

## **A Boyhood Cooperative Project: “The Rain-Drain Mortar”**

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The 1940's were a time of no microwave ovens, TV, aluminum foil, plastic toys, and the like. Things of substance were made of steel and wood. Toy soldiers were made of cast pot-metal which were then carefully painted by hand. Play became a source of imagination supported by a limited number of well made toys, but there was always the exception.

The war brought out the masculine instincts of the neighborhood boys. Cowboys and Indians did not really fit into these times. Soldiering and weapons of war did, however. I don't know who first came up with the idea of making a large scale weapon. A contraption like a catapult would be difficult to make, and of course would not fit into the concept of “modern” warfare. A mortar! That was it! What a great idea it was.

Our first task was to find a suitable barrel. Pre-adolescent boys do not look at the practical side of things, such as “you'll never find anything suitable.” Boys always take short-cuts through neighbor's yards and are naturally curious, so the stock of possible supplies is always in one's mind, even if slightly larcenous in nature. So it was with the barrel.

The Gartley twins knew of neighbors who had lengths of round copper roof drain pipe piled behind their garage. It would be easy to access and we wouldn't be seen! Now a long length of pipe would be too obvious to other neighbors, and too we didn't want to be greedy or have the owner notice his loss. The Gartleys lived closest to the new source of supply, so quickly ran home to find their dad's hack saw. Watching carefully for detection, the proper length for our mortar was sawed off with dispatch.

We, in our optimism, had not really thought of how this mortar would be powered, except to relate to our toy cannons and came up with a spring. Now one must appreciate that strength of the spring, diameter, and how it would be compressed to allow a projectile to be fired, had not been considered. Young boys take things one step at a time, and after exhausting all possibilities then might give up on a project. But we were on a roll.

In our naïveté, our next quest was for a suitable length of some stiff wire to wind to the proper diameter to serve as the propelling power of the mortar. Around the “pasture” was a fence, and on one segment of that fence known only to informed boy entrepreneurs, was a single strand of wire. Most of the fencing was the typical wood post with large squared cattle fencing attached. This prime section also had a single strand running along the top. What a find! With cutters in hand, we clipped a suitable length and headed home to wind the all important spring. Carefully it was wound around an old can slightly smaller than the diameter of the drain pipe.

Any armorer knows that on any firearm, cannon, or mortar, there must be a bolt or breech lock of some kind at the opposite end of the business end of the weapon. In our case it was some for which the spring used as a platform to compress. A tin can was found that was only slightly larger than the drain pipe. To hold it in place, we wedged in some small trimmed pieces of lath. We were nearing the end of the task!

To hold the projectile, not yet determined, another can was found that would fit in the barrel of the mortar. Holes were made in the bottom of the breech can and the projectile holding can. A cord was tied through the projectile can, down the barrel and out through the breech can. By pulling on the cord, the spring would be compressed. Releasing the cord would “fire” the weapon.

This would not be just your ordinary weapon. To fit in with its “military” purpose it must be painted. And painted it was. Checking our homes, suitable paint for a good camouflage was found. No latex paint this. It was good old oil base paint that would take over night to dry. It was a long day’s work, and we were willing to wait until the next day for “field trials.”

It had been painted at my house, so the next day the crew came over for a test firing. We wanted an audience, so coaxed my mother to look out the sliding lanai doors down to the side yard where the test was to take place. Her words still echo in my ears, “Now be careful and don’t hurt yourselves!” It reminds me of the admonition in the classic Christmas film where the young boy who wants a BB gun is told by his mother that he will put his eye out.

Now this mortar had no stand or mounting, so I held it on my shoulder. One of the Gartleys put a small rock in the projectile can. The other twin pulled back on the cord as I braced myself for the shock of the discharge. The “loader” cried, “Fire!” The cord was released and the spring pushed forward with a screech. The rock was hurled out of the barrel. The total distance achieved by the rock..... less than 10 feet. My mother turned and left. I don’t know what her reaction might have been. One of amusement, most likely. We were disappointed. We tried it again with much the same result.

I don’t know whatever became of that wonderful imaginative weapon. It no doubt sat in the corner of the garage or somewhere before it was disposed of. But of course that is not the point. We used our imagination to create a wonderful thing. Our accomplishments were rewarded in a small way. It was a thing of pride. Now if it had hurled that projectile rock a good 50 feet or more, who knows what trouble we would have gotten in to!