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Aiming High: Guns as Fireworks in American History

Largely because of the efforts of the National Rifle Association to reduce gun accidents, there are a great many practices that gun owners no longer consider acceptable. As an example, it is a little startling to look at photographs of police marksmanship teams from the 1930s, and see them pointing their revolvers straight at the camera. This simply isn't done today, because all modern competitors know that you do not point a gun at anything that you do not intend to shoot.

In the last few years, New Year's Eve gunfire into the sky has become a major concern of big city police departments in the United States, and with good reason. It is certainly true that a bullet fired *exactly* straight up into the air will not be an enormous hazard when it lands. When a spent bullet falls vertically, it will have only the velocity that gravity gives it. It would take fairly unusual circumstances for a low weight bullet fired *exactly* vertical to be dangerous when it fell, such as a bullet hitting the soft spot on a baby's head, or hitting someone's eye who was looking up.

Of course, freak circumstances happen. At the National Park Service museum at Gettysburg, they have two bullets that were recovered from the battlefield that are fused together, nose to nose. Apparently, these bullets had a head-on collision in mid-air. What are the odds of that happening? Probably about the same as that .22 rimfire bullet coming back down and landing in someone's eye, or doing permanent brain damage to a baby. Would you want to explain to that baby's parents why shooting a gun into the air wasn't really all that dangerous, and their baby just happened to be one of those million to one circumstances?

For a heavy bullet, such as a centerfire rifle slug, or a large pistol bullet like .45 ACP, gravity provides enough energy to cause a serious injury, and perhaps, under the right circumstances, a fatal injury. I remember some years back, reading about a spent round fired somewhere outside of Disneyland coming down in the park. It penetrated a guest's hand, causing a very painful injury.

While a bullet fired straight up is unlikely to be lethal when it lands, a bullet fired into the air at an angle is another matter. The bullet's velocity has two components, one in the *horizontal* direction, and one in the *vertical* direction. The bullet rises, and gravity eventually reduces its *vertical* velocity to zero. Then gravity takes over, and it starts to fall again. When that bullet returns to the Earth, the velocity in the *vertical* direction will only be what gravity gives it. What reduces velocity in the *horizontal* direction is drag, and only drag; the velocity in the *horizontal* direction could still be lethal.

We have certainly seen plenty of film clips the last few years showing Islamic militants celebrating their latest victory against Israel or the U.S. by firing AK-47s into the air. When I lived in East San Jose, on New Year's Eve we could hear "firecrackers" going off in groups of six. At least here in California, some people derisively refer to this practice of celebrating holidays with gunfire aimed skyward as "Mexican fireworks." But this practice is not just a south of the border custom, nor confined to certain countries in the Mideast. While researching the history of guns in the United States, I was surprised at how commonly Americans used to celebrate by firing guns skyward.

A seventeenth century Virginia law prohibited shooting “any guns at drinking (marriages and funerals only excepted)...”¹ Maryland, in 1642, also ordered that, “No man to discharge 3 guns within the space of ¼ hour... except to give or answer alarm.”² Gunshots were the common method of warning neighbors that the Indians were attacking. Because so many people were shooting guns while celebrating, it was impossible to be certain that gunshots indicated an Indian attack.

Colonial Americans did a lot of shooting, and they weren’t always very careful about what direction those shots went. A statute adopted at the Massachusetts 1713-14 legislative session complained, “Whereas by the indiscreet firing of guns laden with shot and ball within the town and harbour of Boston, the lives and limbs of many persons have been lost, and others have been in great danger, as well as other damage has been sustained...” the legislature prohibited firing of any “gun or pistol” in Boston (“the islands thereto belonging excepted”).³

Elias Pim Fordham was a British immigrant to America who settled in Indiana in 1817. His account of a Christmas Day village feast describe how the young men celebrated the holiday:

The young men had their rifles out, and were firing *feux de joi* [shots of joy] almost all the preceding night, all the day till late into the evening. It reminded me of Byron’s description of the Moslems firing at the feast of the Ramadan in Constantinople—but we backwoodsmen never fire a gun loaded with *ball into* the town,—only from all parts of it, out towards the woods.⁴

¹ William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 1:401-2. Spelling modernized.

² William Hand Browne, ed., *Archives of Maryland* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1885), 3:103.

³ *Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay...* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, 1878), 3:305-6.

⁴ Elias Pim Fordham, ed. Frederic Austin Ogg, *Personal Narrative of Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky; and of a Residence in the Illinois Territory: 1817-1818* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1906; reprinted Chicago: Library Resources, Inc., 1970), 147.

At least Fordham's friends knew that there was some risk involved! In cities, the risks were somewhat higher, and the laws stricter because of it. Two days before Christmas, 1828, Mayor Joseph Gales of Washington, D.C. issued a proclamation:

WHEREAS it has been too much the habit of idle and inconsiderate persons, on Christmas and New Year's Day and Eve to indulge in firing off guns, pistols, squibs, and crackers, and burning of gun-powder in divers other ways, to the great annoyance of the peaceable inhabitants of this city, and to the manifest danger of their persons and property—all which practices, where they are not contrary to the express ordinances of the corporation, amount to "disorderly conduct," and as such are punishable by law:

Now, therefore, with a view to prevent such disorderly practices, I, Joseph Gales, jr. Mayor of Washington, do enjoin upon all Police Constables, Ward Commissioners, and others, whose duty it is to preserve peace and good order, to be diligent in the execution of their several duties, and to apprehend and bring to justice all persons so offending against the laws.⁵

A PROCLAMATION.

MAYOR'S OFFICE,
Washington, Dec. 23, 1828.

WHEREAS it has been too much the habit of idle and inconsiderate persons, on Christmas and New Year's Day and Eve to indulge in firing off guns, pistols, squibs, and crackers, and burning of gun-powder in divers other ways, to the great annoyance of the peaceable inhabitants of this city, and to the manifest danger of their persons and property—all which practices, where they are not contrary to the express ordinances of the corporation, amount to "disorderly conduct," and as such are punishable by law:

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Given under my hand, at the City of Washington, this
23d day of December, in the year of our Lord
one thousand eight hundred and twenty-eight.

Dec 24—

JO. GALES, jr, Mayor.

⁵ "A proclamation. Mayor's office, Washington Dec. 23, 1828," Printed Ephemera Collection; Portfolio 193, Folder 10, Library of Congress.

During the 1830s, “Christmas shooting” took the same place on the frontier that Christmas caroling did in the America of my youth. Gert Göbel’s description of the Missouri frontier tells us that at Christmas, there were no religious observances, and no gifts exchanged:

There was just shooting. On Christmas Eve, a number of young fellows from the neighborhood banded together, and, after they had gathered together not only their hunting rifles but also old muskets and horse pistols from the Revolutionary War and had loaded them almost to the bursting point, they went from house to house. They approached the house as quietly as possible and then fired a mighty volley, to the fright of the women and children, and, if someone did not appear then, another volley no doubt followed. But usually the man of the house opened the door immediately, fired his own gun in greeting and invited the whole company into the house.... After everyone had chatted for a little while, the whole band set out for the next farm, where the same racket started up anew. In this way, this mischief was carried on until morning, and since, as a rule, a number of such bands were out and about, one could often hear all night the roaring and rattling of guns from all directions.⁶

Accounts of similar practices—apparently of German origin—appear in many parts of the United States, both on the frontier and in settled regions, in the 1830s.⁷

We recognize this quaint practice of celebrating by shooting guns into the air as a leftover from a time when Americans were a little more reckless, and population densities were low enough that your spent round would *probably* not hit anyone. That was then; this is now. If you don’t know exactly where that bullet is going to land, don’t pull the trigger.

Another point worth considering: don’t give this practice an ethnic label, even in jest. Shooting guns into the air in celebration is as American as apple pie.

⁶ Gert Göbel, *Länger als ein Menschenleben in Missouri* (St. Louis, [1877]), 80-81, quoted in Walter L. Robbins, “Christmas Shooting Rounds in America and Their Background,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 86:339 (1973) 48-52.

⁷ Robbins, 49-51.