

WPA

Western Pyrotechnic Association

Newsletter

Volume 11 - Number 2 - October 1999



Important Notice:

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Online with the WPA

Keep in touch with all of your WPA pyro friends with the WPA internet e-mail list server. You can view the posts in two ways, "List Format" or "Digest Format". With list format, you will see every message posted to the group as it is posted to the group. With digest format, you get a single message at 5:30 pm PST containing all posts for that day. If you have an e-mail account and are not yet receiving messages from fellow club members, it's easy to get started. Send one of the following e-mail messages to: list-admin@pyro.org

To receive messages in list format, the message should be:

subscribe wpa-list you@domain.com

To receive messages in digest format, the message should be:

subscribe wpa-digest you@domain.com

(In both cases, you should replace "you@domain.com" with your email address.)

Instructions for Authors and Advertisers

The WPA Newsletter is published quarterly by the Western Pyrotechnic Association, Inc. Articles submitted to the Newsletter may be on any topic of potential interest to WPA members. The Newsletter Staff will do their best to publish any reasonable manuscript submitted by WPA members. Electronic submission of manuscripts is strongly preferred. Guidelines for preparing manuscripts appear in the first issue each year. If you have an article, advertisement, or other information you wish to submit to the Newsletter, please send the material to:

Mike Workman
14918 Three Oaks Court
Saratoga, CA 95070
E-Mail: mike@pyro.org

Dear WPA Members:

The last few weeks have been trying for most of us. As many of you know already, our recently elected Vice President, Greg Boyd, was arrested on August 27 for alleged violations involving fireworks and firearms. Greg is a friend and acquaintance to many WPA members, and his arrest was a shock. Details of the case are still being sorted out. For obvious reasons it is best for Greg if the details of the case were not discussed here. Nevertheless, the Board feels compelled to tell a few salient facts: (1) Greg had a BATF license, and (2) Greg had what he believed was a legal, mobile, Class IV magazine in Arizona. This magazine was moved across the river to his shop in California, which is situated on a few acres of land with a warehouse for his car parts business. The WPA Board of Directors, as well as many of Greg's friends both in and outside the WPA, has been intensely focused on helping our elected VP. Greg has held up amazingly well under the circumstances, but it will be extremely costly for him to defend himself. A fund was therefore created to assist Greg with his defense. Many of Greg's friends from the WPA have made substantial contributions. If you would like to join them, checks payable to the "Boyd Defense Fund" can be mailed to:

Boyd Defense Fund
c/o Harry Gilliam
19453 Ebenezer Church Road
Round Hill, Virginia 20141

Many other things have transpired since our last newsletter in July. A brief update is provided below:

Resignation of Glenn Vodhanel as Treasurer

On July 26, 1999, the Board received a letter of resignation from Glenn Vodhanel, the WPA Treasurer elected during the most recent Western Winter Blast. Glenn's resignation was requested by the other Board members on the previous day. The reasons for this request are outlined below:

Over the years Glenn served the WPA in many ways, ranging from volunteer assignments to elected positions. During his tenure as an elected officer - including the term he just resigned from - it appears that Glenn arranged financial remuneration from hotels where members stayed during our Western Winter Blast conventions. The WPA has signed copies of documents in which Glenn has agreed to receive a fee or percentage of the receipts from certain hotels used as accommodations by our members. In at least two cases, the fee was 10% and it was to be paid to Paragon Communications, a company owned by Glenn. Such arrangements are quite common for professional conventions, and they are an important fund-raising mechanism for some organizations. However, there are no records indicating that any of the funds generated by hotel commissions were paid back to the club. The Board's perspective of Glenn's point of view is that the hotel commissions were fair compensation for hard work on his part. However, the WPA is a club of volunteers where the officers willingly accept their responsibilities without compensation unless compensation is approved by a full vote of the Board. It is generally agreed that Glenn worked hard for the club, but his apparent attempt to profit at the expense of fellow club members is inappropriate for an officer responsible for club finances. Details for remuneration from Glenn are still being negotiated.

Kathy Baird is our new Treasurer

Shortly after the resignation of Glen Vodhanel, we received an offer from Kathy Baird to serve as Treasurer for the remainder of the year. Kathy is an accountant who is qualified

for the post of Treasurer, and her willingness to donate time is greatly appreciated. Please join the Board in offering Kathy any and all the support she needs.

Other changes in the WPA Leadership

On August 25, 1999, Tom Grace temporarily stepped down as President of the WPA by asking Greg Boyd to assume the role of President. Tom's decision was motivated by personal health reasons, and it came less than 48 hours before an informant called the Needles Police Department to report that Greg Boyd was a "Bomb Maker". With Glenn Vodhanel's resignation, Tom Grace's departure and Greg Boyd's arrest, the WPA Leadership suffered what is probably its greatest setback ever. This bizarre turn of events caught everybody by surprise, but the club is recovering. The Board of Directors has been reassembled as follows:

Greg Boyd (Acting President)
Mike Workman (Acting Vice President)
Keath Nupuf (Secretary)
Kathy Baird (Treasurer)

The Board's decision to keep Greg Boyd as Acting President was motivated by two reasons: (1) The club can probably function without an active President until Tom returns (possibly by mid-October) or until the next election in February, and (2) the Board is convinced that Greg is innocent of the ridiculous charges brought against him, and the decision to keep him in this position for the time being is an excellent way to make this clear.

Do-It By the River

This will be the Club's first non-WWB event, and Kief Adler has done a great job putting this event together. Greg Boyd was also playing a substantial role in the planning process, and it is his strong desire to have the event go forward as planned. Many aspects of "Do-It" were impacted by the recent turn of events, but the dedicated people involved with the planning for Do-It have risen to the challenge. For those of you who will be fortunate enough to attend "Do It By the River", we look forward to hearing from you.

From the WPA Secretary

by Keath Nupuf

Dear members,

Almost everyday, I receive phone calls from members (both new and old) to confirm their membership status. Even though membership application forms were received and entered into the database, we have not had a chance to cash these checks yet due to the transfer of the accounting information. All checks will be going to the bank by the time you read this letter and also you will receive the new membership package and the Do-It package before the event. We are sorry for the delay and we are currently working hard to catch up. Please be patient and don't make stop payment yet!! Thanks.

From the Newsletter Staff

As final touches were being added to this newsletter, the Newsletter Staff was informed that an article might be available from Greg Boyd about the PGI Convention. This was good news because the Staff tried hard to get something from Greg; it was something he wanted to do. Unfortunately, numerous factors make it necessary to move forward without Greg's article. We will look forward to printing it in the next newsletter.

A Call for Action and Nominations

by Frank J. Feher

"I was opening the old files from Winter Blasts Past... and had a flash back to Winter Blast I and Winter Blast II... I remember the energy so many people put into the association and the absolute frenzy of excitement about our first Blast at Mesquite and the first Blast (numerically the WWB II) to be held at Lake Havasu City. I recalled the efforts of so many people... Wow! What a Country! What an Organization! It seems now that OUR organization is caught up on the type of activities that we swore we would never let occur..."

These words were printed in an open letter to the WPA from Ron Dixon in September of 1996. They are as cogent today as they were three years ago. The WPA is at a crossroads. Its membership has grown dramatically over the past several years, bringing both increased revenues and a diverse pool of talented individuals, but the Association itself is reeling from years of ineffective leadership and a general lack of vision. The WPA has the resources and talent to be a truly first-class organization, but it is doomed to fail and hurt both the fireworks profession and hobby if it remains on its current path.

Ron Dixon's open letter to the Association in 1996 proposed that we "take a big WPA erasure and wipe the board clean; make a list of who is willing to do what; and a list of what needs to be done..." The membership largely ignored his call to arms, but it cannot do so for much longer. Like it or not, the WPA is a dysfunctional organization with a number of nontrivial problems, and it has very little chance of overcoming these problems without input and cooperation from its members.

What can the membership do? The answer is really quite simple: promise to do one thing a year that will move the Association forward. For most members, most of the time, this requires very little effort. In fact, every member of the WPA could make a major contribution to the Association by simply obeying the common-sense safety rules at the Winter Blast every year and respectfully cooperating with the dedicated individuals who volunteer as safety officers. For other members, a limited tour of duty as an officer of the Association might be more appropriate and rewarding. If you have a few spare hours every week, a decent personal computer and compulsion to stay organized, then you clearly have everything necessary to be a terrific Secretary. If you also have accounting skills, you obviously have what it takes to be Treasurer. If you are a natural leader with an ability to get things done - especially the "important but not urgent" things that really make a difference over time - you sound like the kind of President and Vice President the WPA needs.

As the Winter Blast approaches and you make plans for travel, the public display or the many of other activities at the Winter Blast every year, it would be especially helpful if you also made plans for the selection of WPA officers at the annual business meeting. Think NOW about who would be a good officer, and encourage them to accept a nomination at the business meeting. Make it clear that you only want them to become an officer if they are willing and able to work with the other officers on a regular basis to develop a reasonable set of short-term and long-term goals for the Association, a realistic plan for achieving these goals and a feedback mechanism for interacting with the membership. Insist that your candidate prepare an article for the next newsletter outlining the reasons for their interest in serving the club and the things they would like to accomplish. And please note: if your potential nominee is unwilling to communicate this information to the members, the WPA is better off without this person serving as an officer.

The WPA has had a number of dedicated and capable people serve as officers since its creation, but in recent years it has been unable to cope with important issues because it has been unable to identify and elect a cohesive group of pyroenthusiasts who can manage an organization of 600+ members with the same skill and enthusiasm as it takes to make a 12" Kamuro Shell. This situation must change soon.

Stupid Things Said to the Fire Marshall

compiled by the Newsletter Staff

A series of recent posts on the WPA list server debated whether light articles, such as "Ten Things Not to Say to the Fire Marshall", were appropriate for the newsletter. Most people polled by the Newsletter Staff believe that they are. In fact, at least two WPA members happen to be a Fire Marshall or Fire Chief, and they enjoyed the "Ten Things Not to Say to the Fire Marshall" when it appeared in a previous newsletter. The Newsletter Staff has worked hard to assemble the following list. And believe it or not, the following things have actually been said to a Fire Marshall:

Do you guys REALLY sit around the fire house and play checkers all day?

I MEANT to shoot part of the finale first. I thought it would be a good opener.

Do you have a match?

I don't need to check the guns. I kept track during the show, and I know they all went off.

It shouldn't have done THAT.

We've done that effect 50 times and it never set fire to the stage before.

We're not required to have placards if we travel less than 50 miles.

Don't forget... if there is a fire, I'm still in charge here.

It's okay. I do it THIS WAY all the time.

MY ID? Let's see YOUR ID.

I don't think you know what you're talking about.

If you would have left us alone, this problem never would have happened.

Sure, you can park your car there. (This was said before the Fire Marshall's car was set ablaze during a performance.)

Workman's Comp Corner

by Mike Workman

Featured in this issue: Steve Majdall's Parlon Purple

We all try to find formulas that improve the brightness and purity of our colored stars. When I first started, I had the best luck with black (i.e., blind) stars. Getting a nice, bright purple has always been a challenge. Some formulas are too pink; others are too blue. Adjustments in the color are not difficult to achieve, but brightness is often compromised. Some of my purple-tailed Willow shells at Fargo used a purple formulation that I got from Steve Majdall. His formula tends to be on the blue side of purple, but it is bright, clear and very nice.

PARLON PURPLE - W. S. Majdall

potassium perchlorate	50 (parts by wt)
strontium nitrate	8
copper oxide (black)	13
parlon	15
magnalium (50/50, 200 mesh)	3
red gum	7
dextrin	4

The ratio of strontium nitrate to copper oxide determines the color of the star. For a star which is a bit more red, increase the amount of strontium nitrate and decrease the amount of copper oxide proportionately. These stars roll very nicely. Priming should be done in two steps: first with a 1:1 mixture of star comp/Chysanthemum 6, then with an outer layer of Chysanthemum 6.

Attention Pyroenthusiasts
in San Diego, Riverside and Imperial Counties:

A group of WPA members from the San Diego Section is planning to do what pyro clubs are supposed to do: get together on a regular basis to talk about pyro, learn about pyro and probably practice what they learn. The next meeting is already being organized. If you live in San Diego, Riverside or Imperial Counties, then you are probably close enough to participate in this group's activities on a regular basis. If you are a WPA member in good standing, over 18 years of age and interested in interacting with fellow pyros from the San Diego Section, please send a brief letter describing your level of pyro knowledge along with a stamped (33 cents), self-addressed, business-sized envelope to the address shown below:

P.O. Box 181
Imperial, CA 92251

Do It by the River

by Kief Adler

For those of you who have been ignoring the mail and the WPA-List, Do It by the River, the first legally sanctioned event blessed by the Board of Directors in addition to Winterblast, will be held at the Avi Resort and Casino on Friday and Saturday, October 22 and 23, 1999. "Do It" is a hands-on pyro learning experience where fellow members will be able to learn the pyro arts from the masters whose names appear below. In addition to a fine array of seminars, members will also be able to purchase Class C fireworks from Gary Lillich of Flash Fireworks (contact Gary at 316-788-5801 for a list of items and to pre-order product) and purchase the chems you need to start your own pyro hobby from Firefox (208-237-1976 for pre-orders and information). Open shooting will begin at 5 pm and end at midnight each night: that's 14 hours of smoke smelling! Great hotel rooms are available to the WPA for \$17/night on Wed and Thurs and \$35 for Friday and Saturday. The Avi has a 24 hour coffee shop, Baskin Robbins and Subway stores, and a gift shop. Buffet meals are also available. FREE coffee each morning in the casino. Food and drink will be available on site as well. (Would you believe our own, personal, Louisiana chef will be dishing out everything from burgers to jambalaya?) There is a pool and spa in addition to the beach area along the river. A recently opened Kid's Quest is a supervised site to drop the kiddies for a while. Cheap (?) gas is available at the Texaco station in the parking lot but don't confuse the tribal fireworks shop with our own vending or you'll go broke quickly....

PLEASE check in all product to the main magazine upon registering. (See the map on page 10 for directions.) REMEMBER that eye protection, long pants, long sleeved shirt and closed toed shoes will be required in all areas (B and C). Hard hats will be required in class B areas and hard hats or caps are suggested in class C. Let's have fun but stay green doing so.

I am accepting late registrations, BUT NO ON SITE REGISTRATIONS, for the same \$35 fee, possibly without a T-shirt. Please call before sending in your dollars.

I look forward to seeing you all at Do It by the River! Last minute questions? Late or Saturday arrivals? Didn't receive a confirmation by post or e-mail, call me before 9 pm at 618-991-8605 or e-mail to kief@pyro.org.

Schedule for Do It By the River

Thursday, October 21, 1999

Time	Activity	
9:00 - ?	Set-up until we're done. If you volunteered to help, meet by the entrance gate to the Do It zone.	
4:00 - 6:00	Early registration at the entry gate	

Friday, October 22, 1999

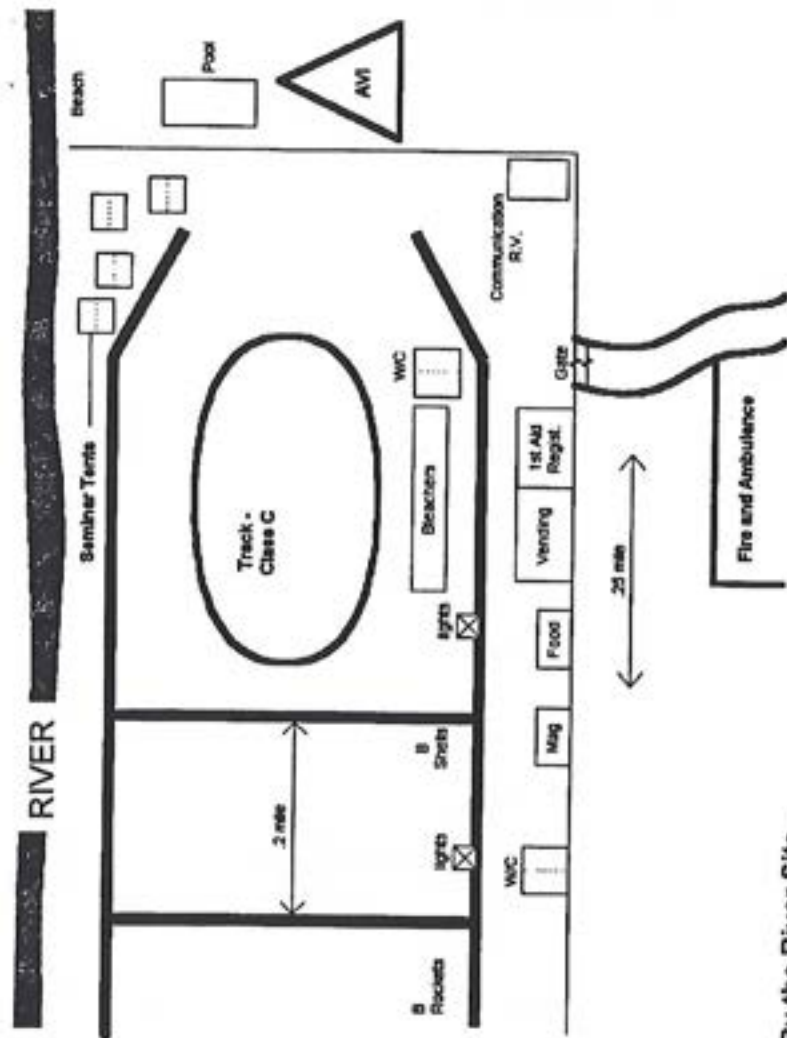
Time	Activity	
10:00 - 1:00	Registration at the entry gate	
11:00	Seminar leaders meeting at the seminar area	
1:00 - 2:00	Precision Timing Elements (45 min)	Frank Feber
2:00 - 3:30	Round Star Rolling Workshop (1 hr)	Gregg Materna
3:30 - 5:00	Fountains and Wheels Workshop (1 hr)	Kurt Medlin
5:00 - 5:15	MANDATORY kick_off meeting and experimental pumpkin firing at the bleachers for all participants	
5:15 - 11:00	Class C and Chemical Vending	
5:15 - midnight	OPEN SHOOTING	

Saturday, October 23, 1999

Time	Activity	
9:30 - 12:30	Rocket Workshops	Steve Majdali & Kurt Medlin
12:30 - 2:00	Lunch Break	
2:00 - 5:00	3" or 4" Shell Building Workshop	TBA
5:00 - 11:00	Class C and Chemical Vending	
5:00 - midnight	OPEN SHOOTING	

Sunday, October 24, 1999

Time	Activity	
9:30 - ?	Clean up and pack up	



A Map of the Do-It By the River Site.
The AVI appears as a triangle on the right.

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E-mail: flashfw@yahoo.com or flash1fw@aol.com

This article is a revised version of an article that first appeared in American Fireworks News (No. 178, July 1996).

Just a few moments ago I finished writing another affidavit for another attorney representing yet another fireworks hobbyist. Once again, the facts of this case and its result sadly points out the need for better information and greater awareness among hobbyist experimenters. At the moment I do not have time to give the subject the full attention it deserves, but the subject has been addressed in past articles by myself and others. For this article, I will only outline a few of the more important points. (However, note that I am not a lawyer and these are only my personal opinions.)

- 1) If you are a hobbyist experimenter, you should have in your possession, a copy of information documenting the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearm's (BATF's) position that in most cases a federal license is not required for hobbyists. This is because you can not rely on a BATF agent knowing this. (I will send a copy of the relevant page from the BATF's Explosives Newsletter, to anyone sending me a SASE.)
- 2) Just because you may not need a federal license does not mean that you do not need to store your pyrotechnic compositions and completed fireworks devices properly in a magazine. However, it is easier and cheaper to do than you might think. Some metal gun cabinets, available for about \$100, meet all the requirements for an indoor Type 4 magazine. (An indoor magazine containing up to 50 pounds net weight of explosives can be placed in any building that is not a residence.) Some metal construction-site tool cribs, available for about \$250, meet all the requirements for an outdoor Type 4 magazine except for the addition of a non-sparking interior.
- 3) The BATF has taken the position that there is a requirement to have a BATF license if you transport your materials across a state line; however, a User-Limited permit is all that is required.
- 4) Just because you may not need a federal license does not mean that you do not need a state license. (However, in several states that is easier and cheaper to get than you might think.) Also, do not be naive enough to believe that membership in a hobbyist organization will gain you any special consideration if you run afoul of the law!
- 5) Often it is a minor accident or a nervous neighbor that draws the attention of law enforcement officials. Thus, being extremely safe and not conducting yourself in a manner that raises concern with neighbors is essential. (If you do not have the requisite safety knowledge, you should not be working in pyrotechnics. Note that introductory pyro-chemistry and safety seminars are often part of the program at fireworks organization conventions. John Conkling teaches an excellent week-long Chemistry of Pyrotechnics and Explosives course in Maryland each Summer. Also a couple of times each year Bonnie and I teach a 3-day Pyrotechnic Chemistry course with at least one held somewhere in the US.)
- 6) Do not rely upon the law enforcement officer to be able to properly identify fireworks items as being merely fireworks (and not a bomb or incendiary device). It seems that when you are trained to look for bombs, many things will look like bombs to you.
- 7) Many hobby experimenters may not be fully compliant in the following areas: state or local regulations, endangerment of neighbors (or your own minor children), improper storage, improper use of fireworks, etc. You need to identify and eliminate these potential compliance problems BEFORE pursuing your activities.

- 8) In most instances, when a hobbyist has a legal problem, the prosecution will charge them with just about everything they can possibly think of, even if there is essentially no chance of winning on all of the charges. (Sometimes I think this is done intentionally to put you in the mood to accept their version of an appropriate plea bargain.)
- 9) If you do find yourself needing a lawyer, seek advice on whom to hire before actually hiring the criminal defense attorney that will represent you in court; they are not all equally skilled or well motivated. (This is not always easy advice to follow; there seems to be something about sitting in a jail cell that creates a powerful sense of urgency.)
- 10) Do not pay an attorney a fixed price for a package of his services. You will need to establish a trust account to guarantee payment of the attorney, but draws on this account should be made as the individual services are performed. This will help keep the attorney's interest where it belongs, on you and not on wrapping things up with as little work as possible.
- 11) A trial will be very expensive, will put you and your family through hell for many months (preparation and trial), and is a crap-shoot with no guarantees. Do not accept a bad plea bargain, but do not be too idealistic either.
- 12) If you do decide it is in your best interest to plead guilty, try to only plead guilty to only those things for which you actually are guilty (making fireworks, endangerment, improper storage, etc.). (Your attorney should get good advice early in the process. It is fairly likely that this will be the first fireworks or pyrotechnics case the attorney has worked on. A mistake or missed opportunity may be costly to you, and usually there is no second chance.)
- 13) If you do plead guilty to a felony, try to get deferred sentencing (called various things in different states) as part of the plea bargain. This will mean that your felony conviction will be eliminated and all records of your conviction will be sealed at the completion of your sentence.
- 14) If you do have to serve some time in jail, try to get work release as part of the plea bargain. This will allow you to keep your job (in the unlikely event your employer has not already fired you), and you will only spend evenings and weekends in jail.

At the very least, having legal trouble as a result of your hobby experimenting will be embarrassing and VERY expensive. At most it will cast a serious shadow over the rest of your life. The hobbyist-experimenter should not be so foolish as to think: these problems will not happen to him; that because he personally feels that fireworks laws are unjust, he has a right to ignore them; or that after he gets in trouble, there will be some magic cure that will get him off. In recent years I have assisted one or two hobbyists per year; in most cases it has been a truly sad experience. Sad, because, for the most part, these have been good honest people who end up paying a terrible price for their hobby. PLEASE, take the steps NOW to conduct your activities legally and safely.

Requests for copies of BATF information (with a SASE) can be sent to:

Ken Kosanke
PyroLabs, Inc.
1775 Blair Road
Whitewater, CO 81527

Treasurer's Report

by Glenn Vodhanel

This report was submitted by Glenn Vodhanel on July 28, 1999, shortly after his resignation as WPA Treasurer. Except for minor editorial changes that were necessary to produce an article with a format comparable to the other articles in the newsletter, this report has been published "as is". Ed.

Since the last issue of the WPA newsletter, a great deal has been accomplished:

- Reconciliation of all bank statements
- Review of all accounting transactions.
- Completion and submission of our 1999 Short Year Federal Tax filing.
- Submission of our non-profit application to the State of California.
- Receipt of returns from our CPA and review of returns for filing.
- Request, complete and submit application for WPA membership into the APA.
- Obtain non-profit audit recommendations

As of 3/31/99, we have \$19,042.18 in association funds. With the 1999 statement completed (see facing page), these items remain:

- Await California non-profit status letter.
- Upon receipt of status letter, have CPA prepare California tax returns
- Request \$800 refund from state of California
- Present solicited non-profit audit recommendations.
- Ensure association finances easily pass audit muster.
- Solicit audit services.

The financial statement shown on the facing page was based entirely from bank statements. This ensures that should anyone desire answers those answers are readily and completely available. The accounting is being done via Quickbooks™ and the organization of the chart of accounts as well as the designation of individual accounts was designed to facilitate preparation of the tax returns.

The WPA Treasurer's position has required much more energy than I anticipated. In less than four months, the financial statements for 1/99-12/98 and for 1/99-3/99 have been prepared, presented and submitted to the IRS. While maintaining the viability and health of our association as well as of other pyrotechnic associations is very important to me, I have had to reassess my workloads and priorities. Now that the books have been organized, are up to date and after much thought, I have come to the decision that due to personal and business conflicts, I can no longer devote the time & energy necessary to serve as Treasurer. Given the importance of quality accounting as well as importance of timely State and Federal filings, I might suggest retaining an independent accounting professional. This might make it easier for the board to concentrate on guiding the WPA to achieve the purposes for which it was established.

Below is the Western Pyrotechnic Association Inc. financial statement for the short year beginning 1/1/99 and ending 3/31/99.

Ordinary Income/Expense	
Income	
Interest Income	79
Dues & Assessments	10,900
Member Registration	63,391
Refunds	-232
<hr/>	
Total Income	74,138
<hr/>	
Convention Expense	
Advertising/Promotion	1,303
Badge Holders/Lanyards Etc.	3,381
Display	20,144
Room Comps	1,860
Shirts, Mugs, Pins	2,952
Insurance-Display Liability	3,990
Licenses and Permits	100
Medical/Safety	916
Miscellaneous	1,060
Registration Supplies	1,474
Communications Rentals	1,375
Convention Site(s) Rentals	1,400
Seminars	3,773
Site Preparation	1,196
Support Services	2,851
Vendor Infrastructure	520
Tents, Tables, Chairs, Etc	6,533
Transportation	1,562
Security	3,102
<hr/>	
Total Convention	59,492
<hr/>	
General Operations Expense	
Advertising/Promotion	1,607
Bank Service Charges	20
Telephone	23
Deductible Incurred	817
Liability-D&O	1,000
Miscellaneous	104
Office Supplies	286
Accounting	500
Corporation Filing Fee	72
State	668
<hr/>	
Total General Operations	5,097
Postage and Delivery	317
<hr/>	
Total Expense	64,906
<hr/>	
Net Income	9,232

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TO
WINTER
BLAST

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NEED TO BE PYROTECHNICALLY
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WWB XI Update

As the newsletter goes to the copy service, plans for the Winter Blast are moving forward nicely. The Newsletter Staff has been informed that the event will be held at Lake Havasu City and that the dates are the same as always - Friday, Saturday and Sunday of Presidents Day weekend. Many details have yet to be finalized, including the possibility that the event will begin a day earlier (i.e., Thursday). Information about the Winter Blast will be sent separately when plans are finalized. If you have any questions about the Winter Blast, please contact the WPA Secretary.

Some Advice for Beginners

by Frank J. Feher

This article is a revised version of a message posted on the WPA list-server in March of 1999. It was written in response to another WPA member's request for a list of the "top 10 pyro chemicals every beginner pyro should have to build some simple shell/fountains etc..."

I thought that I would offer a few suggestions for beginners.

Step 1: Start a library of highly regarded books about pyrotechnics and start reading. I have not read the book by Perigrin, but I have heard good things from many people (and unflattering things from the usual collection of whiners). The other books suggested by THH are all excellent and very useful for beginners. I would also add Bleser's book on Round Stars and Shells and the two Pyrotechnica issues with articles about cylinder shells (i.e., #IX and XI). Much of the info in these sources will be well beyond a beginner, but that's the point. It is important to read as much as possible to learn the fundamentals the easy way rather than wasting time and money by making well-known mistakes. Reading will also allow beginners to identify and avoid well-known hazards (e.g., chlorate and sulfur).

Step 2: Establish a network of "pyro-buddies" who can answer your questions, provide helpful suggestions and generally steer you in the correct direction. Our craft is a craft we learn from others. A pyro-buddy can also make it easier to identify suppliers of chemicals and other essentials.

Step 3: Get a good permanent notebook (e.g., composition book or lab notebook) for keeping track of what you did and how you did it, and what worked and what didn't.

Step 4: Chemicals and other supplies...

1. Commercial black powder for lift.
2. Commercial time fuse (Chinese or Japanese)
3. potassium nitrate (KNO_3)
4. potassium perchlorate ($KClO_4$)
5. sulfur
6. charcoal (can be made as indicated in the last WPA newsletter)
7. dextrin (can be made from cornstarch - see below)
8. wheat paste (can be made from flour - see below)
9. ferrotitanium, titanium or ferroaluminum (all -60 mesh or comparable)
10. aluminum powder (12 micron atomized)
11. red iron oxide (Fe_2O_3), sodium bicarbonate (baking soda)
12. boric acid
13. gum arabic

A few comments about each of the items on my list:

1. Commercial black powder for lift: At the risk of igniting a firestorm of protest from people who make their own lift, I strongly encourage beginners to identify a reliable source of commercial lift powder. (Cannon powder is a nice general purpose blackpowder if you only want to purchase a single kind of black powder.) Let's not kid around here, one of the best things a beginner can do is learn how to reliably get a device out of its mortar and to its proper altitude every time. The only practical way for a beginner to do this is to stick with commercial lift powder. Besides, commercial powder isn't that much more expensive than the ingredients used to make it (assuming a beginner is purchasing small quantities of chemicals from one of the standard pyroretailers), and a one-pound can will lift a lot of comets or small shells. It is often difficult for beginners to locate a local supplier of blackpowder, but this is time well spent.
2. Commercial time fuse (Chinese or Japanese): Chinese time fuse burns slightly faster (2.2 sec/in) than Jap fuse (3 sec/in), but both work well. Some beginners might be inclined to shy away from Chinese fuse because of negative comments in some pyro literature and at least one video. However, I have not heard of any recent problems with Chinese fuse, and I have seen many yards of it work without a problem.
- 3, 4 and 5: KNO_3 , KClO_4 and S: KNO_3 and KClO_4 are the two most widely used oxidizers in fireworks. KNO_3 can be used to make match, polverone, spider comps and glitter. KClO_4 can be used with KNO_3 to make a reasonable powder for burst. (Bill Page pointed out at a recent WWB seminar that Shimizu's changing relay (35 KClO_4 , 35 KNO_3 , 24 charcoal, 6 dextrin) makes a decent bursting powder for Italian shells when made up like 4x4 polverone and sieved to remove fines.) KClO_4 can also be used to make colored stars as a beginner gains experience. KClO_4 is probably best obtained from a pyroretailer. The same goes for KNO_3 and S. The latter two are a little pricey compared to the cheap agriculture-grade stuff that many people like to use, but the quality is good and you can limit your storage problems by purchasing 1 or 5 lb tubs rather than 25 or 50 lb bags. **I STRONGLY DISCOURAGE THE USE OF CHLORATES BY BEGINNERS.** Chlorates are perfectly fine for experienced pyros, but the potential consequences of confusing chlorate with perchlorate or nitrate are too great. Besides, beginners don't need chlorate to get decent results. Until a person has developed a good knowledge of pyro and has established the work and record-keeping habits necessary to avoid problems with chlorate, it is a good idea to avoid chlorates altogether.
- 6: Charcoal: Everybody seems to have strong opinions about this one, but beginners have lots of things to learn and a very steep learning curve. I would suggest they leave the fine art and considerable mess of charcoal making for another day and stick with commercial air-float charcoal.
7. Dextrin is easy to make from comstarch. If you factor in the cost of running your oven, homemade dextrin made from top of the line comstarch might be more expensive than commercial dextrin. However, comstarch is cheap when purchased from restaurant supply houses, it's always available locally on short notice, and it can be stored practically anywhere. A short article in AFN (#151, pg 7, 1994) provided a recipe from Mitch Piatt: 1 lb of high-quality pure corn starch spread evenly in 12 x 14" baking pan; bake at 400 deg for 75 min, stirring every 25 min; after cooling, sieve through 30 mesh screen. "Mitch's research and testing showed this product to be the exact quality of commercial dextrin." If you bake for longer, the binding power of your dextrin increases. In fact, the bind-

ing power of dark brown dextrin, which I made by accident one day, is impressive. Note: This procedure generates an acrid odor that some people (e.g., your spouse?) might not like.

8. Commercial wheat wallpaper paste is sometimes hard to find, but homemade paste is another easy thing to make. Ofca provided a procedure in one of his "Technique of Fire" books, and I have modified it to avoid lumps: Bring 9 cups of water to a rolling boil. In a blender, add three cups of water followed by 2 cups of all-purpose flour. Quickly put the cover on the blender and start the blender on a medium setting. After about 20-30 seconds, stop the blender. (This will release a strange air bubble that seems to form in the flour mixture.) Start the blender again, and then mix for another 30 seconds while using a spoon to carefully dislodge any wet flour clinging to the blender's container. Quickly add the flour mixture to the boiling water and immediately start to stir the hot mixture with an electric cake mixer. As it comes to a boil, reduce the heat. Stir for another minute then turn off the heat and stir for another minute. (This avoids having the bottom burn or cook much more than the rest.) Cover the pot and set it aside to cool for several hours. Paste prepared in this manner will spoil within a couple of days in warm weather, but its pot-life can be extended by adding a small amount of boric acid or salicylic acid.
9. Ferrotitanium, Titanium, Ferroaluminum: Metal powders that produce pleasing effects when added to simple charcoal mixes. A great way to create different effects without making major changes to the routine.
10. Aluminum powder: 12 micron atomized is a good general purpose Al that is useful for making many functional glitter comps - another nice effect for beginners with a limited supply of chemicals, including KNO_3 , S and charcoal
11. Fe_2O_3 and baking soda. Two of many delay agents that can be used to make glitter comps. Winokur's #23, 25 and 26 are three glitter formulas that work reasonably well with only KNO_3 , S, charcoal, and Al. I am sure other WPA members can suggest similar glitter comps that work even better.
12. Boric acid: Used as preservative for paste and as a buffer in glitter mixes
13. Gum arabic: An excellent binder for making blackmatch.

Step 5. Learn how to make blackmatch/quickmatch

Step 6. Learn how to make small comets (e.g., Chrysanthemum #6 with and without Fe/Ti, Ti, Fe/Al; glitter)

Step 7. Learn how to make polverone

Step 8. Learn how to make 3" cylinder shells (cut or pumped glitter or charcoal stars with changing relay as burst)

I was going to provide a few more comments about Steps 5-8, but this message is already too long... I another WPA member wants to pick up where I left off, please feel free.

Beginners need regular advice from more experienced members, and a regular series of articles for beginners would be very helpful. The Newsletter Staff hopes that other members will indeed pick up where the author left off above. Ed.