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Farewell to Tobacco and a Pinch of Snuff

What in the world is snuff? Leave it to the medical profession to muddy the water. They define snuff as a medicinal or errhine powder (that which promotes a discharge or secretion from the nose) to be inhaled into the nose. Acatarrh snuff is a powder used for insufflation for coryza. And, Ferrier' snuff is a mixture of bismuth and morphine for insufflation. While, white snuff is a mixture of menthol and cocaine for insufflation. Now since we have used insufflation at least three times, might as well see how they define this term as well. Insufflation is the act of inflating the lungs. Hogwash! That's only half of it. You bet, when you sniff snuff you inhale deeply, then exhale with gusto. i.e. you sneeze!

Now you are getting the idea, has to do with putting something in your nose. The movies, television, &c. have made snorting cocaine, perhaps on a rolled dollar bill, a practice that is wide spread.

And "coryza"? That is in terminology known to kids as boggers, snot, sheep's leg or (?). In other words when you have a head cold and your nose is stopped up, if you take a sniff of snuff, you will sneeze and perhaps clear your head. (That is if you don't blow your ears off instead.)

The amazing thing about snuff, the actual, physical, hard core, substance that you can see, touch, taste, smell and hear (well actually when snuff is used properly, it causes you to sneeze and the vigorous "a a a a choo o o o" is what you hear), is that it is nothing more than finely ground tobacco.

Smoking tobacco wasn't the most popular way to use it back in the periods of highest acceptance, neither was dipping (the practice of putting a bit of snuff between the lip and gum). No, snorting snuff was the fashionable means for its use. No less men than Benjamin Franklin and many of our most respected leaders on both sides of the Atlantic used snuff. For a most interesting essay on snuff, one needs only to read William Mathews praise in his "A Pinch of Snuff". There you will be entreated to stories of proper etiquette in taking a "pinch". How in a pinch (pun intended!), one minister was saved from having to forego his use of snuff by using floor sweepings from an area where he had generously used snuff. And much more is in Mathews book, Hours with Men and Books, which was published in 1879.

"Snuff" as in snuffed out, probably originated from the practice of pinching out the flame of a candle. One uses the thumb and forefinger to lightly grasp the wick and extinguish the flame. So snuffing and pinching became synonymous. Which leads us to a further thought, that is, the Scotch are sometimes referred to as penny pinchers. And of course you can imagine one dressed in plaid as squeezing a coin between his fingers to get the last value from it. So it is with snuff, one uses just a pinch taken from the can or bottle or snuff case to produce the desired effect. Of course, so that one might not be mistaken for a clod, there is a right and wrong way for taking a pinch of snuff. To assure that one did not make a gaffe that would forever mark one as being uncouth, schools have been taught on the proper etiquette of snuffing. An advertisement in the Spectator, August 8, 1711, to wit, "The exercise of the Snuff Box, according to the most fashionable Airs and Notions in opposition to the exercise of the Fan will be taught with the best plain or perfumed Snuff, at Charles Lillis's & C." After the snuff box is withdrawn from the pocket by the left hand, the fingers of the right hand give the cover three taps (this is to settle the snuff so that when the box is opened it will be collected in a mass, easy to take an appropriate sized pinch), then the box is opened and pinch of snuff placed on the back of the left hand or more properly, on the thumb-nail enclosed by the forefinger. Then raising the left hand or the right hand with the thumb-nail load of snuff, whatever, to the nose, a sharp inhaling of the powder into the nose was typically followed by an appropriate sneeze. In Christendom, "God bless you" is said by those about.

When snuff was at its most popular, one of the brands seen on drug store shelves among other places was "Scotch Brand" . This familiar brown bottle with a cork to seal its contents against loss of freshness may from time to time still be found in antique markets or perhaps a ravine or other waste land spot where garbage was sent to its final resting place. Small children often valued the "tin", which was about the diameter of a quarter and two inches high. The tin often embossed with the brands logo, was sealed tightly with a glued wrapper securing the tin top to the tin base.

And somewhere, the practice of "dippin" developed. That's similar to the methodology used with a quid of chewing tobacco, whereby a "pinch" of snuff was placed between the gum and the lip. Now the level of snuff added was such that one only seldom expectorated (spit). Rather one simply let the dry powder sit and occasionally, one would need the use of a tin cup (or any other convenient container, thus the spittoon (which was used for chewing tobacco, not snuff dippin in later days)).

Having a small pinch between the lip and gum, one could enjoy the alkaloids from the tobacco as they were dissolved and passed through the membranes of the gums and lips. When the effect became diminished, the best method of achieving a higher level was to stir the deposit, ever so gently. For this purpose, an elm "tooth brush" was most effective. This was nothing more than a short piece of elm twig which had been cut about four inches long and one end abraded by either the use of the knife or perhaps simply by briefly chewing on it.

And then science rears its ugly head. Now you can buy your favorite Copenhagen or Skoal in convenient tea bags (well they are like tea bags) and of course we call it smokeless tobacco instead of snuff.

I know of no statistics on the effect of snuff on life expectancy. However, it is interesting to note that many of our most prominent leaders in the distant past snuffed (agin pun intended). And unless done in by an angry mob, most lived to a ripe old age.

However, if you want to learn of the "influence of noxious substances and poisoning" brought about by the use of tobacco products, you need look no further than page 484 of Gunn's, Newest Family Physician and Home Book of Health, published in 1884. Dr. Gunn recites the many evils of tobacco including snuff. "When taken into the nostrils in the form of Snuff, a portion of it enters into the sonorous cavities of the face, and gradually impairs the functions of the voice. ... Snuff, from its constant use, has ben found to produce abscesses in the tender internal surface of the nose; for, from the infinite number of nerves diffused over the mucous membrane of the nose, it is endowed with exquisite feeling, and the better to preserve the sense of smelling, those nerves are continually lubricated with moisture. By the almost caustic acrimony of Snuff, this moisture is dried up, and those fine, delicate nerves, the organs of smelling, are rendered useless and almost insensible. To this self-evident bad effect may be added the narcotic, or stupefying power of Tobacco, in any form by which the brain and nerves are injured ..."

The arguments regarding snuff and tobacco usage are not just of this century as you can imagine. After its introduction to Europe and the Far East, tobacco became an industry that made the fortunes of many men and monies flowed into the coffers of the Church and Royalty. Its popularity lead to claims and counter claims some of which persist to today.

One of the books on the subject which romanticizes snuff is, Snuff and Snuff Boxes, the Book of, by Mattoon M. Curtis. Written in 1931 and published by Bramhall House, New York. Curtis collected snuff

boxes and his book is a view of tobacco from an enlightened historic perspective. It's a great book! The following are selected quotes from the book, taken in sequence from the pages of the book.

Uses of tobacco among the aborigines - 1) curative of certain diseases, sores, wounds and a defense against insects [note: I have used a cigar as a means of dissuading insects while fishing] and pest, 2) preventative of hunger, thirst, and fatigue, 3) restorative of physical and mental energies, 4) a factor in religious, civil and social ceremonies, 5) source of pleasure to taste and smell, 6) a narcotic or stimulant when used in various ways, 7) a medium of exchange for barter. pp18

Dental effects - It was observed in a burial mound that at least one of those buried there had teeth that had been worn down almost to the gums. Since it is reported that tobacco was mixed with ground, burnt shells or limestone and taken orally, perhaps this was as a palliative for tooth problems? pp 20

Healthful benefits - "their bodies are notably preserved in health, and know not many grievous disease wherewithal we in England are oftentimes afflicted "pp47

Healthful benefits - "a handbook for seamen was published and dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, recommending tobacco juice for erysipelas and skin lesions, and that remedy was probably used until recent times." pp48

Poetry - "Prince and peasant, lord and lackey,
All in some form take their Baccy."
(Author unknown)

Health benefits - In 1576 L'Obel, one of the leading botanist of his time, says of tobacco, "it satisfieth hunger, it helps ulcers and wounds, and it is good for diseases of the chest and the wasting of the lungs""pp52 (Interesting to note that people who quit smoking often gain weight. And what of this diseases of the chest and wasting of the lungs, the very thing that cigarettes are accused of.)

Poetry - "For rich and poor, in peace or strife,
It smooths the rugged path of life."
(Author unknown)

Politics and health - "...by 1600 the times were ripening for an onslaught against the rapidly rising use of tobacco throughout Europe. There was a growing scepticism regarding its medicinal values. There was a well-founded suspicion that the axiom, "Prevention is better than cure" was leading people to anticipate all the diseases for which tobacco was a remedy. Pharmacology had succumbed to prophylaxis. Under puritanic influences it was coming to be regarded as a wicked comfort and luxury. Church and state saw in its popularity an extravagant expenditure of money that should go elsewhere, and especially a corrupting element in official families. Antagonism began to show itself in the press and on the bema (altar space) by those who loved negation and sought reform."pp53

When Indians snuffed, they sometimes used the "wishbone" of fowl as a means of permitting the snuff or smoke from burning tobacco to be introduced directly into both nostrils simultaneously.

Tobacco derives its name from the island source, Tobago, from the Indians there who so named the plant and the island. The circuitous commercial route tobacco took to Europe and then back to America was by way of Spain. Then through Europe to England and thence back to the Colonies. Of course, the American Indians had their own supply and in fact the variety of which there are many was different from that made its way through Spain.

The Latin name *Nicotiana*, likewise has a historic source. The players; a) Henry II of France who was trying to marry off his daughter to the King of Portugal, b) his secretary, Jean Nicot, who failed in acting as the marriage broker, but wrote a description of the tobacco plant and its uses, c) Frampton, a writer of the period who wrote *Mondardes*, a translation of events of Portugal attributed to, d) Jean Liebault who actually received the writings describing uses of tobacco, penned by Nicot. pp34

Nicot described the curative and medicinal properties of tobacco for a number of maladies including, cuts and bruises, *Noli-me-tangere* (about which I know nothing), old sores, cankered ulcers, ringworm, dropsie, short breath, Kinge's evil (do wonder what this is/was?) and two others; hurts and scabbes. He claimed he had personally been the finder out by careful experimentation of the benefits of tobacco. For this, the plant was given the name, *Ambassodor*'s herbe, for it having been "invented" and brought to France. pp36

(It is well to remember that this all took place in or about 1559-1570, prior to Nicot's birth, tobacco had become an item of commerce in Spain and Portugal, so why attribute to Nicot such fame. Others before and after Nicot have claimed authority to which they are undeserving. Our own President represented himself to be a "Constitutional Scholar".)

Further claims of benefit from tobacco are provided by Girolamo Benzoni who wrote in 1541 that shade dried tobacco, when used whole or ground was considered good for headaches, lock-jaw (rabies), toothache, coughs, asthma, stomach-ache, obstructions, kidney troubles, diseases of the heart, rheumatism, the poisoning of arrows, carbuncles, polypus, and consumption (tuberculosis). pp37.

Today concern is expressed that the additives in tobacco may be as much of the problem as tobacco itself. However when you learn that among early adulterants to tobacco were; leaves of rhubarb, dock, burdock, coltsfoot, beech, plantain, oak, elm, cabbage, lettuce, and chicory leaves steeped in tar-oil. Others were; peat-earth (probably peat moss), bran, sawdust, malt-rootlets, barley-meal, pea-meal, and potato starch. (In passing it should be noted that a company in Lubbock Texas offered lettuce cigarettes as late as the 1980's. Nothing apparently changes in this world.) pp56

More poetry:

"Tobacco is an Indian weed,
From the devil it doth proceed,
It picks your pockets, burns your clothes,
And makes a chimney of your nose."

Source unknown.

If you are to believe that only today do we have hypocrites, Curtis in his book points out that in the early 1700's, Louis XIV who hated tobacco in every form and using the authority of the medical profession, had his royal physician make a public outcry against tobacco. How effective Fagon (that was the physician's name) was remains to be seen as he took an occasional dip of snuff as he made his pitch against the weed. (At least our doctors early on recognized that they could not wage war against tobacco if they still indulged.. Unfortunately, the government at both state and federal level while preaching against tobacco, still claim the bounty of taxes from its sales and thus benefit directly.)

Flavorings of snuff are not new. Curtis writes that "scent" was imparted by a sauce which contained salt, soda, tamarinds, red wine, syrup, cognac and cream of tartar. In addition rose leaves and other plant substances were added. pp67.

More poetry:

What introduces Wig or Tory,
 And reconciles them in their story,
 When each is boasting in his glory,
 A pinch of snuff.
 Where speech and tongue together fail,
 What helps old ladies in their tale,
 And adds fresh canvas to their sail,
 A pinch o f snuff.

Alexander Pope is said to have written:

Snuff or the fan supply each pause of chat
 With singing, laughing, ogling and all that.
 And Catullus wrote that when Cupid sneezed,
 The little loves that waited by,
 Bowed and blessed the augury.
 A sonnet to the nose,
 Knows he that never took a pinch
 Nosey! the pleasure thence which flows?
 Knows he the titillating joy
 Which my nose knows?
 O nose! I am as proud of thee
 As any mountain of its snows!
 I gaze on thee and feel that pride
 A Roman knows!

(In our family, the proboscis has always held much acclaim.)

To feed the nose as has been described before, it was simply a quick passage of the pinch of snuff from between the thumb and forefinger or perhaps from a pinch which had been pre-deposited on the back of the hand. But how was milady to do so with grace and poise? Why with a spoon of course. To wit:

To such a height with some is fashion grown
 They feed their very nostrils with a spoon. pp 75

(Of course the Chinese had long before discovered the pleasure and fitted their many snuff boxes/bottles with tiny spoons.)

A proper box to house snuff was almost as essential as the content itself.

For females fair and formal fops to please,
 The mines are robb&rsquod of ore, of shells the seas,
 With all that Motherly Earth and beast afford
 To man, unworthy now, tho once their lord;
 Which wrought into a box, with all the show
 Of art the greatest artist can bestow,
 Charming in shape, with polish rays of light,
 A joint so fine it shuns the sharpest sight,

Must still be graced with all the radiant gems
And precious stones that ere arrived in Thames.
Within the lid the painter plays his part,
And with his pencil proves his matchless art;
There drawn to life some spark or mistress dwells,
Like hermits chaste and constant to their cells.

Perhaps an aside to the materials of construction is in order, judging the above poem. Many natural and unnatural materials, as well as the precious and semiprecious metals and stones, found their way into snuff boxes. One material of note is that of the shell of the turtle. Tortoise shell which is simply the upper covering of the creature was prized by the oriental trade because of a very unique property, in addition to its rich natural colors of brown, black, green and yellow. The hawkbilled tortoise of the South Sea Islands gave up its shell, most unwillingly, to the trade. The shell of the tortoise is formed in very thin layers or shingles about three times as long as their breadth. (Similar to the operculum of some shell fish, which provides a closure to the open area of whelks, conch, &c.) These layers are easily softened by heat and may be welded together in any shape or thickness required. Unlike ivory, tortoise shell seldom cracks, checks, or warps in changing temperatures. The remarkable qualities, to which must be added fine texture and translucent colours, render it very desirable for decoration and engraving. pp86 (The reader may have encountered "artificial" tortoise shell in combs and other personal care items. Plastic having now come to the salvation of the hawkbill tortoise. While not in any way related to a tale about tobacco, another [turtle](#) story relates the travels of an Oklahoma snapper.)

Alas, snuffs declining status preceded that of the pipe and cigar, giving way to the cigarette.

Without joking, the cigarette is the poetry of smoking,
And needs no constant stoking, as my pipe.
I like a good cigar, but my funds don't go so far
As for the cigarette, with even more delight.

Lest the reader think I have been too strong an advocate of tobacco, I must remind he or she that Mattoon Curtis (and I) share the same thoughts on its use. "No longer milady holds the box that puts her at ease while displaying her fair white arm and flashing rings; instead she sell her picture to advertise some new or old brand of tobacco. No longer does my gentleman raise from its velvet bed the artistic pipe, or cigar-holder, but picks at a cellophane package, smokes his stupid briar often upside-down, or from the same enunciatory organ manages simultaneously his cigar and his conversation." In today's vernacular, the use of tobacco is a dirty, stinking habit!

I recommend Mattoon Curtis' book. It contains more than just a memorial to snuff and snuff boxes. From MC's introduction; "This little book is the offspring of a desire to make clear to myself the rise, development and disappearance of the great vogue of snuffing tobacco which for about three hundred years played one of the most dramatic roles in the social life of modern peoples..." Published in 1935 by Bramhall House and copyrighted by Mary C. Curtis who just may have been either his wife or daughter?

The last snuffer in our family was Grandmother Wortham. She lived with her daughter, Cleo until she was well into her eighties. My remembrance of her is reinforced by a picture of her sitting with her small white dog. Out of sight is the familiar tin cup, the bottle of Scotch Snuff, the elm twig or the sometimes spots on the floor where she just missed the cup. Grandmother Wortham became legally blind but this in no way diminished her lust for life. She was active til the very end. Don't know what really did her in, but surely wasn't snuff. But sniffing the stuff, no way, she wanted her constant high from the nicotine and other alkaloids which she got by stirring the witches-brew with her "switch".

Hours with Men and Books, William Mathews, S. C. Griggs and Company, 1879, pp 345

Up to snuff!

If the above isn't enough to fill your nose and head with snuff, there's more. Merriwether's site;

provides an amazing listing of poetry to the benefits and pleasure of snuff. As his disclaimer states, "insight into a culture that is under threat as we speak", is not being defended, only noted as a point in time to what was, is and might have been.

joew/070199 <http://shift.merriweb.com.au/books/tobacco/tobacco.html> The Poetry of Snuff, Return of Snuffing ****

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