

Outdoors

English — shot through with shooting

Few speakers of American English realize how many of our expressions can be traced back to firearms or their use.

When we say a politician was a “flash in the pan,” for example, most of us have no idea of what a flash in the pan really is. We use the term to mean a person or thing which begins in a big way and then fizzles out, but the phrase originated in Colonial days when all firearms were flintlocks.

The loading process included placing a small charge of gunpowder in a pan mounted on the side of the barrel, after which the weapon was cocked. When the trigger was pulled, a flint was driven against a hardened steel surface from which sparks fell into the pan, igniting the priming charge. The flame – or “flash” – from that event passed through a hole in the barrel wall to reach the main charge and fire the gun.

But that hole could get blocked, in which case the priming charge only produced a flash and puff of smoke in the pan but the gun did not go off. From that, the meaning of the term “flash in the pan” has evolved to signify gaudy beginnings which bring only disappointing – or no — results.

Another such phrase in daily use without conscious reference to firearms is “going off half-cocked,” meaning speaking or acting without prior thought.

Firearms with external hammers which were supposed to be cocked before firing – in those days practically all guns – have an intermediate “half-cock” position to be used as a safety. When on half-cock, a gun should not fire, even if the trigger is pulled, but mechanical malfunction or damage to the gun could occasionally cause the hammer of a loaded gun to fall from the half-cock position and discharge the weapon.

This was called “going off half-cocked.” It still is called that among shooters, but the general public has adopted the phrase to signify any hasty and unconsidered action or speech.

Then there’s “shooting from the hip.” To a shooter, these words mean firing without raising the pistol to eye level so the sights can be used, especially after a fast draw. Unaimed shots rarely accomplish anything except making noise, and neither do the hasty, ill-considered actions or statements that the phrase has come to mean in modern conversational English.

A little thought will doubtless bring to mind dozens of other sayings in everyday usage which have lost all connection to the shooting conditions or events in which they’re rooted.

“Keep your powder dry,” “to shoot down” a suggestion, “quick on the trigger,” “score a bullseye,” “shooting blanks,” “miss by a mile” or “a miss as good as a mile,” “a dud (as of an idea),” “in the sights (or crosshairs),” “misfire” (as of a plan or an idea), “in a crossfire,” “out of ammo” or “... bullets,” “direct hit,” “hot as a pistol,” “scattershot” or “shotgun approach,” “draw a bead,” “not worth the (gun-) powder to blow up,” “double-barreled,” “high caliber” and “hired gun” are examples I can think of offhand.

And these hardly scratch the surface of a whole vocabulary of gun-related sayings stemming from hunting game or the military



Photos by John Wootters

The author experiences a genuine “flash in the pan” (see text) with a British “Brown Bess” flintlock musket from the American revolution.

Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

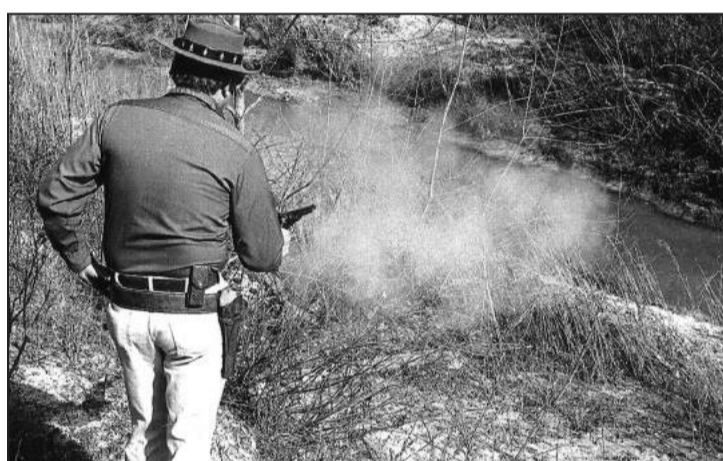
experience (e.g.: “machine-gun speaking style”).

We often forget that this country was won, secured and defended with firearms, which are so ingrained unto the American psyche that even our greatest artifact, our language, is riddled with shooting-related expressions.

Some came down to us with the mother language, the king’s English, but by far most of these shooting-bred idioms were native-born on this side of the Atlantic.

Persons who disapprove of guns, their use and their possession are simply turning a blind eye to one of the richest and proudest traditions of our people. Americans have been noted for skill with firearms for as long as they’ve been known for their love of liberty ... and for the same reasons.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen’s Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.



“Shooting from the hip” may have been popular with gunfighters in TV westerns, but in real life the term means an ill-considered action undertaken without due preparation ... such as aiming. Here the author demonstrates how to miss when shooting from the hip with a black-powder sixgun.