

The Evolution of My Pipe Collecting: Emphasizing the Dunhill Pipe

I was born in Berkeley, California in 1954, and for the first 30 or so years of my life it was still “normal” to see men smoking their pipes publically. Our next-door neighbor in the North Berkeley hills was a professor at U. C. Berkeley and a world renowned Chaucer scholar. I remember as a boy seeing this dapper man descend his stairs in the morning to go to work. Almost always he sported an elegant Harris tweed and puffed happily away on one of what I later learned was his regular rotation of Charatan pipes.

My best friend’s father was also a pipe smoker and I suspect that my interest in the pipe began with my observations of these two men.

I became rebellious during my adolescent and teen years and at that time I would no more have wanted to be seen with a pipe than with my mother or a satchel full of schoolbooks! However, when I entered the University of California, Berkeley my interest in the pipe was rekindled. It must be true, nevertheless, that pipes had always fascinated me, because I can remember even as a ten or eleven year old boy visiting Drucquer & Sons’ pipe shop on University Avenue. Drucquer’s was an enormous and magical place – the likes of which, sadly,

may well no longer exist in that size and breadth anywhere today.

In 1979 I purchased my first pipe at the Drucquer's store: A "second" quarter-bent horn, the brand name of which I cannot remember now.

When my neighbor Professor Bronson discovered that I had become a neophyte pipe smoker he welcomed me over to his home regularly to listen to music while he familiarized me with the basic techniques necessary to smoking a pipe with satisfaction. I have an indelible memory of my first "lesson" with Dr. Bronson. He was seated in front of three large French windows while we listened to a composition by his good personal friend Sir Arthur Bliss. I remember him puffing peacefully and with immense pleasure on a beautiful Charatan Prince as the sunlight enhanced the beauty of the smoke.

In the 90's as I began to learn about high-grade pipes, I did what many initially do and purchased a Savinelli Autograph. The original and amazing Drucquer and Sons store had closed by that time, as pipe smoking was no longer considered a normative social phenomena.

Ron Richards had acquired the Drucquer shop and moved it to a smaller location on Solano Avenue. Ron was a passionate lover of the Dunhill pipe both in its pre- and post-war iterations. And I suppose it was my

respect for Ron's judgment that initially guided me towards a preference for English pipes and the Dunhill pipe in particular -- although at the time I most certainly did not fully understand why. Not long after that I encountered an article on Edsel James in the 1998 edition of "Pipes and Tobaccos" magazine. By then my eye was growing more discriminating and I had become particularly interested in the old deeply blasted shells that were not the norm for Dunhills being made in the 80's and 90's.

One day when I was at the Piedmont tobacconist owned by Steve Richmond I told Steve that I was looking for one of these old, special shell pipes that I had not as yet been able to acquire. Steve went into the back of his shop and returned with a roll-up that contained at least a half a dozen superb examples of pre-war Dunhill Shells. I gawked but understandably Steve was unwilling to sell.

That's when I made contact with Edsel James in Murfreesboro Tennessee.

I wrote Edsel a letter telling him that I was hoping to acquire one or two old Dunhills like some of those I had seen in the 1998 P&T article about him.

He wrote me back with his phone number thanking me for my interest and asking me to call him. When I did, Edsel -- with his charming humor and lilting

southern accent -- 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.” He asked me what kind of pipe I liked and I said “Well, I like that 6LB you’re holding in the photo in your article.” He told me that had been one of his regular favorites for 40-some years. I was surprised to find it included in the box of pipes that he sent to me.

That was the first pipe I purchased from Edsel and as you can see it remains in my collection to this day. (See separate bio on Edsel).

Edsel was among what I think should 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 – to whom we are all, of course, forever indebted.

What I did learn from Edsel was how to “see” an extraordinary pipe. Some of the pipes displayed in my collection are given special mention 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. As can be seen in the bio on Edsel, we developed a long and close relationship that lasted from 1998 until his death in 2009.

During this time I learned more about the Dunhill pipe from John Loring, and acquired his invaluable book on nomenclature and all other things Dunhill. I never met John personally (as I have never attended a pipe show) but I had numerous phone conversations with him. John was a delightful and generous man. He was patient with younger collectors like me who didn't have one-tenth of his knowledge and, like Edsel, he further helped me in refine my eye for a fine pipe and also helped me to gradually come to understand the pipes I wanted to try to focus on.

I never had a desire to build a large collection -- nor do I have the means to do so. What the reader will see displayed in my collection is the product of 30 years of (mostly) careful purchases aided not only by what I learned from Edsel and John but also from other knowledgeable collectors, such as noted Barling collector David Gabriel. I have also been fortunate enough to form close personal relationships with a number of dealers who have been kind and generous enough to occasionally offer me a special piece before they put it out on the open market.

There are many fine pipe makers and I certainly do not believe that there is any "best" maker or brand. What attracted me to focusing on Dunhill pipes is in part the ability to date them so accurately: That gives the collector a very direct sense of the history of the

pipe. Also – although, there are most certainly notable exceptions – most Dunhill pipes were/are made from extremely high quality briar and with great care. And most importantly, of course, many have tremendous character.

There are many different ways to approach pipe collecting and I know and understand the inclination to have a large and/or eclectic collection. For me, limiting my focus to older English pipes with a strong emphasis on the Dunhill pipe has been a help in preventing my passion for pipes from running out of control (at least most of the time!). And, as with so many fine objects of art, the better one becomes at knowing a particular thing the more appreciative one grows of its beauty, subtlety and complexity.

In closing, I want to emphasize that to my taste the finest of the Dunhill pipes are as fine as any pipes ever made. This does not mean that I do not believe that there are other (e.g., English, Italian, Scandinavian and American) pipe makers who have produced equally outstanding products.

My friend David Gabriel told me many years ago: “The value of a pipe is subjective”. These are wise words for the collector (and the aspiring collector) and they really translate into, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. Thus, focus your attention on the pipes you come to love the most.

Although, again, there are some notable exceptions, for me the beauty of the Dunhill pipe has become exactly that.