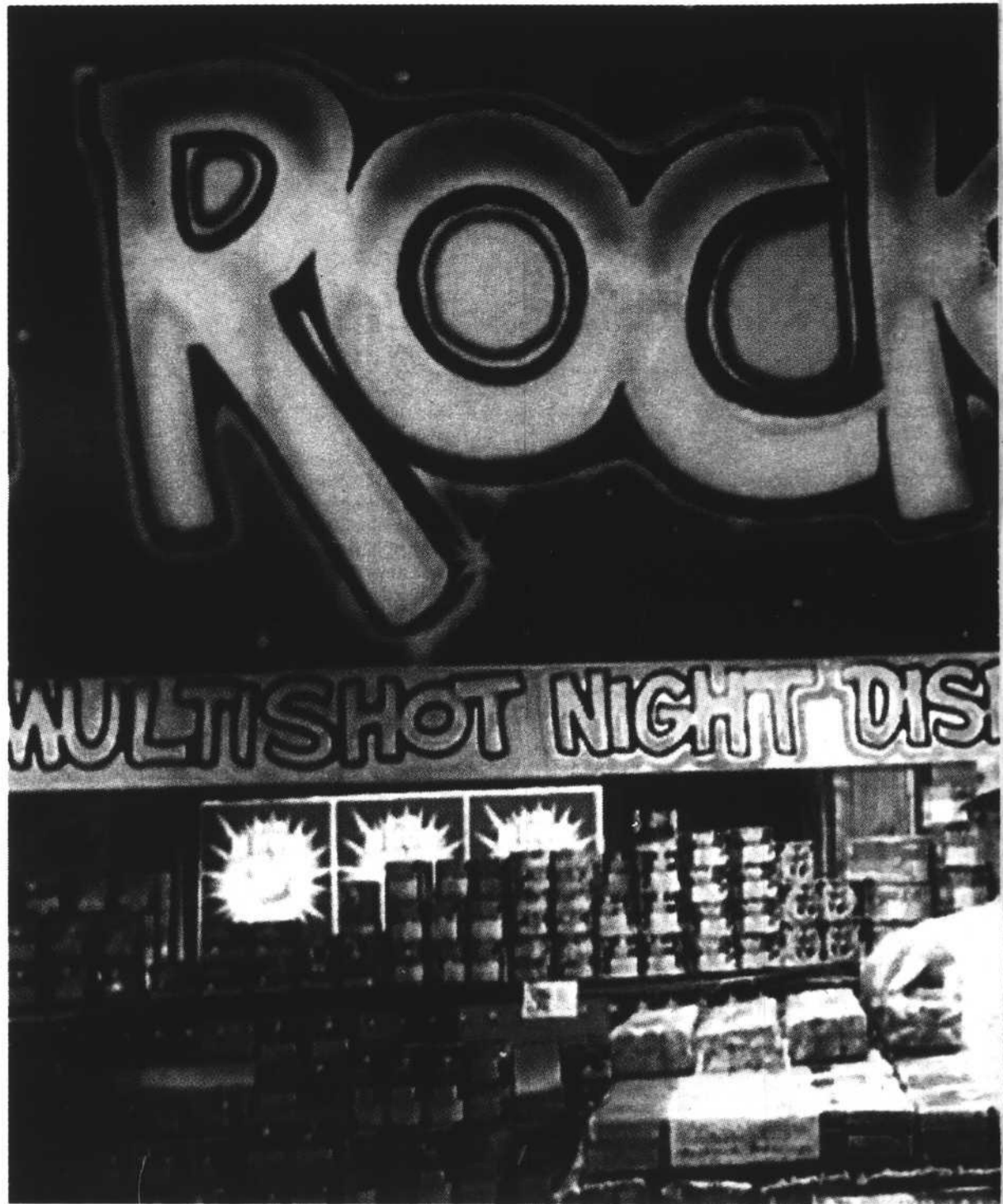


ACROSS the Border



Fireworks laws lure many Nebraskans to Missouri

By JEFF RANDALL
Senior Editor

For Tim Kessler, Independence Day means more than the birth of a nation, barbecues and parades.

It means blowing things up.

Like many Americans, Kessler has lived for years with the belief that the Fourth of July just isn't the Fourth of July without fireworks. And while many Americans are content to sit back and watch others' launch pyrotechnic displays, Kessler, a junior English major, would rather celebrate America's birthday with his own show of explosives.

"Ever since I was little, I've just loved the whole tradition of fireworks," he said. "It's hard to imagine the Fourth of July without them."

But for Kessler and the many other Nebraskans who share his viewpoint, this state's fireworks laws are too restrictive. And so, like many other Nebraskans, Kessler has added a trip across the border to Missouri — a state with less stringent fireworks laws — to his list of

Independence Day traditions.

"Every year, it's like you have to have a parade, a picnic and a trip to Rock Port," he said. "I've been going for the last five years, and I don't plan to stop anytime soon."

Rock Port, Mo., is considered by many to be a fireworks Mecca of sorts. Home to over a dozen fireworks stores — some in buildings, others in tents that would rival circuses, Rock Port is a small town that gets far more visitors than usual at this time every year.

"We're always busy," said Richard Fentiman, a salesman at the Fireworks Emporium in Rock Port. "We're only open for a month or so each year, though, so that's the way we like it."

Fentiman, who has worked for one year at the Fireworks Emporium, but has worked at other fireworks stores "for too many years to count," said the annual emigration of Nebraskans and Iowans to Missouri accounts for most of Rock Port's business.

"Nearly everybody is from out-state," he said. "There's no way of knowing for sure, but I'd say at least 80 percent — maybe

90 percent — are from outside Missouri.

"I think yesterday we had one woman who came from St. Joseph. I guess she was one of the rare locals who stop by."

Fentiman said he understood his customers' desire to go fireworks hunting, even if their home states prohibit it.

"It gives adults a chance to become kids again," he said. "I can't tell you how many people I've heard say that their two favorite holidays are Christmas and the Fourth of July."

"It's a tradition that's been passed from one generation to the next, and there are a lot of people who think more of that than some fireworks restrictions."

Laws that prohibit fireworks are mostly the result of people who have used the products irresponsibly in the past, Fentiman said, and that shouldn't keep everyone from using them.

"There are people who drive too fast, but we don't ban cars," he said. "I think we should give people a little more credit, maybe believe that they have common sense."

"If you use common sense, fireworks are no more dangerous than anything else."

But no matter what Fentiman and other fireworks supporters think, Nebraska's laws still prohibit large firecrackers and — the most popular across-the-border purchase — bottle rockets. And the Nebraska State Patrol is enforcing those laws with road blocks at the state borders.

"We're supposed to stop Nebraska residents from bringing anything they shouldn't have into the state — that includes fireworks," said Lt. Mike Streeter, a state patrol officer.

Streeter said people who do attempt to bring illegal fireworks into Nebraska would have any illegal products confiscated and would also receive a fine. The amount of the fine is left up to the county courts, Streeter said.

Despite road blocks and fines, though, several Nebraskans do manage to make their way back home with full cargo — bottle rockets and all.

And after that, enforcement of fireworks laws are left to local police.

In Lincoln, the list of permissible fireworks includes sparklers, fountains and aerial shells with charges meant to be seen but not heard. Lincoln's city ordinances

also set specific times can be used — between on July 3 and 8 a.m. and — and allow for the use works only on private p

Violation of these confiscation of the f some cases — a citation.

"Ultimately, the of use their judgment in stop," Lincoln Police S said.

"If an officer sees s lady fingers into the something has to be do

But even with the because of it — Kessler Nebraskans will contin fireworks and their enforcement.

"I guess it's my on to be an outlaw," Kessler kind of a 'Beavis and B

"I think I'm a pre mature guy, but I still lighting the wick and don't find out — even if cracker."