

A History of Tobacco

Seeing the Magic of the Cigar Rollers of La Pintada ~ By Matthew Atlee

It has never been determined exactly where tobacco first sprouted – most feel the plant was first cultivated in modern day Mexico or Honduras – but the myths surrounding the plant have been rich. To the Huron Indians of North America, tobacco was brought into being when the Great Spirit sent forth a woman to enrich the land after a great famine. As this woman traveled the countryside, wherever her right hand touched, there grew potatoes; wherever her left hand touched, there grew corn. After wondering and enriching the land with potatoes and corn, she sat down to rest, when she stood up, there grew tobacco. And the story somehow fits tobacco: relaxation after tension and weariness.



The above pictograph depicts the earliest recorded use of tobacco. The Mayans of Central America are thought to have been the first people to use tobacco almost 2, 000 years ago.

Anyone who has traveled to Europe will find it hard to believe that tobacco has had such a short history there. People smoke in Europe more than any other place I have visited. The first European to smoke tobacco was Rodrigo de Jerez on the island of Cuba in 1498. Initially the Spaniards did not find much use for the plant since it did not have any value on the European market: they were looking for gold and silver. Only later did the Spaniards develop the crop and export it to Europe. And that was only done after the Dutch, English and French discovered how addictive and pleasurable the tarred spirit of tobacco could be.

The English in particular fell in love with tobacco first calling it Trindado, after the island of Trinidad. Later they called it Virginia; and finally, tobacco, after the island of Tobago. It is thought that the first Englishman to introduce tobacco to Great Britain was Sir Walter Raleigh. (Raleigh who had tried to settle the Outer Banks of North Carolina by establishing a colony on Roanoke Island in 1584; Raleigh who had ransacked and captured Trinidad in 1595 and then used the island to launch a hopeless attempt to discover the Amerindian trick of El Dorado in Venezuela; and Raleigh who was imprisoned in the Tower of London from 1606 to 1616, then in 1616 released and allowed to make another attempt to capture El Dorado, losing his son in Trinidad during the expedition. And Raleigh, who was beheaded in 1618 by James I). The English liked to sniff their tobacco in the form of snuff, which they have until the present enjoyed as a stimulant. The English became so addicted to tobacco that one English official declared that the tobacco trade might in time be worth more than all Spanish silver and gold in the New World. In fact, the English desire was so great that the Spanish literally burned the plant from Trinidad in order to keep English pirates from smuggling it off the island to Europe. In the Caribbean tobacco by the 16th and 17th century was a cash crop for the English: it was used as a currency. In the American colonies such as Delaware, farmers traded for English goods with tobacco. You could say from Europe's first contact with tobacco until well into the 20th century the desire and therefore the trade in tobacco only increased.

The growing of tobacco is an art and anyone involved in the growing of high-quality tobacco will tell you that tobacco is not farmed but rather gardened. Inside each tobacco plant there are over 300,000 seeds which could end up as potential plants. The seeds are taken and planted in seedbeds. The seeds have to be handled with care, for if they are

not, flavor will be lost. Flavor also depends on the type of soil and climate that the seeds are exposed to. Like wine, tobacco quality depends on the soil and climate it is grown in. Tobacco likes a sandy soil very low in clay. The best soil and climate for tobacco lies along the Rio Cuyaguaje in western Cuba.

In Cuba, before planting tobacco the soil must be cut into deep furrows, always on flat land, then the seeds are planted and covered with a fine cloth; this is done to prevent excessive heat and light. After five to eight days the seed germinates and slowly the cloth is removed over intervals. After thirty-five days the tobacco plant is six inches high and then is transplanted to a new seedbed normally in October. Thirty days after this the plant's bud is taken out to avoid flowering and to maintain aroma. Thirty-days after this, the leaves of the plant are cut from the bottom up since the bottom leaves ripen before the higher-quality top leaves. The tobacco is then hung in bundles to ferment. And finally they are packed in succession of boxes. It is all sixes: six weeks to germinate, six weeks to grow the plant, six weeks to harvest, six weeks to dry and cure, and six weeks to ferment.

Tobacco in Panama

Having lived in Panama for a number of years, most of which were spent in the countryside, I had heard only rumors about the cigar rollers of La Pintada. La Pintada is a small-town located in the central province of Cocolé. The town is about 20 minutes from the capital of Cocolé, Penonome. We left Panama City in the early morning rain and reached Penonome at about 11:00am. The road from Penonome to La Pintada begins right next to where the police station is located on the main square of Penonome.



The cigar factory in La Pintada has a 20 year history in the community and produces fine, inexpensive cigars. The above photo shows the cigars being put into a cigar mold that is later covered by a lid and then put on top of other molds -- all of which are pressed by a large vice.

Penonome is set up like most Spanish cities in Latin America: the Spanish used a standard urban plan known as a *traza*. In the center of Penonome is a rectangular park around which are located a church, government offices and a police station. Off the central park are eight parallel streets which divide the town into grids. The name Penonome comes from an ancient indian ritual known as the Feast of the Penitents, in which the mountain indians above Penonome would flagellate themselves until they bleed profusely. This ritual stopped at the beginning of the 20th century.

Penonome became famous in the last century because it produced Panama's most famous 20th century president: Arnulfo Arias, the deceased husband of the current president Mireya Moscoso. Penonome today is a wealthy small town that provides modern banking services to the rich agricultural community that surrounds it. It is also known as one of best towns to go wild in during Carnival.

From Penonome, the road to La Pintada is very well maintained and the drive is beautiful as you pass agricultural fields from which farmers take their crops by horseback to the main market in Penonome. We also saw a number of small farms for sale along the road and after talking with some of the locals from La Pintada we found out that a number of foreigners had moved into the area and were setting up small farming operations.

The lay of land as you head towards La Pintada is initially flat but as you get closer to the town the hills above the town come into clearer focus, and from La Pintada forward are mountains and mud tracks that can only be traversed with a 4X4 vehicle.

We arrived in La Pintada and stopped at a small shop that was painted bright red and asked where the cigar rolling factory was located – we learned later that there had been three such factories in the recent past, but two had closed down as the owners moved into other businesses. The road leading to the cigar factory was part grass, part stone and the factory itself was located on a steep slope and surrounded by teak and acacia trees. There were few houses near the factory and the atmosphere was very quiet and very rural. As we pulled up we saw a young couple walking in and out of the factory very quickly, as though they were excited and sick at the same time.

As we approached the door that led into the room where people were rolling cigars at small wooden tables, the sweet-scent of tobacco filled my nose and lungs. The atmosphere inside was one of complete silence and tranquility as only three cigar rollers worked cutting and wrapping the tobacco. The lights were turned off but light from outside illuminated the factory, creating a shady tranquil feeling inside. The walls were painted white and the floor green. And immediately I began to feel as if something was in the air; it was as if a hum of energy was running through my body from some unknown source: it was the kick of tobacco. Some of the people I had traveled with had to step outside the factory because the smell and strength of the tobacco made them feel light-headed and sick to their stomachs. The female rollers worked with deep concentration and for at least 5 minutes we said nothing to one another. The young couple I had seen when pulling up to the factory darted in and out from several doors that led into the room where the rollers worked.

Finally Sergio, the only male roller in the room began to speak to me about the factory and his love of cigar rolling. He told me that the tobacco came from Chiriqui Province, the Panamanian province that lies on the Costa Rican-Panamanian border; he did not know from where in Chiriqui. He had been working at the factory for over 5 years and loved the process of rolling tobacco. He liked the feeling of handling the tobacco and then smoking what he had handled. He showed me some of the cigars that were for sale; they were lying on an old wooden table that one might have found in a grade school from the first half of the 20th century. Twenty-five cigars for \$10.00 and they were delicious. They tasted as good as any Cuban or Nicaraguan cigar I've tried: milder and less-expensive. All the time we talked the young couple kept walking in and out very excited and nervous.



Cigar rollers working tobacco into cigars. The tobacco for Panamanian cigars comes from Chiriqui Province, Panama. While watching the rollers you can feel the nicotine in the air: many people cannot take the strength of the tobacco without becoming light-headed and nauseated. Most of the cigar rollers come from small villages located 15 to 20 minutes from the cigar factory.

Sergio and I stepped outside and we walked to the small warehouse where the tobacco was kept. As we walked, farmers passed by on horseback on the road below. The tobacco was kept in dark rooms to keep it fresh. Sergio offered me a cigar and we smoked and

enjoyed the atmosphere of slow rain and a light breeze. All the while the young couple was walking by filled with their nervous energy.

Having enjoyed the cigar given to me I bought a pack of 25 for \$10.00 and talked a little more with the rollers before leaving. As I left the factory, I thought about what the young couple was doing: But I never did find out.