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# Offbeat Oregon History

Dynamite used to  
be a regular part of  
Oregon life

BY FINN J.D. JOHN  
For the Sentinel

There was a time, not so many years ago, when every Oregonian over the age of 12 had access to dynamite.

Not that they could simply walk into a hardware store and buy some — although in the early years, they could. But even as late as the 1960s, the laws restricting explosives purchasing were mild enough that it wasn't uncommon for farmers to buy the stuff for stump removal, or to work a mining claim. And you don't have to go back too many years before that to reach a time when anybody who wanted dynamite could get some — for good purposes or bad ones.

As if that weren't enough, anyone who wanted to make his own dynamite could do so with great ease and total anonymity. All that was necessary was a bottle of glycerin oil, some nitric acid and a few pounds of sawdust.

"A boy can make it and there is no law to prevent it," M. Bennett remarked in the St. Helens Columbian newspaper in 1885. "The sale of opium and poisons are restricted, but dynamite, the greatest and most terrible destructive engine of the 19th century, may be bought by anyone at 36 cents per pound."

This is an aspect of life in a frontier state that's not much remembered today. Of course, personal dynamite ownership is unheard-of now. In 1970, federal legislation restricted explosives to people who'd been granted a special permit by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Today, nobody without a permit is even allowed to carry a stick of dynamite across a room, to say nothing of actually buying one or lighting it off.

Not many people would disagree that this change is a good one. Looking back through old newspaper articles from the late 1800s and early 1900s, it's clear that universal access to dynamite occasionally makes for some high drama, even in a remote frontier state like Oregon.

The manufacture  
of dynamite

Dynamite was invented in 1867, famously, by engineer and peace-prize founder Alfred Nobel in Sweden. Nobel figured out that although nitroglycerin was too unstable and dangerous to use for construction blasting, if an absorbing agent like sawdust were used to soak it up, it became relatively safe to handle.

Commercial dynamite was soon widely available for anyone who wanted to blow stuff up. And by the early 1880s, terrorist organizations like the Irish Republican Brotherhood were already starting to use it to drive home political messages.

Most dynamite at that time was made locally, since it was tricky and dangerous to transport. A dynamite maker would mix nitroglycerin and sawdust together and roll it up like a cigarette in heavy paper. To detonate it, one needed a blasting cap — like a heavy firecracker tucked into a bundle of dynamite sticks. Blasting caps could be set off with a burning fuse or with an electrical pulse sent from one of those plunger-type magneto detonators that Wile E. Coyote used to use in practically every Road Runner cartoon.

The strength of dynamite was represented with a percentage figure: 50-percent dynamite is made of a 50-50 mix of nitroglycerine and sawdust, by weight; 90-percent (also called "Gelatine") is 90-10; and so on.

Occupational  
hazards

Almost all dynamite in the 1800s was fairly safe when it was fresh, but it got more unstable and dangerous the longer it sat around. That's because over time, the nitroglycerin would leach out of the sawdust, saturating the paper wrapping and leaking out and pooling in the bottom of the dynamite case. Remember, the whole reason dynamite was invented was because liquid nitroglycerin was so dangerous. Any little jar could set off a box of dynamite if it had been allowed to sit long enough.

Dynamite roasting  
on an open fire

There were some other issues, too, that made it hard for blasting professionals to buy life insurance. Dynamite "froze" at 45 degrees, and became unusable. This was great for safety if you had to transport it in cold weather, but if you had a blasting operation to undertake when it was 25 or 30 degrees out, it meant you were probably going to be thawing your dynamite out beside a woodstove or campfire — an activity that was just as dangerous as it sounds.

That's how Irvin Reed of Bend got his bell rung in December 1905. He had 24 sticks laid out on a box near a campfire while his two co-workers labored to drill out blasting holes for a ditch they were excavating in the frozen ground. Then, as Reed was bending over the dynamite — probably gathering a few sticks up, intending to use them — they went off, hurling him some distance and ripping most of the clothes off his body. Amazingly, he survived, although he was partly blinded and disfigured by the massive blast.

The Dynamite  
Kid

One early Oregon story involving dynamite, relayed by Richard Dillon in his book "Shanghaiing Days," concerns a young man named George Banks. George was one of those rock-solid young men, poised and confident and morally upstanding. In the mid-1890s, he had a job working on the portage railroad at Cascade Locks. One day, George was down in Portland picking up a load of freight, and he missed his return sailing on the riverboat. So there he was, stuck on the wharf with the crates of merchandise he was supposed to bring back — probably stuck there until the next morning.

Luckily, some friendly, helpful fellows noticed George and offered to help him out. They made a deal and soon the strangers were back with a boat of some kind (Dillon doesn't say, but it was probably a steam launch).

After the strangers had helped

George load his crates onto the launch, they cast off and started heading downstream. George was puzzled by this at first, until one of the strangers informed him — no doubt belligerently, with much flexing of muscles, to encourage him not to try to fight his way out — that he was a sailor now, and they were bringing him to Astoria to put him aboard his new ship.

"You ain't gonna shanghai me," George retorted, reaching into his pocket. "I'll blow you to hell first."

His hand came out full of blasting caps.

Presumably that's the point at which the would-be shanghaiers realized the boxes they'd helped load on board the boat were full of dynamite. They also soon thereafter learned that George's nickname among his friends was "Dynamite Kid."

Needless to say, the boat immediately turned and headed upstream to the construction site, where George unloaded his cargo, paid the men as agreed, and went about his work.

But stories of dynamite being used to foil crime are vanishingly rare compared with accounts of the stuff being used on the other side of the law. Dynamite offered magnificent prospects to criminals. Roadbuilding crews of all sorts tended to have it around, and some of them didn't do a particularly good job of looking after it, so crooks quickly learned it was easy to get. We'll talk about some of the more famous and infamous examples of dynamite-related crime in next week's column.

(Sources: Dillon, Richard. Shanghaiing Days. New York: Coward, 1961; Bend Bulletin, 12-15-1905; Eugene City Guard, 2-21-1885; St. Helens Columbian, 5-22-1885)

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. To contact him or suggest a topic: [finn2@offbeatoregon.com](mailto:finn2@offbeatoregon.com) or 541-357-2222.

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