

Bottle Rockets

The Fourth of July is a very retrospective time of the year for me, frequently taking me back through my past and the associated misty memories, tinged like old photographs from another era. This simple fact is not because I am a patriotic historian... perhaps it is a simple combination of my being a bit of a recovering fire bug and having been born on the First of July. Coming in headlong to forty-nine years old, a lot has changed about how we celebrate this holiday and our Nations ever tightening laws to protect us and our neighbors from our selves but as I look at old scars on my hands, those learned traits in my formative years harken back to the old ways.

In the era of my adolescence things were quite different from our current state of civilization... as children we still received gifts that have long since been outlawed, such as tiny lead smelters and plastic melting, molding sets where one could make soldiers and toy cars... and we survived. We carried bb guns around our neighborhoods and flew small fuel powered airplanes out in the streets. Sure... we got hurt some but we all lived to grow older and more experienced. So, it is no wonder that the Fourth of July was celebrated with pyrotechnics in ones own back yard and those celebrations frequently involved burnt grass and a water hose emergency at best, a call to the fire department at worst. There was a hierarchy to these fireworks too, starting as a five year old with sparklers made on wires that became red hot branding irons scarring our flesh, graduating to further burns with firecrackers and unspeakable acts of violence against all members of the insect kingdom , eventually reaching the pinnacle of cheap fireworks... the bottle rocket.

Oh bottle rockets of my youth, representative of all that was truly holy in my prepubescent years, why did the authorities malign you so? For those that might have missed out on this important historical artifact, let me tell you about it since our school system has refused to teach it. These were truly fireworks for the masses... sold by the gross, yeah... one hundred and forty-four, twelve dozen and cheap as dirt. With a coupon they were normally \$1.44 for two grosses of them and that was a whole lot of firepower for a twelve year old, filling a medium grocery sack and a few dozen set aside for mischief later on in the year. A bright red toothpick diameter stick about twelve inches long with what appeared to be a slightly lengthened firecracker glued to the end with exciting manufacturers names like "Air Traveler" and "Black Cat". A beautiful color label in each cellophane wrapped dozen, with graphics and exciting phrases like "Extra Loud Report". Even just sitting in the bag, they were exciting with just enough touch of menace and danger to excite any youngster, making the mind reel at the power one had just obtained.

In theory, these bottle rockets were designed to be fired from a bottle... shot vertically where they would carry their third world country

paper payloads to a safe height before exploding... but like all theories, (and cheap third world products for that matter) there were exceptions. Some of them had very little delay between that satisfying phsssst of liftoff and the neighborhood rattling kaboom of the "extra strength report" exploding just about head level, particles griming our greasy little faces. Then... there were the ones that had a long, long time between takeoff and that long awaited explosion that would echo on our neighborhood blocks. Those long ones often exploded in the grass somewhere, or on a roof, releasing their fiery payload on the dry, sun parched Texas surfaces... burning anything flammable... including your neighbors house. Now... that is just one set of variables, the other big variable was how they were launched themselves. Quite often, we would get a short piece of pipe and use it like a gun and shoot them at each other in what were called "Bottle Rocket Wars" as we mimicked the scenes we saw every night over our dinner while the Vietnam War was televised into our young and ever so malleable minds, afterward limping home to spray Bactine on our wounds and hide our powder burned t shirts deep in the hamper, thinking we had some deeper understanding of the horrors of war.

Like all wonderful rites of passage, there were variables that existed with the users of the bottle rocket that were dependent upon the temperament and personality of the individual... like the two little sociopaths that lived next door to me trying to burn down a particularly disagreeable neighbors home by taking fence pipe and using it like a mortar to fire their attack over their house and across the street and onto his house. They were both wearing plastic army helmets and giving each other fire missions, and their father the neighborhood drunk was trying to capture the Kodak moment with his 126 instamatic... no kidding. You might as well have given them a howitzer and assault rifles, the results couldn't have been much safer or less climactic.

It was no surprise to adults when my home State, Texas decided to just outright ban the import and sale of bottle rockets completely... after all, you can only burn so many houses and pastures down before the authorities feel it necessary to protect their taxpayers... but it sure came as a surprise to me and my little fire bug buddies. With age though, I have found it to be quite paradoxical as I go about checking the hoses to be sure they are functional and ready for rapid deployment, wondering what those little psychos that live on the other side of the alley have planned for the Fourth of July this year. If I had some good old bottle rockets, I would show them but good... burn the little mullets right off their heads I would. Maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised about that ban, now... where did I put that phone number for fireworks anonymous?