

First cigarette and other smoking stories

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I can't actually remember when I had my first cigarette. I know I was over 18 because I had promised my mother that I wouldn't smoke until then. She never smoked, at least not to my knowledge. Her three older cousins all smoked and all died at a younger age than she did. When we talked about my promise years later she had no memory of asking me for that promise, but I remembered and that was what counted.

My grandfather smoked a pipe and sometimes a cigar. He even used a hookah at the direction of his doctor when his ulcer was acting up. I never recall him ever smoking a cigarette except once. We were out for Sunday dinner at Kreb's, a fancy restaurant in Skaneateles, NY, established in 1889. They had small glass vases on all the tables which each held a few cigarettes. Can you imagine that being a restaurant offering today?

I know I smoked in college as did most others, presumably peer modeling for dealing with the academic stress.

When I met Peter Steinau, who became my first husband, we certainly both smoked. After we moved to Chicago from Boston, we became friends with one of the young physicians from the hospital where Pete worked along with his British wife. One evening we joined them for dinner at their place, probably soon after the information came out about the dangers of smoking. (This would have probably been in 1965.) Neither of them smoked. They owned only one ash tray which was filled with our cigarette butts by the end of the evening. As our host went to empty the overflowing ashtray, his comment was, not a lecture, just a simple statement: "You know you're killing yourselves." I resolved at that moment to quit and we decided to both stop. Everyone knows that is easier said than done.

First, we switched to cigars and pipes as a bridge to quitting. I actually met some very interesting people when I was smoking cigars in public. That practice was unexpected for a woman so it attracted interesting conversations with strangers.

Of course the cigar and pipe were meant as a bridge to ceasing altogether. It worked for me....Pete not so much. He tended to inhale the cigars which you are only supposed to puff on.

Pete did stay cigarette free, as far as I can remember, until an incident the following spring. We always enjoyed getting out of Chicago for the weekends and this eventful weekend we were doing some very early tent camping. We were about the only people there that very damp, drizzly Sunday morning. Try as we might, we had no luck getting a campfire going. Pete decided to use some Coleman lantern fluid to get it started. I had learned never to do that as a spark can follow a stream of flammable fluid back up into the can which could explode, and advised against it. He compromised by putting the flammable fluid in a small cup. As predicted, a spark from our earlier fire starting attempts ignited the fluid. When

the flame hit his hand, he flipped up the cup and the burning fluid came down on top of him. Flames reached over his head. He had learned to roll in a blanket if you catch on fire and headed for the tent. I yelled at him to 'stop, drop and roll.' Years later when he described the event to our daughter, he recalled that I tackled him. I have no memory of that. I do remember ending up on the ground with him, so I suppose he is recalling it correctly.

We ended up walking out of the park because Pete tried to start the car and ended up flooding the engine. Remember, it was very damp that morning and cars were not as reliable back then. There was a little store just outside of the park's entrance and the owner kindly drove us to the hospital over the objections of his wife who was worried because it was just before the 'after church' rush. He took us to the closest hospital ER and after checking Pete in, our rescuer took me back to the park where our car started right up. When I arrived back at the hospital, Pete was ready to be discharged. He had picked up a pack of cigarettes in the gift shop. It took his hair months to grow out and many years to stop smoking again.