

NOT JUST BLOWING SMOKE

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by Robert E. Ison

Let me preface this paper by saying it is not intended in any way to persuade anyone to take up the habit of smoking cigars. While I personally may enjoy a cigar from time to time, I recognize that it is not the healthiest of my long list of vices. So I implore those non-smokers among you to accept this paper as it was intended, namely, as a brief and slightly biased examination of the cigar in history.

"If I cannot smoke in Heaven, then I shall not go." Mark Twain made this remark while discussing the pleasures of enjoying a fine cigar. Mention the word cigar and many seductive images swirl about the mind: an Edwardian gathering where every man has a mustache and a burning cigar; an afternoon at the racetrack; a floor show at the Tropicana in Havana; any photograph of Winston Churchill; a quiet smoke overlooking the fog in the Smokey Mountains; the birth of a child; or my favorite, golfing at Pebble Beach overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Of course, if one is a non-smoker, the images may be simply of foul-smelling, smoke-filled rooms. Whatever your personal opinion may be, the cigar is not only an international commodity, it

has been elevated to an art form.

Cigars have played a signature role in the private and public lives of many great men. Both Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee smoked through the major battles of the Civil War. Sigmund Freud attributed his emotional and physical well being to the fifteen cigars he smoked each day. Einstein daydreamed about energy, mass, and time over cigar ash. Literature owes a great debt to Mark Twain's and Rudyard Kipling's ever-present cigars.

While cartoonists may depict genius at work via a light bulb glowing above the head, many great insights are better symbolized by a plume of cigar smoke. Cigar smoke wreathed Thomas Edison, General Douglas MacArthur, Ira Gershwin, Orson Welles and Ernest Hemingway. Hollywood figures such as Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields, Groucho Marx, Jack Benny and Edward G. Robinson often puffed away on the big screen. Cigars have long been ritual accessories for males gathered before and after military battles, business deals, poker games, stag parties and weddings. The boss used to hand an employee a cigar along with a promotion. Amazing how different the world was in which our fathers and grandfathers came of age. Today, our world seems to be divided into cringing smokers and finger-shaking non-smokers.

Actually, not until the 19th century did cigar and pipe smoking become "gender-specific" to men. By some accounts, in the 18th century men and women in America and Europe smoked in equal numbers. This changed when the smoking club became the domain of the Victorian gentleman. There were, of course, exceptions, but in the main, women who smoked cigars were seen as eccentric and sexually renegade. A woman smoking a cigar sent a signal that she had assumed the "male" prerogative of taking pleasure in public. And so cigars were props for women who staged their sexuality in public -- gypsies, actresses and prostitutes. Today, for better or worse, women are enjoying cigars in greater numbers. The late Lucille Ball relished cigars; Bette Midler confesses to the pleasure, as does Whoopi Goldberg, Demi Moore and Jodie Foster.

The cigar's history begins with the arrival of Christopher Columbus on the island of San Salvador and his subsequent exploration of the large island called Cuba in 1492. Columbus and his crew-members observed that the natives carried "a lighted piece of coal and some grasses, and inhaled the aroma using catapults, which in their language, they called tabacos." It is believed that the "catapult" may have been a tube-shaped construction of plant leaves filled with tobacco. Columbus himself observed that these

Aboriginal Cubans called the plant "cohiba", a word that has survived 500 years to become the brand name Cohiba, one of the preeminent cigars in Castro's Cuba. Rodrigo Xerez, one of Columbus' crew, was so intrigued with the "smoking" ritual that upon his return to Spain, he was caught indulging in his new habit by officials of the Inquisition and was imprisoned for "demonic practices". You can imagine his surprise years later when, released from prison, he found that the townspeople had adopted his habit.

From the start, the Spanish were the prime architects of the cigar industry. The origin of the word "cigar" has been linked falsely to the Spanish. In fact, it comes from the Ancient Mayans. The word "seegar" first appeared in the New English Dictionary of 1735. By the early 1800's, the royal cigar factories of Sevilla were experiencing astounding growth. It should be noted that no one in South or Central America had made a cigar as we know it today; that credit goes to the Spaniards. Prior to that time, New World natives had wrapped tobacco in leaves of other plants like palm or maize. In 1831, King Ferdinand VII granted Cubans the right to produce and sell tobacco in their homeland. Prior to that time, all tobacco was shipped to Spain. The island soon swarmed with producers who were the exclusive makers for the Spanish Crown. This tradition continues even under Fidel

Castro, who every year, sends a symbolic batch of the best cigars to the Spanish King, Juan Carlos. To this day, Spain remains the world's largest importer of Cuban cigars and offers them to its people at the lowest prices.

Tobacco was cultivated widely in the British colonies of North America, but at first the crops were intended for pipe smokers. In 1762, Israel Putnam returned to Connecticut from active duty with the British Army in Cuba bearing a large supply of cigars and introduced the miracle to Connecticut. Putnam was a hero at the Battle of Bunker Hill and went on to become a Revolutionary War General. Following the war, factories for cigars sprang up in Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New York. The word "stogie" comes from Conestoga, Pennsylvania, which had a large number of cigar factories.

Cigar smoking in America rose dramatically after the Civil War, with many U.S. companies producing cigars made of domestic wrappers and Cuban filler. In keeping with the "Hopkinsville Connection", following the Civil War, Hopkinsville supported three different cigar-manufacturing companies. A review of the 1897 City Directory indicates three cigar companies in existence. Harry L. Lebkuecher owned one of the cigar companies. Another was owned by Walter S. Elgin and was located on South Virginia Street. It appears that the Elgin Cigar Company remained in business until 1912. By far, the most

successful and long-running cigar manufacturer in Hopkinsville was owned by Archie Higgins. Higgins & Company is known to have operated a cigar manufacturing company until at least 1944 and was located on what is now South Main Street on the second floor of the building now occupied by John Chewning. The Higgins Cigar Company is known to have a brand label called the "Hotel Latham" cigar. Cuban filler was shipped to Hopkinsville for the production of "local" cigars. While cigars were initially hand-rolled locally, most production soon shifted to machine-rolled cigars so that greater numbers could be produced.

After World War I, cigar production in the United States began slipping as cigarette manufacturing increased. Cigarettes were easier to produce and were cheaper to buy.

Cigars and Cuban-American politics have long been mixed. From 1881 to 1895, the Cuban writer and Revolutionary Jose Marti lived in New York City. When he finally returned to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule, he had the support of thousands of Cuban cigar makers who had fled to Key West and Tampa. The plans for the rebellion in Cuba were sent from Key West to supporters in Havana rolled in a cigar. Sixty years later in 1955, Castro's supporters delivered messages hidden in cigars to Castro in his Cuban prison

cell on the Isle of Pines.

One reason why Cuba's cigar makers, as well as rollers who immigrated to America, became politically aware in the 19th Century, was because they were well informed about current events and politics. As they worked, the rollers would listen to a lector, generally one of the rollers selected by the others for his eloquence, as he read aloud from newspapers and books while the rollers worked.

The most famous cigar-smoking politician of our time has to be Winston Churchill. He discovered cigars at the age of twenty-two while garrisoned in Havana, Cuba in 1895. They became a life-long passion. By most estimates, he smoked at least ten cigars per day; or roughly 3,000 per year, which works out to over a quarter million cigars in his lifetime. During the Second World War, Cuban cigar companies sent 5,000 cigars each year to keep him well-stocked against shipping interruptions that might be caused by German u-boats. Although Sir Winston smoked many kinds of cigars, his favorite was a seven-incher with a 48-ring gauge. The Romeo y Julieta factory in Havana immortalized that size by naming it the Churchill. The term "Churchill" is now widely recognized to describe larger cigars, generally seven or more inches in length with a 46 to 52-ring gauge.

Cigars in the White House have been a tradition for almost two centuries. Nineteen of our nation's Presidents are noted to have smoked "seegars". Prior to William Jefferson Clinton's infamous incident involving a cigar and a particular young intern, it was Thomas R. Marshall, Woodrow Wilson's otherwise forgotten Vice-President, that made cigar history. After listening with some disgust to a rival politician rambling on for hours in the Senate about "what America needs most", the Vice-President harpooned the blowhard with an immortal line: "What America really needs is a good 5¢ cigar." Unfortunately, he got only part of his wish, as America turned away from the fine art of hand-rolling cigars and machines took over. The price became cheap, but the product lackluster. Will Rogers, the noted humorist, commented soon thereafter, "Our country has plenty of good 5¢ cigars, but the trouble is, is they charge 15¢ for them."

John Kennedy, the last President prior to Bill Clinton to regularly light up, acquired the taste as a young man, encouraged by his father, Joseph Kennedy, a financial heavyweight and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Ambassador to the Court of St. James. Kennedy usually smoked the petit corona size. One day in 1961, shortly after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the President took legendary action that has become a classic anecdote of cigar

lore. JFK called his cigar-smoking Press Secretary, Pierre Salinger, into the Oval Office and said, "I need a lot of cigars." "How many, Mr. President?" "About a thousand. Tomorrow morning, call all your friends who have cigars and just get as many as you can." Salinger rushed out and got as many H. Upmann petits he could find. The next morning there was an urgent message for Salinger to enter the Oval Office immediately. "How did you do on the cigars last night?" asked Kennedy. "Mr. President," replied Salinger, "I was very successful. I got eleven hundred." With that, John Kennedy opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a decree banning all Cuban products from entry into the United States. "Now that I have enough cigars to last a while, I can sign this." Unfortunately, for those who enjoy cigars, the embargo is still in place against Cuba.

Until recently, the cigar was prominently portrayed in literature, art and in Hollywood. Authors such as Jane Austen, Henry James, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling and Samuel Clemens all enjoyed cigars while creating many memorable literary characters. Great artists such as Renoir, Picasso and David Hockney were known to enjoy cigars while creating masterpieces. The cigar also became a dramatic prop for Hollywood. The cigar figured prominently in many Charlie Chaplin movies. Laurel and Hardy and many

other silent stars developed sight gags using cigars, such as cigars slammed in doors, and holes being burned in clothing by lighted cigars. It is hard to imagine Groucho Marx without his monstrous eyebrows and ever-present cigar.

Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock smoked continuously on sets of their movies. Welles was reported to have said he made movies to be able to smoke for free. "That's why I write in so many cigar-smoking heroes and villains who chomp their cigars." Today's actors such as Roger Moore, Bill Cosby, Chevy Chase, Pierce Brosnan, Robert Duvall, James Coburn and Robert DeNiro are all known to favor an occasional cigar.

Perhaps the most famous actor to use the cigar as a prop was the late George Burns. "If I had taken my doctor's advice and quit smoking when he advised me to, I wouldn't have lived to go to his funeral," said the late Burns at age 98. Burns was the only celebrity permitted to press his cigar into the cement at Mann's Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard. Even at 100 years old, Burns still smoked about ten cigars a day.

The cigar labels and boxes became art forms themselves. In 1830, the banking firm of H. Upmann began shipping cigars to its directors in London in sealed cedar boxes emblazoned with the Bank's emblem. When the Bank

went into the cigar business full-force, Upmann rapidly set a trend for packaging in the industry. Soon, cigar manufacturers began printing colorful lithographic labels as a way of differentiating brands. There were many literary references as well. In 1935, Upmann created the Monte Cristo brand as a tribute to the fictional hero of Alexander Dumas's novel, The Count of Monte Cristo. Today, "vistas", as the colorful images on boxtops are called, are avidly collected in America and in Europe, and vintage examples fetch thousands of dollars apiece for rarities. The man who invented the cigar band, Gustav Bock, was neither Cuban nor Spanish, but Dutch. In 1850, Bock developed the ingenious, if seemingly obvious idea, of labeling his cigars to distinguish them from other brands. Soon monarchs, presidents, and leading world figures were honored to have their faces on cigar bands. Little did Bock know, that he was creating a dilemma for generations of future cigar smokers . . . to remove or not remove the band . . . that is the question.

There are at least two theories as to why bands were first put on cigars. The first, and most obvious one, is that the bands provide cigar-makers with the means to advertise and distinguish their brands. The other is that the bands prevent the cigar's nicotine from staining the fingers. In earlier times, a heavy gum was applied to cigar wrappers to prevent the wrapper from

unraveling. Today's lighter vegetable gums keep cigars securely wrapped without sticking to or staining the fingers. However, there is still the persistent question of whether to remove the band. The answer, it seems, as with so many of life's perplexing questions, depends on whom you ask and where you live. Ask an Englishman and he'll say that, of course, it is only proper to remove the band. Ask someone from the Continent, however, and your Englishman's counsel will be spurned. A general rule of thumb is to remove the band only if it slides easily off the cigar, lest by forcing it, you damage the delicate wrapper.

In order to truly appreciate the art of fine cigars, or "puros", as they are often referred to in Spanish-speaking countries, because they consist entirely of tobacco, it is useful to know something of the science of growing and processing the tobacco that goes into them. Because we live in Hopkinsville, in the midst of some of the finest tobacco-growing soil in the world, most of us are familiar with how tobacco is grown. However, the tobacco which is grown for cigars is quite different from the burley and dark-fired tobaccos grown in Christian County. The tobacco does begin just as it does in Christian County, as seeds in beds covered with straw or cloth for shade. After the seed has germinated, it is transplanted to field where the plants grow rapidly.

The tobacco plants soon develop buds that must be removed by hand so the plant will concentrate on leaf production and not divert energy to producing flowers. After a labor-intensive 120 days or so, the seedlings will have matured into full-grown tobacco plants ready for harvest. The finest cigar tobacco is grown in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Honduras and Nicaragua. Producers there cure the tobacco much as we do here in Christian County. After harvest, the tobacco leaves are bundled and transported to nearby tobacco barns. The barns face east and west so the sun heats them in the morning and afternoon for aging and curing. Leaves are strung onto wooden poles that are hoisted high inside the barn where air circulates around them for the next 45 to 60 days. After the tobacco leaves have dried and turned from green to brown, the leaves are carefully removed and stacked into bundles according to type.

The next phase involves two fermentations of the tobacco. The fermentation process makes the tobacco used in cigars less acidic and lower in tar and nicotine than that used in cigarettes. This is one of the reasons why cigars taste smoother than cigarettes and don't burn as hot. Another reason is that throughout the aging process of the tobacco, people are constantly sorting and selecting the leaves, ensuring that only the best leaves

are used in fine cigars.

From the drying barns, the leaves go to the fermentation houses, where they are placed in three-foot piles and covered with burlap. Moisture in the leaves triggers the fermentation process; similar to composting, and by the end of another 35 to 40 days, the leaves will assume a uniform brown color. From the fermentation house, the leaves are placed in large square boxes lined with palm leaves and then transported to the sorting house where they are graded by color, size and texture.

A second fermentation begins after the moistened, sorted and graded leaves are piled in six-foot stacks in dark rooms. There they are allowed to ferment for an additional two months. At long last, the tobacco is ready for the cigar factory. But once there, the tobacco may continue to age in a warehouse for as long as two years, provided it is kept at ideal temperatures and humidities. I suppose it is easier to appreciate the cost of finished cigars when one understands that the making of a fine cigar is both a capital and labor-intensive operation.

The construction of the cigar has three main components -- the filler, binder and wrapper. The filler is the core of the cigar which the binder and wrapper will embrace. In fine, hand-rolled cigars, it is made up of long leaf

tobacco leaves that run the length of a cigar. Short leaf or cut tobacco is used primarily for machine-produced cigars. The binder is the first layer of covering for the filler. In a quality cigar, it is a specialized leaf that has the strength to hold the bunch together. The binder affects the taste, burn rate and aroma of a cigar, and its flavor must be compatible with that of the filler and wrapper.

The wrapper leaf is the most delicate component of the cigar. You may not know that some of the finest cigar wrappers in the world are grown in Connecticut. They are known as Connecticut-shade wrapper. All wrapper leaf is harvested from special tobacco plants that are grown under gauze sheets to protect them from the sun. Unblemished wrapper leaves from one plant will provide enough wrapper for as many as 32 cigars. It can take upwards of three years to obtain a high-quality wrapper, including the year-long growing period, then six months to process and another 18 months for aging. Producing such a delicate product is expensive; a great wrapper leaf, whether it is grown in Connecticut, Cuba or Cameroon, adds significantly to a cigar's cost. Cigar wrapper often sells for \$40 a pound and adds approximately 50 to 60 cents to the cost of the cigar.

All of the world's fine cigars are made by hand. It is a craft that is

developed like any art. As any cigar-roller, or tabaquero, will tell you, the work that goes into making a fine cigar includes a great deal of love and devotion. Rollers work in large rooms, or galleries. In the gallery are dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of rollers, today, about half men and women. A Cuban tabaquero traditionally would spend as long as two years as an apprentice before even being allowed to roll a cigar. Even then, they would only be allowed to roll the smaller-sized ones. The most experienced rollers are responsible for making the most difficult cigars, often the largest or most uniquely-shaped, the figurados. A good cigar roller can make about 100 medium-size cigars per day. A highly-skilled cigar roller may make as many as 150 per day.

Cigars are characterized by color, shape and size. There can be as many as 65 shades of a cigar wrapper; however, they are categorized under seven color headings, from double-claro, the lightest, to oscuro, which is for all intents and purposes, black. A rule of thumb is that the darker the wrapper, the stronger and deeper the cigar's taste will be. This is because the wrapper leaf's oil and sugar content are directly proportional to the degree of darkness.

The shape and size of a cigar is a matter of personal taste. Torpedos

once were not popular. Now they are in demand. It also used to be that American smokers preferred milder, generally double-claro, cigars, but that fashion has changed as well. All cigars are characterized as either being parejos (having straight sides) or figurados (irregular shapes). Figurados include piramides, belicoso, and torpedos.

With regard to size, the choice should be influenced by how long one might have to smoke. The cigar's girth, or diameter, is measured by ring gauge which measures diameters in 64ths of an inch. Thus, a ring gauge of 64 means the cigar is one-inch in diameter. In general, the larger the ring gauge, the more full-flavored the cigar. Their fillers contain more slow-burning leaf, so they tend to smoke cooler and milder. They also tend to be better made because they are put together by more experienced rollers.

There are no standard sizes for particular types of cigars. A torpedo or a Churchill might be six inches long with a ring gauge of 48, or it may be nine inches long with a ring gauge of 58. I generally choose longer cigars with a larger ring gauge because they tend to be good "golf course" cigars, and they tend to be milder.

By the time a cigar has reached your local tobacconist, they have been scrutinized more closely and more often than most products made by human

hands. It takes a great deal of skill to make a cigar. If, for example, too much filler is used, it will make the draw too difficult, while too little filler will make the cigar burn hot and fast. It takes great skills to make good cigars consistently. To make a fine cigar requires more than 200 steps from the planting and tending of the tobacco seedling, to harvest and fermentation, to rolling, grading and packaging.

Lest you think that I am overly enamored with my subject, I leave you with this oft told story: Groucho Marx was hosting his enormously popular TV show, "You Bet Your Life". He was interviewing one contestant who allowed that he had 19 children. "Nineteen?" asked Marx. "Yes. I love my wife very much." Groucho Marx, taking his cigar from his mouth, said, "I love my cigar, but I take it out once in a while."