy we need today, but we have none like him, and that's a shame.

Take a look at the [Elmer Keith Museum](#), which is now closed, unfortunately.

Find some of Elmer Keith's books [here](#).



[Kat Ainsworth](#) (Outdoor Writer and Author)

Kat Ainsworth Stevens is a prolific outdoor writer based in North Texas. Her love and enjoyment of firearms extends to both self-defense and hunting, and she's driven to teach safe gun handling. Kat's the author of several books and thousands of articles as well as a successful editor with more than a decade of experience in marketing. With experience in everything from defensive handgun use to field dressing a deer, Kat's background is varied and extensive. She firmly believes in the importance of protecting the Second Amendment as well as the First.

When she's not behind a gun or processing her own game meat, Kat can be found trapping, boating, doing yoga, and mudding. The outdoors and the Lone Star State are where she belongs.

Experience

Author:

Handgun Hunting and anthologies including *The Deer Shot Back: And Other Hunting Tales* and *How Not to Shoot Fish and Other Deer That Got Away*.

Dedicated Outdoorsman:

Year-round enthusiast of hunting, trapping, and fishing.

Advanced Training:

More than 1000 hours of training in defensive handguns, long guns, edged weapons, self-defense law, force-on-force, handgun retention, and related topics.

Focused Specialty Skills:

Expert witness. Massad Ayoob Group certified Deadly Force Instructor and graduate of Active Self Protection The Practice & Preparation of Being an Expert Witness.

Related Tags:[Feature Articles](#), [Guns](#), [revolver](#)