

Twin Cities Journal: Clean, fill, tamp, light ... but don't inhale

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White smoke billowed as Wally Loucks relit his long-shanked Canadian -- thick, roiling smoke, enough to cut visibility for yards and warrant anyone nearby shouting "Fire!"

The smoke rose, then drifted over the basement bar and dance hall like morning mist, jostling and mingling with cloud banks of sweet Virginia rising from another corner.

Tom Rowe was talking.

"I started when I was 14," he said, tamping the burn in an intricately carved pipe that he held with both care and ease. More pipes of deeply polished briar lay sprawled before him like trophies.



Harvey Rodich
Photo: Marlin Levison
Star Tribune

"I'd steal my dad's corncob pipes and Prince Albert tobacco," Rowe said, smiling. "My dad was a corn-cobber. He was one of those guys who got up in the morning, put his pipe in his mouth and then put his fake teeth in around the pipe."

They are less furtive than cigarette smokers, less boisterous than cigar smokers, but they are smokers nonetheless and suffer the same disdainful looks from the pure of lung. Many places declare them unwelcome, including even "Smoking" sections in cafes.



Strangers may approach a pipe smoker in public to smile and say, "You remind me of my grandfather," which can be a little troubling if the smoker is 30 and forgets it's the fragrance of Cavendish that triggers the memories.

Sometimes, seeking deeper understanding and acceptance and maybe a trial bowl of something with more bite than their usual, some Twin Cities pipe smokers gather as the Great Northern Pipe Club.

No snobs here

Jon Werner, 39, of Savage, said the Twin Cities had a thriving, convivial community of pipe smokers decades ago: people who admired each other's pipes and shared tobacco, stories and information. The rise of "the antismoking crowd" took some of the fun out of that, he said, but pipe smokers are on the rebound.

Werner and Tony Soderman, 54, of Minnetonka, put out a call for pipe enthusiasts to get together. Now they're drawing as many as 30 a month.

"We try not to be snobbish," Soderman said, "but I suppose it can come off that way when we talk about our English tobacco and \$50 humidors."

He owns 650 pipes, many of them rare. Smoking them in rotation, he doesn't return to a pipe for four months.

"But one of our members smokes only corncobs," Soderman said, "and he's welcome here."

"We all started with crummy pipes. They're cheap and deliver a decent smoke, and after a while you throw them away and move on."

"I remember the day I bought my first \$200 pipe. I cried."

Bob James, 60, of St. Paul, collects pipes with large bowls. "They smoke cooler," he said, "and I like the way they feel in my hand." Rowe, 61, of South St. Paul, favors pipes by Rich Lewis, a widely respected Minneapolis pipe maker.

Loucks, 64, from Roseville, has 240 pipes, mostly long Canadians with flattened-oval stems. He rotates through about 50 for smoking.

"I know guys who collect old cars," he said. "Others collect bottle caps. I like fine, beautiful wood, the look and the feel of a good pipe."

Each has a different personality, "like cats," he said, and he can keep himself occupied and entertained with all the filling and tamping, the matching of tobaccos to certain pipes, the lighting and cleaning.



Wally Loucks

"There was a guy who worked as counsel for the state Department of Corrections back in the '70s who smoked a pipe," Loucks said, taking a while to tell the story as he cleaned, filled, tamped, lit and relit his Canadian. "He'd use it to buy time when somebody asked him a question. That guy could take 10 minutes fiddling with his pipe while he searched for an answer."

Expensive roots

Loucks said he spent \$2,000 on pipes last year -- on *three* pipes. Rowe said he's spent as much as \$900 on one.

"But I've got pipes I spent \$10 on," he said, "and the reality is that one of the best-smoking pipes I ever had cost \$10 and had a cracked bowl."

Most pipes are carved from cured briar burls, or growths, on the root system of the white heath tree, a shrub found primarily in arid wastelands around the Mediterranean Sea. The wood is tough, porous and nearly impervious to heat. The most expensive pipes are carved from fine-grain old briar by "name" artisans.

Pipe bowls are carved into many shapes, such as Dublins, apples, pots, pokers and bulldogs. The stems may be bent (the bowl hanging below the mouth) or straight.

Harvey Rodich, 69, of Minneapolis, started smoking a corncob pipe in the 1950s, "partly because I saw the intellectuals at the university doing it, but also because I couldn't inhale cigarettes."

Pipe smokers long have argued that their habit is healthier -- or less unhealthy -- than cigarette or cigar smoking. But it *is* smoking, and even many Web pages maintained by pipe aficionados contain tips on avoiding practices that could increase the risks of disease.

"Pipe smokers who inhale are going to have the same problems as cigarette smokers," Soderman said. "But the majority do not inhale. Most people smoke for the flavor of the tobacco, for the peace and security and relaxation they get from smoking a pipe."

Rodich has about 60 pipes, including ornate, hand-carved pieces from Denmark. But he carries a few plain pipes "to smoke on the street or when I go to coffee, so I don't look like I'm bragging."

Pipe smokers generally are "laid back," Loucks said.

"Oh, a guy who smokes a pipe could be a scoundrel," he said. "It's like anything else. But generally, they're more relaxed, more thoughtful."

John Enger, 35, of St. Louis Park, who operates the club's Web site (<http://www.greatnorthernpipeclub.org>), has only about 20 pipes -- and smokes only once or twice a week.

"I'm still on a big learning curve," he said.

Club meetings, usually in a Twin Cities tobacco shop or in the Maplewood Lanes basement, feature talks by carvers, blenders or collectors. Highlights in December included the showing of a video from the "Great Carvers of Our Day" series and Enger's report on his first pipe show. He brought something for show-and-tell -- an apple-shaped Wiley pipe, for which he paid \$100.

"Good price," several others said through clenched teeth.

January's meeting (1:30 p.m. on Jan. 20, Maplewood Lanes, 1955 English St., Maplewood) could get hot and smoky, with a presentation by the author of "The Myth of Brand and Maker in Pipe Smoking," a controversial article in a recent newsletter of the North American Society of Pipe Collectors.

But members are looking ahead to the Chicagoland Pipe Collectors show in April.

"There will be a half-mile of display space for pipes and tobacco," Werner said reverently.

-- *Chuck Haga is at crhaga@startribune.com.*