
I'm unsure why I began smoking a pipe. But, like most smoking enthusiasts, I'm certain of when and where I discovered tobacco. It all began at a small tobacconist's store in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with a bowl of golden Cavendish, an insight to another world, and what became my very first pipe. It's funny; I've known about tobacco my whole life, but didn't *discover* it until six years ago.



Located in Minnesota, not far from the Pipestone National Monument, are the Keepers of the Sacred Tradition of Pipemakers, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the ancient tradition of pipecrafting.

Photo courtesy of Bud and Rona Johnston.

Rediscovering Pipes & Tobacco in the New World

by John Breerwood

The story of tobacco's discovery deserves more study than simply saying that Columbus stumbled upon it. Granted, it changed history forever by ushering the Old World into a brave new one—however, tobacco had been discovered thousands of years before that. The Native American tribes of both the Northern and Southern continents had perfected smoking tobacco, so much that it had become a centric attribute to their

cultures and religions. “There were some regional variations of [pipe] styles, but most of them were pretty universal,” says Bud Johnston, president of Keepers of the Sacred Tradition of Pipemakers, who went on to explain that the oldest known pipe was a tube pipe, or a “cloud blower,” which looked almost like a big cigar.

The pipe's evolution took on different shapes over the ages,

such as “disk pipes,” and then nonstemmed “effigy pipes,” commonly taking the forms of animals. Another customary shape, typically associated with a “peace pipe,” consists of an elbow-shaped bowl and a long wooden stem usually decorated with eagle feathers, ribbons, or animal hide. The T-bowl pipe is a more recent edition, dating back around 300 years, in which the bowl is shaped like an inverted T. Pipe-tomahawks were also common, and represented the relationship between war and peace.

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It’s fairly common to simply associate Native Americans with the traditional peace pipe, but there’s much more to explore. It may be presumed that the term “peace pipe” originated as a European association with the act of smoking and its importance in helping establish diplomatic relations with Native Americans. “Usually, when you used a pipe in a mixed group, you’re promising that whoever smokes or touches that pipe is going to tell the truth,” Johnston says. “So, in most treaty signings and ceremonies, there would be a pipe around. That’s how the term ‘peace pipe’ got going.”

Granted, they were used for peace at times, but, aside from that, the pipe is of great religious value. “Pipes were used for almost any kind of communication with [the] Creator. They were the universal tools for most North American tribes to say prayers,” says Johnston. They were also used for guidance, weddings, and funerals, among many other things. A few rituals are described in great detail in Joseph Epes Brown’s book, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of Oglala Sioux*. Black Elk’s son translates his father’s words to Brown so that his tribal nation, as well as others, could

understand the complexity and significance of the pipe, which was essential in the ritual called the Keeping of the Soul, in which “one so purifies [the soul] that it and the Spirit become one, and it is thus able to return to the place where it was born,” says Black Elk. In this tradition, many people of the tribe gather for the ceremony of the “keeping,” and then “releasing,” of the souls of people who have died.

The pipe is essential for other rites and ceremonies as well, and is a main component in all manner of rituals. In the Rite of Purification, a tribe member, with the assistance of the sacred pipe and a “sweat lodge,” cleanses him- or herself in order to live rightly and to receive a vision from the Great Spirit. The Sun Dance is an annual summer ceremony based on the different stages of the moon. According to Black Elk, “The growing and dying of the moon reminds us of our ignorance, which comes and goes.” Smoking of the sacred pipe is important for ensuring that the scouts, who decide the ritual’s location, tell the truth about their vision quest. During the dance itself, the pipe is leaned against a small wooden rack to represent the path to heaven.

“For my tribe, the Chippewa, it’s a more private ceremony, while the Plains tribes made it a great big event,” says Johnston, elaborating that it is common for this particular part of Native American culture to vary from tribe to tribe and is more prevalent now than it was decades ago. “Now you can almost pick a weekend in the summer and there’s a Sun Dance somewhere.”

There is also the rite of the Making of Relatives, in which a common bond is formed between Indian nations. Black Elk explains that it began when a man named Matohoshila received a vision about corn. “When traveling to the southeast, he found a small patch of corn, exactly as he had seen in his vision,” Black Elk says. “[His vision] and this corn he brought back to his people, not knowing that it

belonged to the Ree Nation with whom the Sioux had long been at war.” But peace was achieved when Ree representatives offered their tobacco in exchange for their sacred corn.

It is to be noted that not all tribes follow these rites. Each tribe has its own individual culture and customs that certainly extend to their tobacco blends. Johnston says, “The traditional tobacco of our tribal people is called *kinnikinnik*, mixed with the bark of the red willow.” The bark was very sharp and medicinal so it was usually modified with local ingredients such as berry leaves, clover, and sumac. But, overall, many tribal nations smoke for purposes such as enlightenment and metaphysical meditation. On many occasions, people would gather in a circle as the smoke of burning sweet grass would purify the meeting. Each member in the congress would point and smoke the pipe to the north, south, east, and west, up to the sky, and then down to the earth in order to include the entire universe in the ritual.

Clearly, Europeans understood tobacco in a different sense—especially its profitability. In Virginia, Englishman John Rolfe successfully created a hybrid by crossing the milder Caribbean tobacco and the harsher North American variety in 1612. “North American tobacco, such as *Nicotiana rustica*, was so high in nicotine that the Cherokee would boil it down and make poison arrows out of it,” Johnston says. Rolfe’s crossbreed proved easier on the palate, greatly influencing the explosion of pipe smoking in England and making Rolfe’s “discovery” a pivotal development in the world’s knowledge of tobacco today. In his book, *The Perfect Pipe*, H. Paul Jeffers claims that the indigenous peoples of South America preferred to smoke rolled tobacco leaves while the North American

tribes smoked their harsh tobacco in pipes, which respectively led to the cigar culture of Spain and the pipe culture of the United Kingdom. (A clever theory, yet, despite my efforts, I can’t fully verify this as fact.)

However, many Europeans would quickly discover tobacco’s power in the way of diplomacy with the natives. European travelers could often secure safe passage just by simply carrying a pipe given to them by a previous tribe. French explorers fixed the term *calumets*, or “reeds,” for the tribal pipes. Irish-born Spanish general Alejandro O’Reilly hosted many ceremonial visits in New Orleans and smoked pipes with the Tunicas, Houmas, and other regional tribes. In 1793, the Treaty of Nogales formed a mutual defense against American expansion for the Spanish and regional tribes, uniting many tribes such as the Choctaws, Creeks, and Chickasaws into a defensive confederacy. Louisiana’s governor, Manuel de Lemos Gayoso, who was of Spanish descent, possessed Indian pipes, which were very influential in the negotiations. He would tell Ugulayacabe, the representative of the Chickasaw Nation, to take many gifts “accompanied by a piece of tobacco for each one so that when they might smoke it, the memory of our friendship might rise to the clouds as the smoke might rise from their pipes.” Further, the language of pipes was ever-present in Lewis and Clark’s expedition. Along their journey, Lewis and Clark received several pipes from many different tribes, ensuring safe passage through to the Pacific and back, prompting Clark to acknowledge pipe smoking to be “the greatest mark of friendship and attention.” Clark would later become a prominent US ambassador to the Indian nations, keeping over 40 pipes in his council chamber.



Pipestone, which can be black or red – the latter sometimes referred to as *callinite* or *bloodstone* – is easily shaped and sculpted, allowing for fancier and more detailed designs than those made from other materials. Carved by Rona Johnston, the eagle claw and wolf examples shown here are known as animal effigy pipes.

Photos courtesy of Bud and Rona Johnston.



Traveling artist George Catlin lived among native tribes in the 1830s and, in his works, depicted scenes of their everyday life, which he saw firsthand. He also experienced the power of pipe culture. “My appetite satiated, I straightened up, and with a whiff the pipe was lit, and we enjoyed together for a quarter of an hour the most delightful exchange of good feelings, amid clouds of smoke and pantomimic signs and gesticulations,” he wrote after a feast within a Mandan village in upper Missouri. His journeys eventually took him to what is now Minnesota, where the quarries were full of sacred red pipestone (later referred to as “catlinite”).

“We just call it pipestone,” Bud Johnston says. “Many of our people are offended when it’s called catlinite, because one of the stories is that he discovered it. But he was almost 2,000 years too late.”

The soft, red (and sometimes black) stone was, and still is, used to construct bowls for many tribes’ sacred pipes. “As time evolved, the ability to carve it into significant items, like a pipe, gave the stone added meaning,” says Glen H. Livermont, the superintendent of the Pipestone National Monument in Minnesota. “There were other pipe forms over the centuries, like hollowed-out deer antlers and bones, or other forms of stone, but the catlinite allowed [Native Americans] to explore more of their artistic form.” European influence also played a role in this development of creative discovery. “After the Europeans brought better tools, you started getting into

fancier effigy pipes,” explains Johnston, adding that this also allowed pipemakers to reinforce their pipes’ shanks with lead so that they would not crack so easily.

For many tribes, the red hue of pipestone (sometimes referred to as “bloodstone”) was symbolic of their ethnicity and represented the blood of their ancestors. Some tribes also associate bloodshed with the stone because many have waged war with each other over the ages in order to control the pipestone quarries because this stone was an essential trade item.

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Many Native Americans still quarry today under permit, and continue to carve pipes, including Bud Johnston—though he admits that his wife, Rona, is better at the ancient art, about which much can be learned at the Pipestone National Monument. The quarrying is done strictly by hand without any modernized or mechanized tools—a vigorous process as workers break through layers and layers of soil and hard quartzite. Even though there is plenty of stone left to collect, those who do the work are on the decline, according to Johnston. Younger generations are not as willing, and some “mixed blood” Native Americans are not officially recognized by a tribal nation or the park service, and are ineligible for a



Even today, Minnesota’s pipestone is quarried strictly by hand as shown in artist George Catlin’s 1836 painting.

quarrying permit. “It’s going to be harder and harder to get pipestone pipes unless the park service or the tribes change their policies,” he notes.

Johnston’s own discovery of this meaningful attribute to his people’s culture was a long process. He first heard of red pipestone pipes from his grandfather, who was a Chippewa “spiritual man.” Other than that, Johnston didn’t have many other insights to significant attributes to his people’s culture, considering his parents’ generation were reeducated in schooling institutions. In 1973, he attended a “going away” ceremony where the tribe sent the spirit of an old man to the next realm with only a cigarette, as no one in attendance had a pipe in this time when knowledge of tribal traditions took a temporary back seat to more modern education. “Tobacco is a vehicle, so it was okay,” Johnston notes. “But, I mumbled to myself that if I ever made it to Pipestone, I’d make pipes available for those who needed one.” He didn’t arrive in Minnesota until 10 years later, but he jumped at his first opportunity to apply for a permit. “I started quarrying stone, ran a display case in the Sioux Falls airport, made a little catalogue, and the rest is history. Now, we’re an international, nonprofit with about 600 members and people from about 30 tribes.” Keepers of the Sacred Tradition of Pipemakers is

involved in activities to promote their people’s history and culture. They hold pipemaking classes, educational programs in schools and prisons, and dance exhibitions, as well as travel the world to tell of the pipe’s importance. The group even has a Web site (www.pipekeepers.org) that displays its history and impressive handiwork.

Clearly, there is a difference in the pipe’s involvement in Native American culture than in other cultures. Native Americans tend to view smoking as more cosmic and communal so that they can connect with the world around them. In contrast, many of us see it as a more calming, individualized activity that helps us *escape* the world around us. We all understand pipes and tobacco—just on different terms.

However, the act of pipe smoking, *for everyone*, provides the opportunity to connect with oneself and others. But, currently, fewer people are discovering tobacco in today’s globalizing, non-smoker-friendly world. Unlike the North American Indians and Europeans of yore, we all grow up knowing of tobacco, but it seems that only a very fortunate few of us ever actually *discover* it. **CM**

Visitors to the Pipestone National Monument will see for themselves the layers of soil and hard quartzite, often as deep as 15 feet, that must be cleared to find the desirable pipestone. Bud Johnston (*right*) and Travis Erickson of the Keepers of the Sacred Tradition of Pipemakers know firsthand of the arduous task of quarrying pipestone, something that fewer and fewer Native Americans are taking on.

Photos (opposite page and below) courtesy of National Park Service. Photo (left) courtesy of Bud and Rona Johnston.

