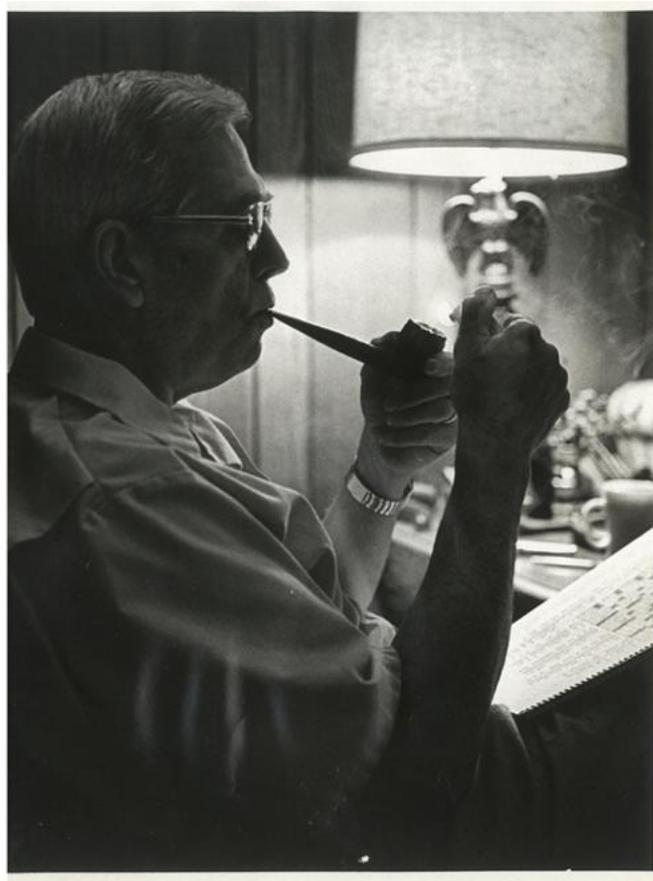


Edsel James: “Mr. Dunhill”

Edsel James was my first real “pipe mentor” and over the years, although we never actually met in person, he also became a good friend.

I begin here with a revised excerpt related from my own bio sketch related to Edsel.



In early 1999, I came across an article in Pipes and Tobaccos magazine (Winter, 1998) entitled “Mr. Dunhill” (see above) which was penned by Chuck Stanion. Among other things, the article included a photograph of three old deeply blasted Dunhill “Shell” pipes: They were just what I had been looking for without success. Since at that time I was not yet

“connected” to many people in the pipe world it seemed like Edsel James might hold the key to my accessing one or two of these beautiful old pipes. (This was in the “old days” when rare pipes usually changed hands via personal connections. Although the modern auctioning approach to trading has created access to a much wider range of pipes, I lament the days where trading was undertaken mostly in the way it did between Edsel and me. I have a strong distaste for the “modern” auction format.)

I don't recall how I obtained Edsel's address (but I did somehow) and I wrote to him in Murfreesboro Tennessee. I told him that I was hoping to acquire one or two old Shell Dunhill's like those that I had seen in the 1998 P&T article about him.

To my surprise, Edsel wrote back promptly, thanked me for my interest, and provided his phone number along with an invitation to call him. When I did, after a brief introduction -- in his, slow, lilting southern tone that always had a hint of humor and charm -- he said: “Send me a check and I'll send you some pipes”. He added, “You pick out what you want and then we'll settle up. Maybe you'll owe me some money, maybe I'll owe you some.” Of course he asked me: “You ever been poor?” He also asked me, other than an old deep blast, what kind of pipe did I especially like? I said: “Well, I like that 6LB you're holding in the photo in your article” (see above). He told me that pipe had been one of his regular favorites for 40-some years. Thus, I was surprised to find it included in the box of pipes that he sent to me. That 6LB Shell was the first

pipe I purchased from Edsel and as you can see it remains in my collection to this day.

Edsel was among what I think would best be called the first generation of serious Dunhill pipe collectors. These gentlemen relied on their extensive subjective experience with older Dunhill pipes but did not have the scholarly knowledge of nomenclature that was later provided for us by John Loring. For example, Edsel usually mistook the last two digits of patent numbers for the date code.

What I did learn from Edsel, among many other things, was how to take a much more refined approach towards “seeing” and understanding the factors that made a given pipe extraordinary*. Some of the pipes displayed in my collection are noted in relation to Edsel because they came from his personal collection. There are, however, a number of other pieces included there that I acquired from him over the years.

So, what began with purchase of one pipe, soon led to the purchase of another (the second was a beautiful 1925 127 Shell billiard), and then another, and another and so on. And, gradually, these phone calls morphed into (usually) weekly ritual where Edsel and I began to discuss a wide range of topics beyond pipes. These (often lengthy) conversations led to a long and warm relationship that lasted from 1999 until his death in 2009.

Edsel had a delightful (often self deprecating) sense of humor. As he told Chuck Stanion in the 1998 P&T article: “I’m

proud – poor, old, ugly and dumb”. Of course the only one of those characteristics that described Edsel was the reality of his getting on in years. And although he was often a playful joker (one of the first things he asked me almost every time I called was, of course: “Have you ever been poor?”), Edsel, was often deep, thoughtful and self-reflective. We discussed issues ranging from our inevitable mortality, to the beauty of nature and even the various ways we both endeavored to cope with times of stress. His deep affection for his lovely wife Alice was also always readily apparent.

It has been more than 10 years now since Edsel died and must say that I still truly miss his friendship. I don’t really know why we got along so well (our backgrounds were extremely different) but I was always lifted by our conversations -- sometimes because they were playful and fun and sometimes because of some deeper connection that is impossible for me to articulate.



Edsel and Alice James