

When Fireworks Go South
by Rick Bragg

Southerners, I believe, should not be trusted with fireworks. It is not in our blood. The North had most of the artillery. The South, which does not always think things through, entered the War believing its officer class could merely hurl mint juleps at the encroaching Yankees and glare insolently. The Gallant John Pelham, Robert E. Lee's vaunted cannoneer, many have been the last Southerner to be truly trusted with a lit fuse. Since him, there has been a long line of Southerners who light bottle rockets with a Camel non-filter cigarette and shoot for the moon, only to see the projectiles blaze ankle-high through the Johnsons-grass, scorching cats and burning worms.

I love my people, but you know there is truth in this. Even when we are sober, bad things happen. Even when we do everything right, things can still go wrong.

Take the case of poor Rob Roy, a suicidal, wirehaired Jack Russell terrier in Valley Head, Alabama. He had a short tail. On the Fourth of July about 10 years ago, it got some shorter.

"Mammaw named all her dogs Rob Roy," said Elizabeth Manning, a graduate student at the University of Alabama. "I'm guessing this was Rob Roy number twoo..."

This Fourth began, like most, with the lighting of the short fuses.

"At dusk, all the women would sit up on the porch, and all the men would go into the field in front of the house and shoot off fireworks. My Uncle Jeff was firing off one of the prettiest ones, and he had it lit and they backed off. Rob Roy, who had a reputation for biting wheels on cars, ran to it, and it shot off right before he got there."

A spark got caught in his tail, which began to smoke. Rob Roy ran in wild circles, as Jack Russells are bred to do, so fast that the flock of grandkids on his tail could not catch him to put it out.

"He finally just sat down and dragged his butt through the grass," Elizabeth recalled.

"Mammaw just watched."

She is 88.

"Well, goosey gander, goosey gone," she likes to say.

I, myself, am careful when it comes to fireworks. Before inserting an M-80 into a bed of fire ants, I follow careful safety protocols.

1. Twist together two M-80s, for more "Holy smokes!" potential.
2. Giggle.
3. Run.

I am qualified to opine on fireworks because The Gallant Pelham, killed by the Yankees as he tried to rally his troops, is buried in my hometown of Jacksonville, Alabama. His statue gazes down upon us – and on the loading dock of the old TG&Y store. I have always believed the Fourth – because of all the booming that goes on – is also a celebration of his life, though he was fighting to dissolve the Union and all. But every year, as the sky fills with fire, I wonder what he is thinking.

Probably: “Duck.”

I know firework safety is a serious matter. That is why I now leave the shooting of them to professionals. In my hometown, we go to the field beside State 204, set our lawn chairs up in the back of my brother’s pickup and watch the falling dusk transform through the miracle of gunpowder. Or, if I am on the Gulf, we watch the colors rain into Mobile Bay.

I think, some years, I would like to shoot one last bottle rocket into the dark, though I am too old to run away.

But at least if my tail were to set fire, I would be easy to catch and put out.