

## **NOISE ON THE FOURTH**

**Chuck Pinney**

Along with Christmas, the Fourth of July was a holiday that I looked forward to when I was a child. Christmas was long. Including the preparation and the aftermath, it took most of the month of December. Searching for a tree in the woods, cutting, delivering, and decorating it, shopping for gifts, then hiding them in our small house. Then after Christmas, there was a whole extra week of no school, to play with new toys and engage in winter sports, mostly sledding.

By comparison, Fourth of July lasted only one day. But what a day! From dawn to dusk, the town was alive with explosions from firecrackers, dogs hiding under beds, small kids with sparklers and tiny firecrackers were watching teenage boys with cherry bombs and Roman candles. Shortly after 5pm, there was quiet while everyone had dinner. Then the remaining stores of firecrackers were unloaded, dogs went back into hiding, and the celebration resumed. It was understood that that everything noisy had to be used up on the Fourth. To set off a firecracker on the 5th would be disturbing the peace. Moreover, we knew that the noisy stuff had to be gone before dark, because darkness would bring an aerial display of rockets. This show didn't last long, because no one in Zaleski could produce the two things required for a big fireworks expenditure—Money, and Kids—lots of both.

Each July 4th, I wanted to be older. I thought if I was older, I would be entrusted with more money, and I could buy more fireworks. But then, it didn't matter how old or rich I was. Suddenly, I couldn't buy fireworks any more. The Empire of Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor and we were at war. Many types of food were rationed. Fireworks were not just rationed, they simply weren't available. I discussed the matter with my friends. We suggested several solutions:

The war would probably be over by July, and fireworks would be available. No need to worry until mid-June. Borrow Dad's rifle or shotgun for celebrating on the Fourth. I told Eddie Chesser that if he had his dad's gun, I would get under the bed with my dog. We all agreed that no adult would allow us to waste ammunition. Permissible Powder: this was an explosive approved by the Bureau of Mines for use in blasting inside a coal mine. It had a much lower intensity discharge and was unlikely to cause a cave-in: too expensive, and too dangerous.

Black gunpowder: this could be made at home. It was often used instead of Permissible Powder by miners and also in old muzzle-loading guns. It was a combination of Saltpeter, Sulfur, and Charcoal, and was cheap. But it had to be tightly confined in the chamber of a gun, or the coal vein of a mine. If wrapped in paper like a firecracker and laid on the ground, it would burn brightly and quickly, but didn't really explode.

We finally ran out of alternatives and went home in defeat. At dinner, I told the family about our discussion. My mother and sister were relieved that we hadn't blown up anything, but Dad sympathized. He said he thought he had a solution, and he'd tell me about it and demonstrate on Saturday. I could invite my friends, if I wanted. Meantime, I was to go to Elmer McKibben's grocery and get a five-gallon lard can. Elmer purchased lard from his wholesaler in these 5 gallon cans, and had the can sitting on his counter. He would sell the lard, usually a pound at a time, putting it into a cardboard tray, wrapping it in butcher paper and tying it with string. He gave the empty cans to customers. The cans came in handy as containers or big buckets, as they had a sturdy bail, and also a tight-fitting lid.

Saturday finally came, and Dad assembled the following things on a table on the back porch: The lard can, a pound of carbide, a tablespoon, some matches, a pitcher of water, a small glass, a hammer, and a small nail. My friends arrived and looked over this array of things. They

recognized everything on the table, but didn't see how this might solve our problem of noisemaking on the Fourth of July.

Dad came out the back door with his miner's lamp, and started speaking to us. "Charley told me about your discussion of what to do on the Fourth of July to make noise, and I suggested something that might solve the problem. I asked all of you to come here today so that I would only have to demonstrate this once. Thanks for coming. This material is called carbide. You know that if I put carbide and water into the little tank at the bottom of the lamp, it will form a flammable gas, which escapes out the little opening here at the center of the reflector. On the reflector, near the little opening, is a carbon wheel and a flint, like a cigarette lighter. I have loaded the carbide and water in the lamp, and now I'll light it." He struck a spark, and a flame jumped out of the opening, and the lamp was lighted. "So that's the usual use for carbide. To mix it with water and produce a flammable gas, called acetylene. But now, I'm going to show you another use for carbide. I'm going to make a cannon!" There were expressions of surprise from me and my friends. Dad turned the lard can upside down. He put the nail in the center of the can, and hit it with the hammer, driving a small hole in the bottom. He opened the lid, poured a tablespoon of carbide into the can, and poured a glass of water on the carbide, which started to bubble and smoke. He jammed the lid back on, turned the can on its side, and lighted a match. "The gas is building up pressure inside the can. When I bring the match flame close to the hole in the can, it will explode." He did so, and a shotgun-sized explosion blew the lid clear across our backyard.

World War II was not over by July, 1942, but we used up all of dad's carbide on the Fourth.