

# The Fourth of Kaboom

Antique cannons and American celebration

The Fourth of July is a special holiday, when Americans — regardless of race, religion or creed — gather together to celebrate independence and appreciate explosives.

Sure, the country may be in the death-clutch of brutal economic recession. Yes, one could make the case that our nation is experiencing an identity crisis in which cultural, demographic and socioeconomic distinctions are dividing and conquering us. But that doesn't mean we can't gather 'round and watch things blow up, for "old times' sake." Right?

Nothing says old times sake like an antique cannon. And in Oregon, antique cannons are rare, but legal.

A quick look into Oregon gun statutes reveals that firearm laws do not apply to antique artillery or replicas — antique meaning any firearm manufactured in or before 1898, or any replica of such a firearm.

So what does it take to get your hands on an antique cannon for the distinct purpose of celebration or patriotic reenactment?

Turns out just a few phone calls to local firearms enthusiasts and a bit of discretion. Discretion, because for some reason, people who build, own and will allow you to borrow antique cannons don't really want all that many more people to know about it — patriotism is wrought with diplomacy.

My contact was pleased to help, but elected to remain nameless — let's call him Uncle Sam.

"Come over to my place and I'll give you a crash course," Sam tells me. It's a weekday and he's in the process of packing to leave town for the upcoming holiday. Although I requested his presence at the cannon firing, he isn't coming along.

Sam's crash course included a brief explanation about the use of black powder and cannon fuse. "Don't stand in front of the barrel when you pack it," Sam warns. "And use the hand you don't write with, just in case."

Sam cautions and reiterates that it is not legal for me to fire projectiles out of the cannon. He also explains that I must not discharge the replica over a waterway or a roadway.

Loading the cannon with black powder and igniting the fuse results in a very loud kaboom, but no ordinance will be propelled. The result will be an ear-splitting sound, a noise that some might say embodies 236 years of independence ... or bullheaded arrogance.

Driving out beyond city limits, all the while offering prayers to every god/goddess one can think of so as not to get pulled over with a cannon in the trunk, is a peculiar type of American experience. Even though it is legal, it doesn't feel comfortable.

Dragging a several-hundred pound replica of a late-1800s era battlefield gun up a logging road and into the forest is like trying to break the chains of an overbearingly cruel monarchy — there is only one way forward and it hurts like hell. Measuring powder, sparking it up and setting it off (safely) is tedious. All of which could lead one to ask: Why? Why do Americans play with explosives to celebrate freedom? And why the hell would anyone own a cannon?

Lighting the fuse and running for cover as quickly as possible, I came to the conclusion — because freedom is loud, and I guess patriotism is too.

Happy Fourth of July, America, please detonate responsibly. **ew**



PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

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