



I LOVE LOOSIE

AROUND
TOWN

Dating back over 5,000 years, its contentious history is highlighted by visceral responses of disgust, praise, scorn and, in modern times, perverse emulation among the young and those seeking to be “with it” and “cool.” At various times and places, it was incorporated into rituals of world religions around the globe. Invoking violent revulsion in some, reaction to it has proven to be strong and swift. In 1590, Pope Urban VII condemned it in a Papal Bull. Orthodox Church leader Joasaphus I, the Patriarch of Moscow, issued a decree in 1634 calling for users to have their nostrils slit. The habit in question is tobacco smoking and the mysteries and contradictions surrounding it plague mankind right up to the present day.

By current estimates, over 1.2 billion people continue to smoke in spite of numerous and frightful warnings. As a general rule, men tend to smoke more than women. Worldwide, the Soviet Union is the largest consumer of cigarettes on earth. The role tobacco smoking played in history parallels the discovery and evolution of America. Upon his arrival in the New World, Christopher Columbus and his crew members were amazed to see Native Americans smoking tobacco in two-pronged pipes they inserted into their noses. Introduced to the American colonies by John Rolfe in 1612 and known by the nickname of “brown gold”, tobacco usage as a cash crop and social tool quickly caught on. As in modern times, tobacco smoking was a habit that induced a quick (some would say greedy) reaction among the political power brokers of the time. In a move that doubtlessly evokes an eerie sense of Déjà Vu among contemporary New York smokers, King James I of England tried to impose a tax of 4000% on tobacco (sound familiar, Emperor Bloomberg?).

As veterans of World War II can attest, smoking was an integral part of the military experience of the time. In the Pacific and European theatres of war, the American Red Cross provided GIs (for a fee) with cigarettes and coffee. The Salvation Army also gave soldiers cigarettes and coffee, at no fee. In the post war era, tobacco was a bargaining tool in the rehabilitation of post war-Germany. Under President Truman’s Marshall Plan, over 24,000 tons of tobacco flowed to Germany in 1948; this figure increased to 69,000 tons in 1949.

For America’s post war baby boomers, smoking was a rite of passage into adulthood, sophistication and coolness; death from lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema were merely unspoken sidebar elements that only happened to “other people.” Yet as boomers aged, and the placid mindset of fifties America gave way to the convulsive growth of the sixties, adolescents of that era began to notice something disturbing-cultural icons and cinematic tough guys such as Humphrey Bogart and Gary Cooper began dropping dead. It seemed their untimely deaths had something to do with their smoking habits. By the end of the decade, youngsters of that era knew three things: John Kennedy was dead, the Beatles changed everything and cigarettes killed. In short, the undeniable had become unavoidable.

In evaluating addictions, cigarette smoking is perhaps the most insidious, due to the fact that up until recently it was not only tolerated but enjoyed a tacit level of approval throughout society. As the Marlboro Man demonstrated (before his death from lung cancer) “real men” smoked cigarettes and enjoyed them with a masculine swagger that implicitly excluded wimps and sissies. American males, locked in a state of spoiled and ever lasting boyhood, bought into this mindset by the millions.

To fully understand tobacco smoking, it is important to note and appreciate the differences between a habit and an addiction. From a physiological viewpoint, the

physical need for tobacco, or any other drug, constitutes a chemically induced craving for a given substance. Given enough time away from the addictive element in question, this physical need will cease and the body will eventually readjust to a pre-addictive state. The habit of smoking, however, is far more sinister. As reformed and would be ex-smokers can attest, cravings for a cigarette can come fast and furious for months, even years after tobacco usage has ceased. Many former smokers report an almost uncontrollable urge for a cigarette when they first wake up in the morning. While this intense craving is real, it does pass within a matter of moments. Yet it is nonetheless a major stumbling block for many who embark on the road to a smoke-free world.

Difficulties aside, there is hope for those wishing to kick this habit in the butt. In addition to Nicorette gum, a relatively new product offers real hope for those who find themselves unwilling worshippers at the altar of the tobacco god. Approved by the FDA in 2006, the drug Chantix is a major step forward in helping people release themselves from tobacco cravings. Designed to inhibit the uptake of nicotine at the receptors sites in the brain, it blocks the sensations of pleasure so many people associate with smoking. Available only by prescription and priced at \$150 for a month’s supply it is not cheap; yet when considering the alternatives it can be considered a real bargain. For those who need support from and with their fellow addicts, the North Shore Long Island Jewish Center for Tobacco Control operates a free quit smoking clinic (Phone 516-466-1980). The program’s director, Dr. Ann Sullivan, the Senior VP of Queens Health Network offers a sobering warning on tobacco usage, “Smoking is the leading preventable cause of death, killing 25,000 New Yorkers and 430,000 Americans every year.”

In spite of the well documented health risks associated with cigarette usage, attempts to stamp it out only serve to make it more attractive to users. Like Prohibition in the early part of the twentieth century, repression has driven the smoking habit underground and spawned its own social dynamic and lexicon among smokers. As the price of cigarettes approaches and in some cases exceeds ten dollars a pack, merchants have responded to the market demand. In bodegas and delis around the city, shop keepers now sell individual cigarettes, known as a “loosie,” at a dollar a piece, driving the price of a cigarette pack to over twenty dollars. State and federal tax collectors may salivate over potential revenues, but store clerks are savvy enough to sell their bootleg product only to well established customers and even then only when they are alone with them. Smokers, eager to control the price of their habit, now take only a few puffs of their cigarette and save the rest of it. This remaining half is called a “clip” and on the street it is used as a bartering item. Hard core smokers are now popularizing “blunts,” or hand-rolled cigarettes that contain a large quantity of tobacco but cost only a fraction of the price of commercial cigarettes.

For over two decades, tobacco executives have perjured themselves by insisting there is no linkage between lung cancer, heart disease and smoking. Of course, they also assert that the tobacco industry has no systematic program to lure young people into the smoking habit—the creation and marketing of strawberry, chocolate and watermelon flavored cigarettes notwithstanding. Ultimately, these Joe Camel “humps” have a “lotta ‘splainin’ to do.”

“...It is a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain and in the black stinking flame thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.”

— England’s King James I, 1604