

## CLEANING YOUR PIPES

By Patrick Dennis

Here's another area of pipe smoking that is the cause of discussion and debate. It seems that everyone has his or her own idea of how to clean a pipe, and just how clean a pipe needs to be in order to be enjoyed. I'm addressing this article to the new pipe smoker. The experienced pipesters will already have their maintenance procedures in place and will be content with them. I will describe my own procedures, which will, I hope, give the new pipe smokers a good beginning for them to find their own level of maintenance that will make them happy.

I have refurbished over 300 pipes and in doing so have worked on pipes that were dirty beyond belief. Some were so bad I could not imagine how anyone would want to put them in their mouth and suck smoke through them. I've seen stems that had so much gunk built up that you couldn't pass a cleaner through. In scrubbing out the shanks I've had piles of unsmoked tobacco fall out of them. I just don't think that this is the way to go, so I'll describe how I take care of mine, you decide how you'll take care of yours.

### CLEANING IT OUT

I clean my pipes before putting them away every time. My pipes always smell fresh and clean and are always shined and ready for the next smoke. Soot, carbon, juices that are deposited and unsmoked tobaccos are the by-products of smoking. Tobacco is an organic material and subject to the same decomposing elements as any other organic material. In other words, it will rot, spoil and grow mold, all of which can produce an unpleasant taste and odor, which I don't appreciate.

When the pipe is cooled off, I remove the stem. This procedure is not recommended by some and their thinking is you will in some way damage the shank by doing so with every cleaning. I have not found this to be true.

I dampen a bristle type pipe cleaner with 190 proof wood grain alcohol and run it through the stem. Because my pipes never get a build up of gunk, once is all that's required. I use an alcohol dampened paper towel and wipe off the tendon. I take the same cleaner and scrub out the shank all the way to the drought hole. I then double up the same cleaner and scrub out the mortise. With the same cleaner now doubled up, I gently wipe out the inside of the bowl with it, making sure that I'm knocking loose any unsmoked tobacco that may have clung to the sides or on the bottom of the bowl.

I coat the tendon of the stem with beeswax and gently "screw" it back into the shank. None of my pipes have suffered any damage to date by my regular cleaning methods. The stems all come off freely due to the wax coating that is regularly applied. None are excessively tight and not one of them has loosened up on me.

Once the pipe is assembled, I use an alcohol dampened paper towel and wipe the stem off

with it. I take the same paper towel and twist it so that it forms a small cone, moisten it with alcohol and push it into the bowl, turning it so as to fit the shape

of the bowl and wipe down the sides as I'm turning it and pushing it down to the bottom. This removes whatever gunk is left in the bowl and keeps me from hardly ever having to use a reamer or knife to scrape it, (assuming of course that you've properly seasoned the bowl in the first place).

Now onto the briar itself!

## THE WOOD

I have the equipment it takes to buff a shine back onto a pipe, I'm going to assume most smokers don't. Using the procedure I'm going to outline for you here, I keep a good wax shine on my straight-grained, sandblasted and rusticated pipes. I'm starting from the assumption that your pipe is somewhat clean and has a coat of carnauba wax already buffed on. If this is not the case, ask me for my article on the procedures I use to refurbish a pipe that needs a lot of help.

There are many products available for keeping a pipe clean and shiny, I have never used any of them. I've read that some pipers use shoe polish, spray furniture wax and any number of products that are used on wood furniture and floors. I don't smoke shoes or furniture; I smoke pipes and don't want any of those products to come near them. A lot of these products have the wax suspended in a petroleum base of some sort and that's not what I want to apply to a briar pipe.

When I notice that a smooth pipe is losing its shine, I take a block of beeswax, which you can find in most hardware stores and rub a coating of it onto the pipe before I fill it and light it up. I make sure that I put a good heavy coat of it around the rim of the bowl and cover the shank too. I use beeswax instead of carnauba because it's a little softer and easier for me to work with, but you can use solid carnauba too.

The heat that is generated while smoking and from my hands softens the wax and allows me to spread it evenly with my fingers while smoking. After I'm done with the bowl and have allowed it to cool off, I take a piece of silk cloth or a chamois and polish the wood to a nice shine. The heavy wax coating I apply to the top of the bowl helps to absorb the soot and somewhat protects the wood from the heat of lighting a bowl. I can take a very lightly alcohol moistened paper towel and wipe the rim off which removes most of the dark areas that aren't charred. I don't use this procedure every time. It's only when I notice the shine fading and want to restore it. I do wipe the pipe down with a chamois after every smoke before putting it up to remove the oils and dirt that may have come from my fingers while smoking it.

Sandblasted and rusticated finishes can be shined up too using the same procedure of applying the beeswax before smoking and as the wax softens, I use a toothbrush and soft shoe brush to push the wax back into the nooks and crevices. Before putting the pipe away, I use the shoe brush to buff a shine on and finish up with a chamois.

There have been some that have accused me of being anal-retentive when it comes to my maintenance procedures. I've learned to live with that handle and it might be true. What I know is that I can bring down any pipe from my rack and have it looking good and smelling sweet each and every time. Oh, and by the way, the whole procedure as outlined above takes me about 1 minute to do each time, not counting the occasional wax job. I can clean 6 to 8 pipes in less than a ½ hour as a result of starting off with a clean pipe each time I smoke one. Now, light up that clean pipe and enjoy a good smoke, you've earned it!