

THE CUSTOM-BILT STORY: A REVIEW BY TONY SODERMAN

Tony Soderman

A comment from Bill Unger

Several months ago, before I had finished my book on Custom-Bilt pipes and Tracy Mincer, I asked Rich Esserman and Tony Soderman-both knowledgeable and highly respected members of the pipe community-if they would review it when it was finished. Rich's review appeared in the last issue of the newsletter. Here is Tony's review:

When Bill first approached me about reviewing his book, I readily agreed because I was eager to learn as much as possible about Custombilt pipes. Since I have a dozen very long-shank Custombilts in my collection of American Canadians, the history of this brand was of particular interest to me. And, as a history major in college, it seemed like the natural thing to do. However, the book exceeded my highest expectations.

My interest in Custombilts began 35 years ago when, as a college student, I was a frequent visitor in the Cellini Pipe Shop (conveniently located next door to Zimmerman's Liquor Store in downtown Chicago). The proprietor, Mr. Silber, spoke of Tracy Mincer, whose unique carving process was copied by the Victory Pipe craftsman who produced Cellini Originals. Numerous Custombilts and some 30 years later, I read with interest the correspondence which appeared in The Ephemera written by various "experts" who disagreed about the origins and demise of Tracy Mincer and his famous pipes. I did not believe that the controversy could ever be resolved, but this is one time I am happy I was wrong!

I have often pondered what it will be like for collectors in future generations when they try to date pipes which will no doubt survive our generation. A hundred years from now, after we are all long gone, our pipes will be scattered among new collectors who follow us. We have enough trouble today dating Dunhills, about which there is some agreement, but what about the other major brands? Bill Unger has provided a scholarly compilation of Custombilt literature (gleaned from corporate records, business correspondence, advertisements and interviews with various survivors), and his effort will serve as a yardstick by which similar books will be measured in the future.

Unlike some popular books which seem to reduce myths and legends to writing, thereby establishing a certain amount of credibility for the misinformation contained in those volumes, Bill Unger has provided the source and background for all of his conclusions. In many cases, complete copies of letters, legal documents and series of photographs are presented in their entirety so readers can draw their own conclusions or use the information as reference materials in the future.

The well-intentioned effort of one popular author to create comprehensive reference guides for all pipes has drawn universal criticism, suggesting that broad, all-inclusive

"histories" fall short of their mark. Yet, to unknowing future generations, the material contained in such books may be relied upon because the sharp criticisms readily available today on the Internet, in

various publications, or by word-of-mouth will not be there decades from now, when unsuspecting readers look for reference materials recorded by our generation. Bill Unger has successfully avoided contributing to this wealth of misinformation.

Written in well-reasoned conversational text, the author presents a history of Custom-Bilt/Custombilt pipes approached from three different perspectives: "The Pipe Companies" (i.e., Custom-Bilt, Custombilt and Tracy Mincer); "The People" (members of the Mincer family and subsequent owners); and "The Pipes" (comparing the carving differences, stamping differences and other subtle variations). It is truly a fascinating approach, which affords the reader a variety of options. While I can read the book as an historical textbook, someone else can read it for insights into the operation of a pipe making company struggling to survive against long odds, and yet another reader can rely on it as a dating guide. (A couple of our more "famous" pipe experts should read the book as an instructional guide demonstrating the importance of factual record-keeping instead of pretty, dust-jacketed, hard-covered books valuable only for collecting the author's personalized signature on the inside cover.)

Bill Unger has the ability to mix anecdotal stories and raw facts in such a comfortable fashion that I did not readily distinguish the two. For example, on the same page that he writes about famous personalities enjoying Custombilt pipes (Paul Whiteman, Clark Gable and Bing Crosby), he also writes that the company produced 40,000 pipes in 1943 with an expectation of 80,000 pipes in 1944 (and keep in mind that those were the World War II Years, when briar was impossible to get)!

Thanks to his close attention to detail, the author presents us with a dating guide for pipes I was certain were not datable. In four quick pages (pp. 91-94), Custom-Bilt and Custombilt pipes can be dated based on the style of the nomenclature stamping and carving subtleties.

Also covered in some detail are pipes of historical importance to the American pipe-making scene. Custombilt "look-alikes" are commonly seen by American pipe collectors. I always suspected that "Rogers Rarity" and "Moore Mark" pipes were related to Custombilts, and now my suspicions have been confirmed. On the other hand, "Shelldrake" and "Emperor" pipes are not related, despite their similarities. Then there are the famous pipes that followed Custombilts, which most American collectors do not know are direct successors, including "The Doodler" and "Tracy Mincer" pipes.

The book is rich in photographs, including workers in the factory, advertisements and many pipes. All collectors would benefit by looking at the pictures if only to see the large number of variations of collectible pipes created by Tracy Mincer and his successors. Of particular interest are the sculptured bowls created briefly, particularly those featuring animals and carved heads. Classic old Meerschaums have nothing on Custombilts.

Included is a photograph of a carved Custombilt pipe depicting Joseph Stalin (smoking a pipe of course) sitting at a desk playing chess against Franklin Roosevelt, with each chess piece carved around the rim of the bowl! (Find that pipe, and a new record might be set on eBay!)

All things considered, it is a masterful book, well-conceived, well-researched and skillfully written. It is of value not only for collectors of Custombilt pipes but for all pipe smokers who would gain an insight into the efforts that go into the creation of any brand of pipes! Bill Unger is to be congratulated for a job well done.

Hopefully, pipe smokers everywhere will become acquainted with the book, and some may be stimulated to produce similar works on other major pipe brands in America and Europe. There is something of interest for every pipe smoker! Personally, I discovered that a couple of my vintage old Custombilts were not so old after all and were of relatively recent production. I also discovered that Bill Unger does not like duck hunting. (When he heard about my fishing pipe--a Custombilt sculptured bowl with a Bass on the front--he had to have it. I discovered that it looks a lot like the Tracy Mincer pipe "The Fisherman," which carried a hefty \$500.00 price when new! He will never get inside my duck-hunting shack, where I keep my Custombilt with three ducks carved, one on each side!)

Enjoy the book everyone. I certainly did.

[Bill Unger's Book Covering the History of Custom-Built Pipes Now Available](#)

Copyright 2002
The Great Northern Pipe Club