

Bill Rea ? Too old for fireworks?

There was a time when the holiday we just finished with was one of my favourite times of the year. Indeed, for many years I would wonder why so many people called Firecracker Day ?Victoria Day.? Didn't they know what day they were talking about?

The fireworks that went with the day was something I would look forward to for weeks in advance, in anticipation of sitting in the backyard, watching the bright colours light up the night sky.

We used to put on our own displays when I was a kid, with my folks buying one of the sets of fireworks one would have been able to buy in many stores over the last couple of weeks. This was long before I heard there were such things as massive fireworks displays that were held to attract the public. Since I had only seen the type of displays my folks could afford, I had no trouble being impressed with what I saw. Besides, it was lots of fun to watch.

For the first couple of years that I can remember, it was just my parents, my brother and I taking in the show. Then my aunt, uncle and cousin showed up, contributing some fireworks of their own (my uncle once brought a collection of cherry bombs, much to my dad's consternation). And in time, the family next door brought their assortment into our yard. That meant the annual fireworks display eventually became quite lengthy, not that I was objecting. I recall there was one year when we had three Burning Schoolhouses. I didn't mind at bit.

My dad, being the take charge (some might call it ?bossy?) guy he was, took it upon himself to handle the ignition duties. He was also a guy who enjoyed cigars, and smoked one when ever the opportunity presented himself (if I was ever stuck for a Father's Day idea, I always knew I had a fall back that would never go wrong). The annual fireworks display presented one of those opportunities. He would use the tip of his stogie to light the entertainment. It worked, although by the end of the show, the cigar in his kisser looked a lot like someone had slammed a heavy door in his face.

These were the days when actual firecrackers, also known as cherry bombs and a couple of other names, were relatively easy to obtain. Kids, of course, were not supposed to possess them, and kids, of course, could get hold of all they wanted, despite the rules. The neighbourhood kids my parents disapproved of always had an ample supply, and they were happy to share their delinquent pleasure. It was also against the rules to have them at school, so naturally there were some kids who brought them to school, if only so they would have something to have fun with on the way home.

When I was in Grade 6, one of the guys named Brian set off a small cherry bomb in class. The teacher had yet to enter the room, but she soon came in, detected the smell and demanded to know what had been going on. Needless to say she was not pleased. And it's been more than 40 years since I heard anything about Brian, but I'm pretty sure he never became a rocket scientist.

In time, cherry bombs became a lot harder to get. As well, restrictions increased in Toronto on people holding private displays. So the Victoria Day shows in the Reas' backyard became history and my father found other excuses to smoke his cigars.

In time, I learned about the more professional displays that were out there, and I was suitably impressed with what I saw. I have attended many over the years, but I have to confess my interest has decreased as time has gone by.

They attract crowds, which I have nothing against, but they can make it difficult to get in and out of places.

About 20 years ago, I was working in a municipality that boasted a most impressive fireworks display for Canada Day. My first year working there, I made a point of taking in the show. The problem was so did everyone else, so finding a parking spot was proving to be a major ordeal. I had left myself lots of time, anticipating such difficulties, but things were a lot worse than I had been expecting. As I was looking for a spot, I saw the local mayor walking to the park where the display was to be presented. He saw me and guessed what my problem was. We spoke briefly, and I guess there was a certain amount of frustration in my voice.

?There's a lot down the street on your right,? he said. ?Park there. Lots of room.?

The lot he was referring to was at the local police station.

?I can't park there,? I protested. ?I'll get towed!?

?No you won't,? his Worship responded. ?I did.?

?You're the mayor!? I reminded him.

I ended up parking several blocks away, meaning I had to treat myself to a very long two-way walk. I was a lot younger in those days.

I will state here that I did not take in any displays Monday night. In fact, I never intended to, and made no effort to get to one. I will grant the lights would have entertained me. But I couldn't face the effort of getting there. And getting home, late at night, would be worse. It wasn't like when I was a kid, when the display was a 30-second walk from my bedroom.

There will be other displays, like Caledon Day and Canada Day, which I might be able to take in.

But at my age, I have to be mindful of what I can stay awake for.
Not for the first time, I wish I were a kid again.

