

HOBBY HISTORY

The Tortured History of the Match: III

*[Excerpted from Diamond Match Company's
Fifty Years of Match Making 1878-1928]
[so keep in mind that this was written in 1928]*

The everyday life of fifty years ago, as compared to that of the present, would probably show as many contrasts as resemblances, and the contrasts would certainly be more striking...The electric motor and gas engine had just been invented, but were not yet put to work, while the gasoline engine was not originated until a few years later...

Buildings were still built of stone instead of steel, and, as a consequence, were limited to half a dozen stories. Portland cement was just being introduced into the United States. The elevated railway in New York was being constructed, and was considered a triumph, though at present certain streets are calling for its destruction.

The telephone had just been created but was little known. Typewriters were being experimented with, but were build upside down and were still a novelty.

In the kitchen the old wood range was as yet in almost universal use, though coal was employed to some extent in the cities...The wages of a skilled workman in the United States were about \$2 a day, while the price of wheat averaged \$1 a bushel.

...Smoking was still looked at askance by the ladies. Men who smoked in the house were expected to do so in their den, and to wear smoking jackets so as to keep any taint of the tobacco from offending the ladies. Even on the Boston Commons, there was for years a "smoking circle" to which men were supposed to retire when they wished to indulge in a cigar. Cigarettes,

though used to some extent in Latin-America, were rarely seen in the United States.

When the average man wanted to light his cigar, he generally fished out a lucifer match out of a bunch loose in his pocket and struck it on his trousers, though frequent applications tended to add an unwonted shine to the cloth.

During the last half-century matches and the whole match industry have gone through a revolution which has not only created an essentially new product, but has transformed match making from a dangerous, and in places fatal, hand trade, to a healthful and almost automatic process.

Fifty years ago the match most in use in this country and elsewhere was the so-called Lucifer. This was made with white or yellow phosphorus and sulphur. The phosphorus was noxious to work with, and the sulphur emitted santanic fumes while burning. Of these objections, the poison of the phosphorus was infinitely more important, but was less noticeable to the consumer.

The odors of the Lucifer match were so objectionable that parlor matches were devised to save the air of the parlor from contamination. They substituted stearic acid for the sulphur but still retained the poisonous phosphorus, and their chlorate of potash made them, go off with a series of explosions that scattered dangerous bits of fire over the carpet. They would also explode when trodden upon, which increased the danger of having them around. Nevertheless they were considerably used among the wealthier classes in the Southern and Western states, though but little known outside of America.

In Europe their place was taken by the vesta match. This was a miniature wax or stearine candle dipped with a match head. It gave a longer light than the wooden match, but cost a shilling a box, or twelve times as much. It was more delicate than the wooden match and the head was more liable to fly off in lighting. Nor was the vesta in favor with smokers, for the burning stearine injured the flavor of the cigar.