



June 30, 2017

And so suddenly, here we are, halfway through the summer...

We've charred our hot dogs, cut our lawns and picked up twisted pieces of metal and hunks of blasted paper from pre-July 4th fireworks. That time known in almanacs and psych wards as the Dog Days of summer is upon us.

It's a time when Roman poets said "the sea boils, wine turns sour, dogs grow mad ... causing to man among other diseases, burning fevers, hysterics, and phrensies."

In other words, just another Tennessee summer with a humidity of 477%.

The Romans, not having our advanced weather satellites and TV weather people, believed all this hot weather and loopy behavior was caused by a star, specifically, Sirius, the brightest star in the Northern Hemisphere in July and August. The Romans also called Sirius the “Dog Star,” apparently because with their limited imaginations and heavy invasion schedule, the best thing they could find to blame the weather on was their dogs.

My dogs are pretty clear on what’s causing the seasonal craziness. They’ve been watching the portents, too. We were all resting serenely in the living room with the air conditioning on high one night two weeks before the 4th when the walls shook, a blinding light flashed through the curtains and what sounded like screaming weasels crackled overhead.

My dogs exchanged looks of baffled outrage and disgust. Then the four of them dove into my lap, including two 160-pound wolfhounds. The cat tried to join in, but there were just too many twitching feet. Including mine. Until I lost all feeling in my limbs.

John Adams envisioned all this back in 1776 when he signed the Declaration of Independence. “It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of the Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more,”

said Adams, who in some accounts added, “And let us Not Forget to heartily scare the Bejebers out of the Hounds.”

But it was George Washington who set the actual tone for the 4th in 1778 when it looked like we might actually beat the biggest army in the world and dodge the English rope. On the 4th of July, he issued a double ration of rum to all his men and fired off a massive artillery barrage. For years afterwards throughout New England, they didn't have howitzers so each town tried to outdo the other with the biggest bonfire, made up in no small part by empty beer barrels. Because things always turn out so well with alcohol and rip-roaring fires.

Fireworks weren't widely available to the average continental. That's because black powder rockets were still considered weapons to kill — or at least stupify — the enemy. Rockets came from China, where sometime in the 1200s, Emperor Li Tsung decided to impress his royal court with an aerial display of the flashy weaponry. When one of the rockets skittered to a sputtering stop in front of Empress Kung Sheng, she gathered up her skirts and bustled off in a huff. When the Empress ain't happy... well, the party's pretty much over.

Gunpowder missiles had a sketchy military history after that. Soldiers called them “ground rats” or “fire rats” because once you set one loose, they were just as likely to goose your own guys as the enemy. In terms of taking out enemy combatants, they weren't especially helpful, although observers watching troops dive for cover noted they did have

a certain entertainment value.

This year, Americans bought 210 million pounds of pyrotechnic entertainment, followed in many cases by the traditional visit to the hospital emergency room.

Statistically, fireworks injuries are creeping up along with fireworks sales. The biggest percentage of the injured are young teenagers left unattended in backyard fireworks celebrations. There are no available statistics on canine fireworks injuries, probably because dogs have the good sense to claw their way under a table at the first loud pop and stay there through the rocket's red glare. We have our traditions. Dogs stick to theirs.

This time of summer, it's our dogs' custom to melt like cheap plastic across our couches and chairs. Occasionally, we roll them over to prevent bedsores. That's all the festive they can handle in this summer heat. They celebrate the 4th of July the same way they did July the 3rd: face down in the couch cushions.

Until comes the inevitable pop....whreeeeeeeee!.....BOOM!!!

And when they all pile on me, wolfhounds included, I see stars and sometimes hear voices.

Here's an idea: this year if you get the urge to take your paycheck and blast it to bits, light a sparkler instead. Wave it around merrily. Say a quiet, heartfelt thanks to our forefathers and all our soldiers and sailors since. Then march back inside and let old men and big dogs enjoy their freedom

from tyranny, too.

Have a safe — quiet — Fourth of July!