Fireworks

Did you know that fireworks were accidentally discovered during the Han Dynasty in China around 200 BC? According to pyrouniverse.com, the Chinese people would throw green bamboo on a fire when they ran out of other firewood, and as it burned it would emit a loud pop, scaring everyone who heard it. The people surmised that if the noise frightened people and animals, it might scare evil spirits also, so the custom became an important part of their festivals.

Later, during the Sui and Tang Dynasties (600 to 900 AD) another accidental discovery occurred. Chinese alchemists, hoping to develop an elixir of life, were working with sulfurous mixtures. To their surprise, one combination produced an explosion.

“During this period of chemical discovery and experimentation, the alchemists kept records of certain poisonous and dangerous compositions that should never be mixed - including one particular mixture consisting of sulfur, saltpeter (potassium nitrate), honey, and arsenic disulfide. The texts make reference to such a mixture igniting accidentally while being cooked over a fire, resulting in a large, bright, hot flame that burned the hands and faces of the alchemists tending to it, and even burnt down the shack there were cooking it in! Despite the warnings, some alchemists were intrigued by the mixture, and continued experimenting with it to try to find ways to make it more powerful. Their crude mixtures weren't as powerful as modern gunpowder because it didn't contain as much potassium nitrate, but nevertheless burned very hot and bright. It was named huo yao, or the "fire chemical" or "fire drug". It was soon discovered that if the "fire drug" was put inside of bamboo tubes and thrown in the fire to be ignited, the gases produced by the burning powder would blast the tube apart with a much louder and more powerful bang than just green bamboo. The firecracker was born.” (pyrouniverse.com)

Eventually bamboo stalks were replaced by stiff paper tubes, and then by increasingly stronger housings. It was discovered that the explosions could be used to fire projectiles, not only for civilian entertainment, but also for warfare. The noise alone scared horses and enemies alike and the projectiles occasionally even hit their targets.

News of the discovery of gunpowder was soon spread across the world to Europe by Franciscan and Dominican Friars. Firecrackers were brought from China to England and given to a Franciscan monk named Roger Bacon who taught and lectured at Oxford University. He became one of the first Europeans to study, write and lecture on the subject of fireworks.

And now you know the first of the story!