

Despite laws, fireworks sales are booming

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of satisfaction, illustrated beautifully by two geeky teenagers who come out with a large bag of assorted goodies. They look like they both just got laid and jump into their black Chevy Capri Classic with Nebraska plates and speed off, eager to tell all their buddies.

When asked about his large Nebraskan clientele, Flanagan proudly says that 80-90 percent of his business comes from either Nebraska or Iowa. To show his appreciation for this patronage the giant billboard next to the giant Uncle Sam says "You wheel, we deal."

Because of the large amount of fireworks stores in the ¼ mile radius around the Rock Port interstate exit Flanagan says the competition is so fierce that you can't buy fireworks any cheaper anywhere else in America outside of that corner. Of course there is more than enough business to go around and he says it's more than just the prices that keep Nebraskans trucking down I-29.

"A lot of it is the road trip part. People enjoy coming through Missouri. That's part of the tradition," Flanagan says in a proud trailer park accent. "It's the thrill of trying to dodge the roadblocks."

Oddly enough, the element of danger does seem to be particularly appealing to many of the Nebraskan shoppers. A middle-aged bearded man with a flannel shirt and a camouflaged hat jokes with his pale and portly son about "Starting a family tradition of buying illegal fireworks." His son giggles as if he has the coolest dad in the whole wide world. This particular trip is the duo's fourth and the dad says the reason is simple. "Better fireworks. Sparklers and fountains just really don't do it."

There is something to be said for the drive down. The big sky and hilly country side of southeast Nebraska and northwest Missouri is very tranquil and relaxing. You get to drive through towns like Unadilla, Neb., where the chief industry is the Texaco and the pay phone on the corner. Then after an hour and a half you drive down probably the only stretch of road where you can see a giant gorilla, dinosaur, blimp, dog and Uncle Sam without either being in a parade or on bad, bad drugs.

In Rock Port you can't swing a dead cat without hitting a fireworks store and all of them have a cheesy balloon. The only billboards that don't advertise something that explodes, be it fireworks or gasoline, is the Rock Port Inn, which advertises a pool and HBO.

The Texaco across from Liberty Fireworks has an assorted rack of hats for sale that metaphorically mirror Liberty's patrons. There are some sports hats, some truck hats, some hats

that say "world's greatest dad," as if the real world's greatest dad would actually wear it, and a hat that says "I pretend to work and they pretend to pay me."

The inside of Liberty Fireworks is packed with almost any kind of explosive device a red-blooded American could want for the Fourth of July, or a minor military exercise.

"Sombitch' honey, look at this."

A middle-aged lady has a little trouble reading the neon orange sign near a fireworks display. But she figures it out.

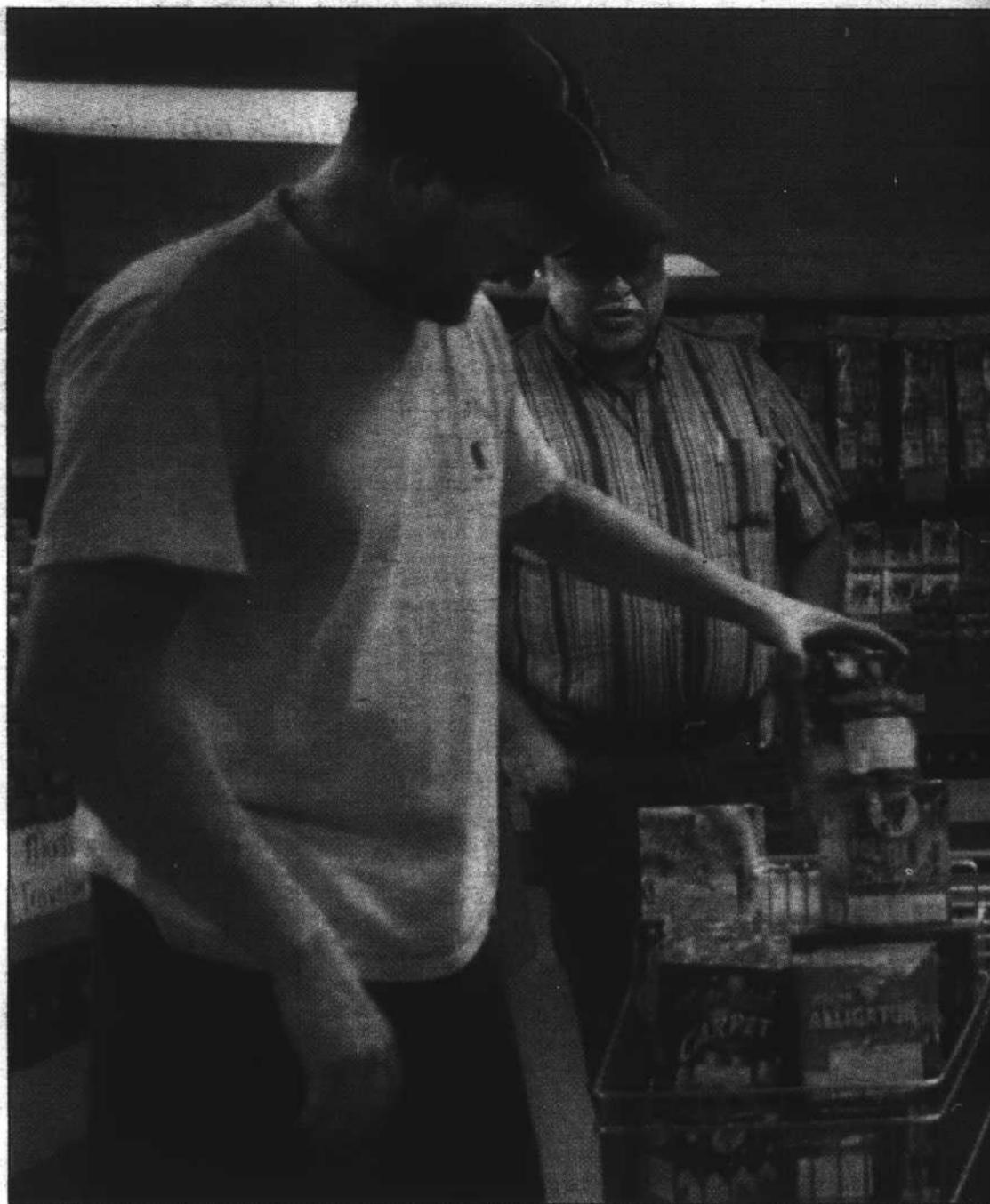
"A 90-shot aerial display," she says.

Her husband just says, "Shit."

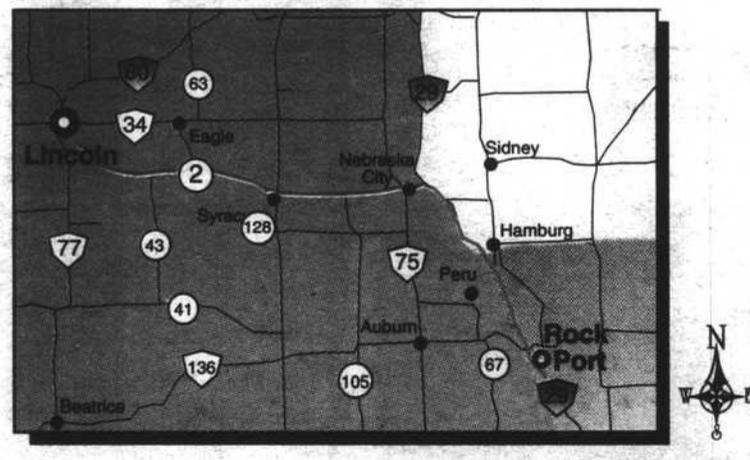
On the other end two men, who both arrived in cars with Nebraska plates, one in the sports car and one in the El Camino, spend more than \$200 on a variety of fireworks. One looks like he can easily afford it, the other doesn't. Either way Flanagan is there to collect and to be nice he throws in some free punks.

He says that for the most part people, aren't very concerned about being caught. In fact, last summer, when the Nebraska State Patrol and Fire Marshall were very visible in the media about cracking down on the transportation of illegal fireworks, Liberty had its best year.

"When you tell someone they can't do something, that just makes them wanna do it even more," Flanagan



The Road to Rock Port



MATT HANEY/DN

explains. "I mean we didn't break our record, we smashed it."

Despite the macho high school attitude many Nebraskans front about breaking the law, few care to go on record with a comment and everyone who passing looks at my notebook to make sure their license plate number isn't written down.

But as another carload of Nebraskans leave Liberty saying "We're gonna rock dude," Flanagan can't help but illustrate his disdain for the Nebraska laws that make him a criminal.

"It's just bullshit. I don't know who's got a feather up whose ass, but why are they not out trying to catch real criminals instead of ordinary guys and citizens trying to have fun on the fourth," he says, loud enough for the patrons of his store to hear. "If they buy milk here and transport it over the state line, that's no different."

Of course if it wasn't for the "bullshit" laws of Nebraska, Larry Flanagan wouldn't be Spartacus, he'd be unemployed.

But don't worry, he knows it and he thanks us.

