

Boomer Boy Toys

I don't remember how I came to be in the toy department of a local fabric store. Toys were not their specialty, and their toy department consisted of a few feet of shelf space with perhaps a dozen budget-priced toys. Within this meager collection was a true gem. Four inches of gray molded plastic. Sinister looking, except for a strange translucent cup on its bottom. A baking powder submarine! Instantly I traveled almost 60 years back in time. I had gotten this submarine as a free toy in a box of cereal. My mother packed baking powder into a little compartment under the cup and placed the submarine into the tub where I was taking my nightly bath. It immediately dove to the bottom and sat there, lurking in the dark recesses of our daffodil colored bathtub, while the baking powder slowly filled that translucent cup with a bubble of air. When the bubble grew large enough the submarine stealthily climbed to the surface, its sleek gray conning tower and molded plastic periscope breaking through the waves as it scanned the horizon for enemy shipping. It stayed on the surface just long enough to torpedo any ship that foolishly ventured within range. Then it would tip to one side, disgorge its bubble like a farting codfish, and return to the safety of the depths.

Many years later I would discover that submarines normally did not surface before attacking. As early as World War 1 they discovered it was unhealthy to reveal yourself to the ships you were about to sink. Those ships had a nasty habit of shooting or ramming the sub while it was on the surface, so submarines attacked from beneath the waves. No matter. The fleet of ships under my command never learned this lesson. Regardless of how many times they had been sunk before, they floated in blissful ignorance while the baking powder worked its magic in the submarine that lay beneath them.

For a brief moment I was tempted to buy this vintage toy, but I sadly realized its time had passed me by. I no longer had a fleet of bath toys for it to attack, and for that matter I hadn't sat in a tub for years. I doubted that it would hold the same fascination for me if it sat on the floor of my shower stall, fizzing baking soda bubbles out of its translucent cup. I reluctantly left it on the shelf, hoping some mother would buy it for her five year old son so he could become the feared captain of this instrument of destruction.

The joy of finding a baking powder submarine sent my mind on a journey back through time, remembering all the glorious toys I'd had as a kid. There were wooden paddles attached to a red rubber ball on a long elastic string. For some reason they always featured a picture of a cowboy on a bucking bronco, expertly swatting a ball with the paddle. I would flail away with these for hours as the ball jerked crazily on the string. Every once in a while I'd actually hit the ball with the paddle. I think that was supposed to be the object of the game, except that if you got a good, solid hit on the ball it often snapped the string and sent the ball sailing across the living room. You could tie the string back together several times before it got too short to work with. Unless, of course, the ball hit one of Mom's favorite bric-a-bracs first. Either condition would end the game. There was also a strange smelling plastic glop that I squeezed out of a metal tube onto the end of a soda straw and blew what was supposed to be a permanent bubble. It

wasn't that permanent, though. I think the first or second bubble I blew popped when it landed on Mom's Danish Modern sofa and the resulting goo dissolved the finish on the armrest. That was the end of that toy. Less destructive toys, like a Weirdo model of Freddie Flameout in his blowtorch powered jet fighter or my Wham-O Instant Fish Aquarium lasted a little longer. Not that the fish lasted, of course. They disappeared the day after they hatched. But the aquarium lasted a long time. There were also prophetic toys, like my gold-colored tin Cadillac with tall tail fins. This had a friction motor on the back wheels, so you could drag it across the kitchen floor a couple of times to rev it up and then set it down and watch it scoot into the den. What made it prophetic was the fact that on the bottom was stamped "Cadillac. Sign of high quality. Made in Japan." At the time, we thought it was hilarious that anyone could associate high quality with the words "Made in Japan." That was a couple of decades before Japanese cars started showing American auto manufacturers what quality really meant.

The most memorable toys, though, were the ones that appealed to my imagination and didn't destroy anything. Often they were my "big present" for Christmas. The earliest one I remember is my "Steve Canyon Jet Fighter Flight Helmet and Squawk Box." OK. That may not have been the exact name of the toy. It might not have even been an authorized "Steve Canyon" product, as I've since seen pictures of Steve Canyon collector toys that didn't look like the one I had. All I know is that it was cool. It was a plastic replica of an Air Force flight helmet with a slightly transparent yellow face shield that slid down in front of your eyes. It came with a hand-held gray plastic microphone that connected to a red plastic speaker that hung on your belt. Load that speaker up with four D-cell batteries and everything you said into the microphone came out in scratchy, distorted pilot talk. "Roger, Red One. You've got a Mig on your tail." The second sentence was spoken as an afterthought, as if you were telling someone they had a spec of chocolate frosting on their upper lip. It was clearly understood that the Mig would soon be blasted into oblivion. I spent hours running through the house, keeping up a running commentary with my wing man. I'm not certain what my mother thought of these conversations, or more importantly what the ladies in her Bridge Club thought of them, as the only flying terms I actually knew were "Roger," "Mig," and "Tail." I suspect my monologues were a bit repetitive, but they must not have been too annoying as that toy lasted a lot longer than my plastic bubble goo. Long after I'd outgrown the helmet, the microphone and speaker saw yeoman duty in Science Fair projects, Halloween costumes, and practical jokes.

My next memorable toy certainly appealed to my imagination. As a matter of fact, it was much more appealing in my imagination, an imagination fueled by an overabundance of TV commercials, than it was in reality. It was a genuine Mattel belt buckle derringer! This finely tooled agent of Death by Deception looked exactly like an ordinary belt buckle. Ordinary, that is, if you ordinarily wore a five pound, brick-shaped gleaming chrome belt buckle decorated with an intricate engraving of a derringer. On TV, it looked positively foolproof. Captured by a bad guy, the hero meekly held his hands in the air while the bad guy stood in front of him, a pistol aimed casually at his chest, as he gloated over his prisoner. Suddenly, with one quick twitch of his stomach, the good guy released a catch on his belt buckle. A spring-loaded lever flipped the

derringer out of the buckle, aimed it at the bad guy's stomach, and fired. Caught by surprise, the bad guy dropped his gun, clutched at his gut, and slowly sank to the floor. The hero quickly snatched the derringer from the lever on his belt buckle, showing that it could also be used as a single shot pistol. Assuming, of course, that any evil accomplices who surrounded the hero would be so surprised at the unexpected demise of their boss that they gave the hero time to reload.

The reality wasn't quite as grand. To begin with, nobody ever took prisoners when playing cowboys. You blazed away at each other until one or the other was slain. Since the guns weren't real, that never happened. Instead, you blazed away until one of the antagonists became so outraged at the utter lack of reality displayed by his opponent that he would stop shooting and start shouting "I shot you! You're dead." There was only one possible response to this, and that was "No you didn't. You missed! I shot you! You're dead!!" And thus the gunfight would degenerate into a war of words.

The other reason the belt-buckle derringer never lived up to my imagination was that nobody in my neighborhood ever wore a five pound silver belt buckle unless it contained a cleverly hidden derringer. Everyone had seen the commercials many times, and the chances were pretty good that your opponent was wearing one himself. This made it difficult to achieve the element of surprise. Instead, the dramatic belt buckle scene had to be carefully choreographed by kids who wanted to recreate the commercial. "You come up from behind and get the drop on me. I'll drop my gun and raise my hands. Then you walk around in front of me and stand right here." At this point in the game the belt buckle would need to be loaded and cocked. You couldn't keep it cocked all the time, as it had a distressing habit of going off whenever you ran, walked, or laughed at a good joke. Once the nefarious trap was set you put your plan of action into effect. Raising your hands, you appeared to be frightened into helplessness as the villain walked in front of you. One quick twitch of your belly and. . . another quick twitch and. . . two or three massive pelvic thrusts, possibly combined with a jumping jack and. . .

One of the neat things about the derringer that came with the belt buckle was that it shot Mattel's new "Shootin' Shell" plastic bullets. A gray plastic bullet was spring loaded into a gold plastic cartridge. Load this into the derringer, and when the derringer was fired the plastic bullet actually flew out the barrel and traveled a good five or ten feet. Or at least it did when the spring was new. Unfortunately, the fact that the derringer actually shot a bullet meant that it was impossible to hide the fact that it fired before it had fully snapped into position. It shot the plastic bullet at about a 45 degree angle to the direction you were facing. This would unfortunately totally miss the villain who had his gun pointed at your chest, but if you were lucky it would take out the evil sidekick who was standing beside him. More often it would skitter under the couch, where it would lie undiscovered until it clattered up the hose of Mom's vacuum cleaner.

If the derringer belt buckle was less than a total success in its own right, at least it set the stage for the ultimate cap gun, a Mattel Snub Nose .38 with a black plastic shoulder holster! Forget the Hopalong Cassidy cowboy guns, the Mattel Fanner 50, or the Chuck Connors' Rifleman lever action carbine. How often did you look out the window of your

mom's station wagon and see a real cowboy strolling down Main Street anyway? But you saw lots of men wearing suit coats, and any one of them might have had a .38 tucked under his armpit. All the cops on TV had one. And here was one that I could slip under my own coat as I stalked the blacktop jungle, looking for bad guys. Except, of course, that the only place I ever wore a suit coat was to church on Sunday. I didn't think there were any bad guys at church, and even if there were I was pretty sure my mom wouldn't let me wear my shoulder holster there. Never mind. She did let me wear my old suit coat when I was playing detective, and although it was too small for me it was still large enough to hide my .38. Sort of. The coat was pretty tight across my shoulders so if I stood up straight it pulled my shoulders back and my coat curled open, revealing the gun under my left arm. Actually, that looked kind of cool, like the picture of the detective on the box the gun came in. If I wanted to hide it I had to stoop forward with my shoulders hunched. It helped if I leaned a little to the right, as that made sure the left side of my suit coat covered the gun. I used to shuffle around the house like a shifty-eyed Quasimodo, ready to snatch my trusty .38 out of its holster at the first sign of trouble.

My snub-nosed .38 used Mattel Shootin' Shell bullets, just like my belt buckle derringer, but it held six of them to the derringer's one. This meant there were six times as many gray plastic bullets for Mom's Electrolux. Not only that, they used Greenie Stick-em caps! Ordinary cap guns used perforated roll caps. Fifty shots to a roll, and you could buy a box of five rolls for a nickel. Even if your allowance was only a nickel a week, one week's allowance bought enough caps to put blisters on your trigger finger. The trouble was, they didn't look like anything in a real gun. You had to open a compartment in your cap gun, insert a roll of red paper, and then feed one end of the roll through a winding channel. You never saw cowboys or detectives doing that on TV. And when you fired your cap gun, a roll of burned paper curled up above the hammer. How could you hit anything with dead paper blocking your sights? The very appearance of it was embarrassing, like walking around with a length of toilet paper trailing out of your jeans. Greenie Stick-em caps, on the other hand, were round, self-stick caps that you peeled off and stuck to the back of each Shootin' Shell cartridge. Then you loaded the bullets into your gun just like the heroes you saw on TV. Never mind the fact that Greenie Stick-ems cost about five times as much as roll caps. And never mind the fact that after you fired them you had to peel the dead cap off the cartridge, whereupon it would stick to your finger like a fresh booger. These were cool! Of course, if it came to a showdown with one of your less-cool friends he had fifty shots to your six, but that just meant you jumped into the "I shot you!" phase a little quicker. (Naturally Mattel had a solution to the problem of limited firepower. You could buy extra Shootin' Shell bullets and carry an entire bandolier of ammunition, all pre-loaded with Greenie Stick-em caps of course. All it took was a couple of years' worth of allowance.)

When I was a child, I played as a child. But when I grew to be a man, I gave up childish toys because that's when I got my AC Gilbert Erector Set. OK. Maybe at age eight I wasn't fully a man, but to a budding engineer this was the greatest toy in the world. Steel girders, metal wheels, pulleys, axles, a battery powered motor - all packed into a sturdy metal case. (Sturdy, that is, until my older brother accidentally stepped on it.) It was the stuff that dreams are made of. When I first got it I carefully followed the

directions to make the creations shown in the instruction book. A giant metal robot with red wheels for eyes. A windmill. A grain elevator. The novelty of following the instructions soon wore off. Even though I lived in Indiana, I did not personally have a whole lot of grain that needed elevating. But the Erector set came alive when I ignored the instructions and let my imagination run wild. I could build a steel bridge that let my green plastic Army tank cross the yawning chasm that separated the couch from the coffee table. I could build an electric car that rattled across our kitchen floor and scared the bejesus out of the family dog. I could build a catapult that threw empty thread spools clear across the living room so they clattered across the tile in the hallway. If I could dream it, I could build it. And if I was building something especially big and I ran out of tiny screws, I knew just where to find more in Dad's workshop. I might have to search through several coffee cans and tobacco tins until I found some that were the right size, but they were there. Somehow, though, Dad always knew I'd raided his workshop. It wasn't until I had kids of my own that I realized that if I'd just bothered to put all the cans back in the cabinet where I found them, he might not have suspected he'd been robbed.

As the years went by, the Erector set became less of a toy and more of a tool. I didn't get it out because I wanted to play with it, I got it out because I wanted to make a jig to hold pieces of a balsa-tissue airplane while the glue dried. Or I wanted to make a working mock-up of a medieval Trébuchet for history class. Eventually, like all toys which survived my childhood, it was appropriated by my younger brother. I didn't mourn its passing at the time because by then I was into cars. It wasn't until years later that I realized what I'd lost. Then came the glorious day when I was a father, my son was old enough for an Erector set, and I found one in an antique store! Steel girders, metal wheels, electric motor – and a sturdy metal case that had already been trodden upon! Not only that, it was a bigger set than I'd had as a kid. There were even more pieces than my set had!

People who say you can't recapture your childhood are wrong. I've had lots of fun with the Erector set I bought for my son. What is true, however, is that every kid is different. My son played with the Erector set, but it didn't fascinate him the way it fascinated me. Maybe some of it is the age we live in. When you grow up with stuffed animals that speak seven different languages and video games that let you fly a spaceship in an intergalactic war, a pile of metal girders and bent metal wheels seems pretty tame by comparison. And when you can microwave a bag of popcorn in 60 seconds to eat while you surf through 347 cable TV stations, spending an hour disassembling the last thing you built just so you can build something new seems like a terrible waste of time. The Erector set slowly gathered dust while my son grew into a man, and it was ignored in turn by each of his younger siblings. It wasn't totally ignored, though. I still built things with it once in a while. And then one day my son came home from college and asked for help with a project for his Machine Design class. "I have to build a mechanical car that will go straight for three feet and then make a right-hand turn" he announced. "Oh, and it's due on Monday." Some things never change. I only had to think for a moment.

"I'll bet we could build one with your Erector set" I answered. And we did.