

The Boys and the Chemistry Set

In another lifetime, when television was brand new and microwaves were years from invention. Back before Homeland Security, terrorists, political correctness, the internet, video games, recording devices for movies, cell phones and everyone “saving you from yourself” or minding your business, there were simpler times.

In this era of the late fifties and early sixties there were very intelligent and very bored kids.

In my tiny rural town, down South, there was a small group of boys, my brother included, who were notorious with their mischievous natures, for getting into trouble. Not the kind of trouble of today where one human being is mean to another or hurts someone, but what I call “creative mischief”.

Back in this time period, kids got really cool presents for birthdays and Christmas. Gifts for boys were very science or sports oriented, sports being baseball and football. The science interest was due in part to the space race. Hopefully little boys would grow up to be scientists that would somehow save the world. This being said, the most popular gift of the day was a Chemistry Set.

I would doubt if one could even be found these days, and if one was found it would probably be considered something lethal. These “toys” were not watered down anything. They contained real chemicals, weather instruments, measuring devices, gyroscopes, microscopes and many other small bits and pieces for performing experiments. They came packed in large metal, fold-out cases with a place to store these treasures for future use.

Also before the internet was the public library. The boys would visit the library for hours in the summertime. It was their research laboratory and only a short bicycle ride away. Maybe you might see where this is headed but parents were oblivious, being more concerned with weekend outings than what their darling children could be doing. Besides, going to the library seemed like a fine idea. They were growing their minds for the next school year.

What the parents didn't know was that the boys, always being fascinated by western movies, dime store spy novels and heroes making their own bullets were studying how to do this. So these quiet children put together the formula to make gun powder! The ingredients at that time were readily available and it wasn't long before the group began playing and experimenting. By the time school began that year they had become quite expert at small explosive devices, mostly used like fireworks. Not really anything harmful.

Then along came Halloween. One of the boys got the idea to put some gunpowder in one of the cannons at the local Civil War monument. They had argued previously over how far a cannon ball would shoot out of a cannon. They discussed circus people being shot out of cannons, all manner of stories ensued. There were all sorts of opinions. And then it happened. One of the group double dog dared the others to prove it.

It was Halloween evening, late. Scientific curiosity had gone awry. The boys headed to the Civil War monument and there they stuffed their home made gun powder into the barrel of one of the cannons. Of course they didn't have any cannonballs so the stuffed the barrel with bodock apples (the grapefruit sized fruit of the southern bodock tree, very hard and green and sticky with a milky substance that oozes out),as many as they could stuff in the barrel.

They picked the skinniest kid to light the fuse as he could run the fastest. The other boys waited patiently across the highway. It was after midnight. James lit the fuse and ran like the wind. He made it just to the edge of the lot when the flash and the resounding BOOM hit the cool night air.

It sounded as if the Earth had split into! The horseapples (bodock fruit) exploded into a million pieces and splatted out, but the flash from the barrel was a site to behold! The noise was deafening and nearby windows rattled in in their frames in the blackness. The other boys had already made it two blocks down before James could get across the highway.

He was the only one to see the caretaker running across the street in just his underwear to the still smoking cannon. Running around the monument , perhaps to see if anyone had died. As down the street the boys feared death from parents and the retaliation of the Civil War memorial people as they waited for James. When he finally quit swearing at them, they headed home, each one separately sneaking in to the safety of their warm beds.

In the morning they feared the worst but everything was eerily quiet. The explosion didn't even make the paper. All the boys breathed a sigh of relief and swore they would never do anything like this again, at least until the Sunday afternoon something in our backyard exploded while the preacher was visiting. But that's a story for another day.

The chemistry set my brother had received is gone now. But he and the boys and that set will live in my memory and my heart forever.

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