



# Making the Perfect Cigar in Iowa

*by Lori Vermaas*



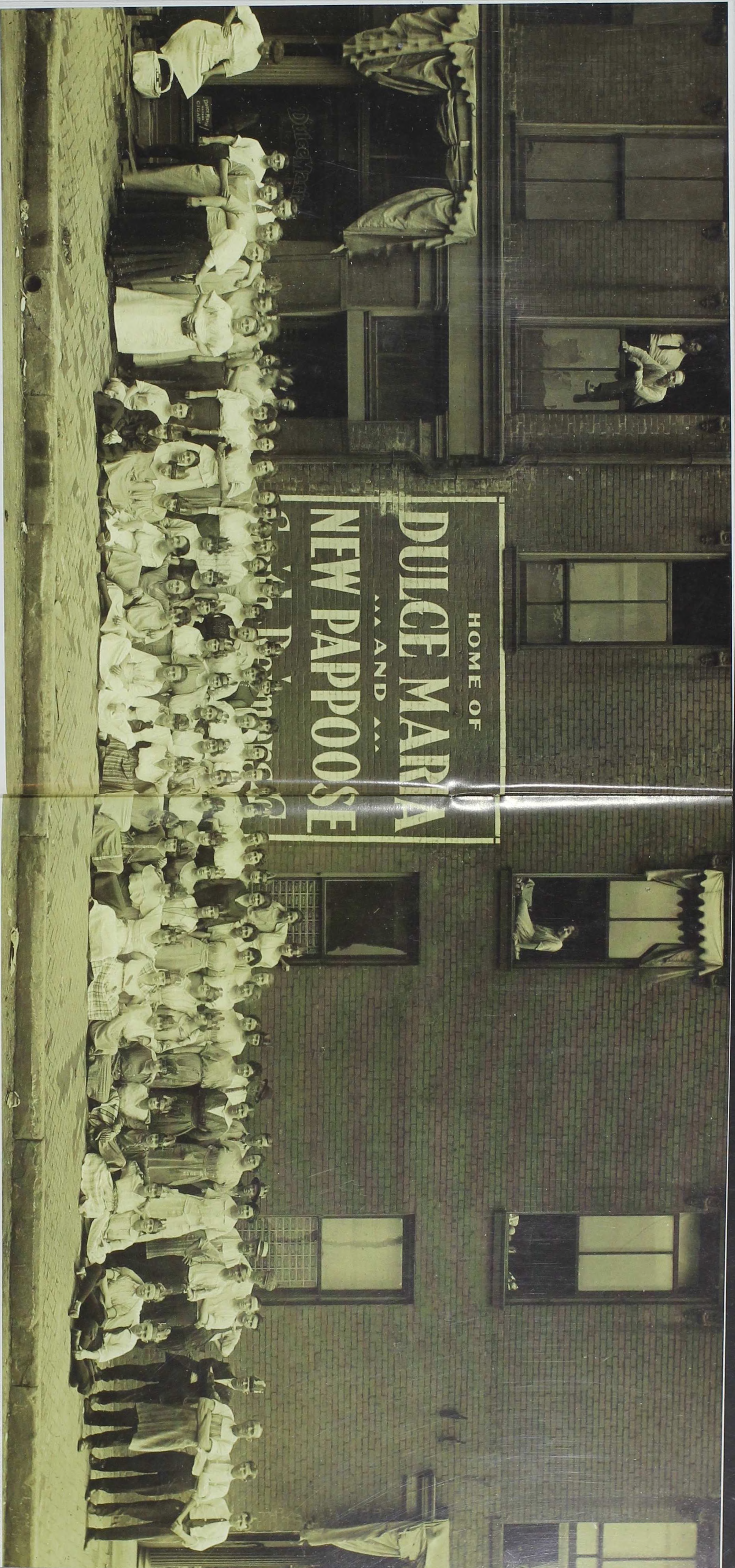
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a role in the rise of the cigar as a consumer product in the United States.

After a year in the factory, Powers "went to the bench . . . to start apprenticeship as a cigar maker," he said. "But after looking at the other people working there [rolling cigars], humped over from sitting there over those benches, I decided that that wasn't the job I wanted and left."

Despite Powers's quick departure from the job, substantial numbers of Iowans worked in the cigar industry during its heyday, the 1880s to the 1920s. The growth of the cigar industry in Iowa hinged on the popularity of the cigar in American social culture. The cigar was attractive to a nation eager to distinguish itself from pretentious Europe. As social historian Eric Burns puts it, "Everything about the cigar . . . set it apart from the pipe. And that, in turn, gave [Americans] . . . yet another way to set themselves apart from the British. . . . A cigar was a small

symbol of the gathering drive toward independence, just as was the preference for certain kinds of alcoholic beverage rather than the tea so often associated with the Motherland."

Burns writes that during the Civil War, "commanding officers wanted their men to smoke, knowing that they needed distraction from the ennui and horrors around them and much preferring tobacco to booze." Burns continues, "A man who smoked too much could still aim his gun and hit the enemy; one who drank to excess might pull the trigger and amputate his toe."

Although Americans preferred to chew tobacco for much of the 19th century, cigar smoking was on the increase. By the 1880s the cigar had become the most popular tobacco product in the United States—and a powerful symbol of success. As Burns states, it was a "badge of the fellow whose time was his own to govern, or who wanted to give [the] impression . . . [that] he owned the block." And as historian Patricia Cooper notes, cigars had become "a familiar prop in male culture"—for politicians cutting deals, gentlemen relaxing after dinner, and laborers stopping at the neighborhood saloon.

In step with the growing popularity of cigars, factory production in the U.S. more than tripled between 1869 and 1899. Iowa's cigar output would never come close to that of eastern cities, most notably New York, where hundreds of manufactories thrived, many employing over a thousand cigar makers. Nevertheless, cigar making was considered a major industry in Des Moines, Davenport, Sioux City, Burlington, Keokuk, Muscatine, Council Bluffs, Dubuque, and Ottumwa. The privately compiled *United States Directory of Cigar Manufacturers* (1902) listed 375 manufacturers in 158 Iowa towns.

During the 1850s and '60s, before the industry took off, cigar making existed on a small scale. These small enterprises, called buckeyes, were often operated out of a backroom, sometimes in a house, with a lone worker or a few more.

In Iowa, one of the earliest cigar-making hubs with small shops was Burlington, where Henry Gabriel had started up his business by 1856. Gabriel's shop was likely a buckeye. Despite the modest size of buckeyes, the value of cigars and tobacco products manufactured in Burlington already ranked 13th out of 22 industries, right beside manufacture of furniture, cut stone, and boots and shoes. Meanwhile, other cigar entrepreneurs were setting up production in the western half of the state—for example, John W. Peregoy in Council Bluffs in 1868. In Des Moines between 1862 and 1876, nine cigar manufacturers established businesses.

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Cigars and walking sticks are the accouterments of these eight stylish gents posing for a group portrait.

Most Iowa cigar enterprises would always remain small and short-lived, employing 5 to 30 workers, but others flourished and became actual factories. In Davenport, Nicholas Kuhnen, who had started up in 1854, expanded his business into one of the largest cigar factories in the state; in 1882, he employed nearly 300 women and men. Ferd Haak, a local competitor, opened a shop in 1869; by the 1880s he employed 60 workers and produced two million cigars annually. D. D. Myers of Dubuque opened his business in 1869; by 1880 he had upgraded into a three-story business building and a similar-sized factory.

Cigar making began with the arrival of large bales of tobacco at the factory. "Since a tax had to be paid on the weight of the bale," Tom Quinn explains, "it was carefully handled to avoid waste. The highest quality, largest leafed tobacco was used as an outside wrapper on the cigars [and] the poorer quality, smaller leafed tobacco was used to make the cigar's core or 'filler.' The tobacco leaves were wet down so that they would be pliable and not brittle."

Next the leaves went to the strippers, who extracted, or "stripped away," the leaves' midribs. Martha (Dougherty) Eddy worked at Fecht's in the early to mid-1930s: "I worked with three other girls stripping the stems out of the tobacco leaves. It was kind of fun. We would dampen the leaves like you used to dampen clothes before you ironed them. And then you would stretch and spread the leaves out on your knees and rip the stem out." In some factories, the leaves were smoothed by feeding them through a wringer-like mechanism.

Then the leaves were tied into bundles called "hands." Quinn continues: "The tobacco destined to become the filler would be dried on large racks for several hours. . . . The high quality tobacco would be kept in the 'hand,' where it would remain soft and pliable."

The next step was rolling the actual cigars. A writer for *The Manufacturer and Builder* in 1872 meticulously described this procedure, an approach that changed little over time: "Sitting at separate tables we found twenty-four men; each one had a piece of hard wood before him which, with a peculiarly shaped knife and a little pot of paste constituted his stock of tools. By his side were two heaps of tobacco, one composed of wrappers and another of [dried] fillers. Taking a leaf in his hand, the workman spreads it out on the slab before him, smoothing it carefully to remove all creases; then with his knife he cuts it into a peculiar nearly semi-circular



Bertha and Karoline Gabelmann from Clarksville, Iowa, stand amidst tobacco, perhaps grown for home use. Tobacco never became a significant crop in Iowa. But in the 1860s Davenport cigar maker Nicholas Kuhnen gave free seed to local farmers, and in 1863, the state yielded over half a million pounds. Ottumwa's Julius Fecht imported some Cuban tobacco for his best cigars, but most Iowa factories used tobacco from Wisconsin and a few eastern states.

shape. He then picks up the material for his filling with his left hand, making it into a kind of bundle; of course this requires an accurate judgment as to the amount required to make the cigar of the exact shape and thickness. As soon as he has collected enough leaves, he presses them together and lays them on the wrapper before him. Then, by a peculiar sort of twist, he brings up the edges of the latter and with a quick roll envelops the loose bundle. The form of the cigar is at once apparent. He now finishes off the end for the mouth by carefully trimming the leaf and smoothing it to a point, fastening the extremity with a little paste; the other end he cuts off smooth. A few more rolls between his flat knife and the slab and the cigar is done. The celerity and neatness of the work is incredible, and, of course, evidences a refinement of skill."

The working environment in a cigar factory was often dark and dank with little ventilation, partly because moisture was essential to keep the wrapper leaves pliable. Patricia Cooper describes how the noxious mix of tobacco odors and fumes from coal stoves created nausea and an "intoxication of [a] thick, penetrating smell." She explains that "except for the work tables, where the cigar makers' busy motions kept the surface clean, a fine brown dust settled everywhere; it mounted on the window sills, since the



COURTESY TOM QUINN

**Three dozen women and men cigar makers in Ottumwa. In the foreground, a male worker rolls a cigar. In front of him are three tied bundles of finished cigars. On the far left, cigar molds are visible on the table.**

windows were rarely opened, and the glass became so coated that it was no longer transparent." Cigar workers suffered from higher rates of tuberculosis than workers in all other jobs except stone cutting.

Ruth Diehn recalled, "I can remember getting on the street car to go home from high school [in Ottumwa]. The ladies that worked at the cigar factories just smelled to high heaven of tobacco. The odor would fill the whole place. Their clothes would be saturated. Their skin, too, I suppose."

Edna Breon recounted that "when I first went in there, I didn't know if I was going to be able to take to that tobacco—the odor from it. Us girls would pitch in a nickel and go down to Kresge's dime store and get some chocolate candy stars and maybe some lemon drops. By the time we got done eating, the bottom of the sack was covered with tobacco."

The work was labor intensive, monotonous, and sedentary. For Tom Dougherty in Ottumwa, rolling cigars was one of his few options. "My father was crippled and walked with crutches," Martha Eddy explained. "That was about the only kind of job he could do. He had to work sitting down."

But unlike many other factories, the workplace was relatively quiet, and employees socialized to pass the time. "It was interesting to be there," Breon said. "There was quite a bunch of girls. If a story got started at one end, by the time it got to the other end, it was

different." Although foremen tried to keep a lid on such distractions, often reminding workers to focus on their tasks, they generally allowed conversation so as not to alienate the workforce.

According to Cooper, about a third of the nation's cigar makers were itinerants, constantly moving from shop to shop across a state or region, certain they could find jobs. It is not clear to what extent this occurred in Iowa, but these nomads (generally young, single men) became such a fixture in the industry nationwide that many referred to them as a "traveling fraternity" who often relied on industry publications to post their whereabouts to worried families and update them on jobs and employers. As Cooper writes, "Travel signified their freedom to control their own time [and] to be very particular about working conditions." In fact, cigar makers generally controlled their own hours each day, coming and going as they chose, at least in the earlier decades.

Most U.S. cigar factories were open about 45 weeks a year, tending to close in July and over the new year for inventory. In Iowa, however, workers in general found employment in the industry nearly year-round. Workers were paid by the hour or by the piece (per 1,000 cigars). If given the choice, most chose piecework, because the skilled could make more money that way. Unfortunately, specifics about Iowa cigar makers are difficult to determine; factories were probably incon-

sistent in returning questionnaires to the state's Bureau of Labor Statistics. Therefore, data on wages and union membership and breakdowns by race, nationality, gender, and age are suspect. Nevertheless, according to one statistic for 1894–1895, 85 percent of Iowa cigar makers preferred piecework. One employee said, "At piecework the fast man does not have to help make a living for the slow one."

In the early days, shops generally employed only a handful of male craftsmen, with workers carrying out any or all of the tasks. But gradually women entered the industry. Stripping leaves—which Cooper describes as "dirty, dead-end, low-wage work"—was primarily done by women. As factories expanded and adopted mechanization in the 1870s and '80s, more women were hired, although it was still for the less skilled jobs and at lower wages. According to Tom Quinn, "Nearly half of the [cigar workers in Ottumwa] in 1910 were young, unmarried women living at home with their

parents." By the early 20th century, however, it wasn't unusual for women to advance. As Margaret (Watts) Davis said, "You had to work your way up." When Davis was 16, she started stripping leaves in an Ottumwa factory. Three years later, she was rolling cigars.

One industry innovation that further eased women's entry into the workplace at this time was the cigar mold, essentially a two-part metal or wooden rectangle, with a row of cigar-shaped troughs. The worker would pile dried tobacco into one half and then screw on the top half. After several hours, the mold was opened, and the compressed filler was ready to be rolled up in the wrapper.

To Edna Breon, who worked in Ottumwa in the late 1920s, the cigar mold transformed tobacco scraps overnight into what she proudly called the "perfect cigar."

According to Fred Powers, workers at Fecht's used molds only for the cheaper cigars "made out of scraps of tobacco." He explained that higher quality cigars

PHOTO BY JOHN ZELLER



The names of Iowa manufacturers appear on these cigar boxes from the museum collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa. "[Young women] sometimes put their names and addresses inside the cigar boxes as they packed them," Tom Quinn writes, "hoping that an eligible young man would find it and call on them."



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**In the 1920s, cigarettes surpassed cigars in popularity. Even so, Davenport's Peter N. Jacobsen Cigar Company boasted of 250 employees in this photo dated 1926.**

were rolled by hand, the worker's sense of the proper measure informed by years of coaxing and shaping the leaves. Rolling a cigar was "delicate and complicated," Patricia Cooper writes. The tobacco's aroma and taste would be blocked if the filler was unevenly spaced or if the spiral of the wrapper overlapped too much. Cigar makers took great pride in their skill, to the benefit of the growing number of cigar smokers who savored their favorite brands.

**C**igar making was hardly a lucrative occupation. Pay typically ranked in the middle of other Iowa manufacturing jobs. An 1890 study noted that a cigar worker's average yearly pay did not keep up with the basic cost of living for a married couple with three children. Women had it tougher than men, for employers consistently paid roughly half of what male workers averaged. And this cannot be entirely explained by the fact that most female cigar makers had the less skilled jobs. Even those few women who obtained managerial positions still earned about half of what their male counterparts garnered.

Although cigar making provided employment for most of the year, the modest wages had to have been the primary catalyst for union involvement. Unfortunately, such activism hardly ensured fair pay or hiring practices for women. One example of union activity in Iowa occurred in November 1882 at Kuhnen's Davenport factory, then "the single-largest employer of women in the city,"

according to historian Sharon Wood. After about a fifth of Kuhnen's female employees joined the newly formed Local 172 of the Cigar Makers International Union, Nicholas Kuhnen slashed women's piecework rates by 25 percent. A large majority of all of his cigar workers, both men and women, retaliated by going on strike, even inspiring employees at a local smaller cigar shop to strike in solidarity. Unfazed, Kuhnen retaliated again, introducing mechanization into his factory so he could hire cheaper, unskilled labor.

Four months later, the strike collapsed, the biggest losers the women who had joined the union. Not only did women continue to work at the lower piecework rates, but the union actually levied a \$15 fine on those women who had returned to work after the strike failed. The fine was more than just a slap on the wrist—it was the equivalent of over three weeks' wages. As Wood observes, union involvement proved to be a trap for these women workers.

Given this turn of events, when Davenport's Local 172 began readying for another strike three years later, women employees forsook union support and instead threw in their lot with Kuhnen, even though he had cut their piece rate even more—down to nearly half of what union members earned in other factories.

Based on state labor statistics, female cigar-union membership in Iowa in the 1880s through the 1920s remained exceptionally low or nonexistent, as did the national average, which peaked at 10 percent in 1920. That's not to say that the nation's female cigar workers never went on strike. During the period before World War I, they struck quite often. In New Jersey alone, they initiated 24 strikes (versus three conducted by males). But the women won only seven.

Despite some success, women workers did not gain much support from their brothers in the Cigar Makers International Union. Fighting for the rights of the mostly white male constituency, the Iowa locals increased their activity around the turn of the century. By then, 16 locals had been established (eventually there would be four more). Bolstered by the larger membership, Iowa cigar makers went on strike around the state 11 times in 1899 and 13 times in 1900. But the union didn't seem to benefit even the men all that dramatically. Women's pay, of course, was a lost cause, never markedly improving in comparison to men's. The union was able to establish fixed piece rates, however, but only for members (nearly half of Iowa cigar makers). Many workers didn't reap the rewards of this preferred pay scale, and the average pay remained steady.

Although the Bureau of Labor Statistics did not keep a close count on the incidence of child labor in the



cigar industry in Iowa, the bureau's biennial reports after the turn of the century listed a handful of calls by cigar workers for enforcement of child-labor laws.

By the 1920s, the cigarette had replaced cigars in popularity. By then, cigarettes had recovered from earlier image problems—as feminine and dilettantish (with brand names like Opera Puffs and Bon Ton); as evil playthings of immigrants; and as cheap indulgences for workingmen. During World War I, cigarettes gained the kind of vigorous associations formerly attached to the cigar. As General John Pershing proclaimed in 1917, the answer to winning the war was “tobacco as much as bullets.” The U.S. government complied, supplying soldiers with what Eric Burns calls the “easily replaceable, instantly rechargeable, immediately gratifying” cigarette.

Soon the government, including health officials, joined the bandwagon and began actively promoting cigarette smoking, even advertising it as a patriotic act (despite anti-cigarette laws in many states, including Iowa, which were largely aimed at youth). The cultural switch in tobacco products was perhaps best captured by how magazines and movies depicted smokers. Now villains lit up cigars; heroes smoked cigarettes.

Other factors besides the cigarette helped snuff out Iowa's cigar businesses. With World War I came a scarcity of workers and unrest in the unions. As new technologies were added, the large U.S. factories outpaced the production of Iowa's smaller ones. Cheaply manufactured national brands overshadowed local, independent ones.

Prohibition also cut into profits because cigar sales had been commonplace in taverns. As Clem Schadle, a Dubuque cigar worker, recalled, “The cigar business went to hell when the saloons went out.”

Lack of sanitation was another culprit. James Engstrand, whose father ran a modest factory in Sioux City, recalled how large factories promoted their product as “no spit tip cigars,” to the detriment of smaller operations. “In the old days,” Engstrand said, cigar makers had a tendency to put their finger in their mouth and then into the glue that put the wrapper on. I wouldn't say they did it in all factories, but some of the cigar makers did, because I . . . seen them do it.” In a Dubuque factory, according to Schadle, one worker “kept on doing it and he got fired. And then he went and started a factory of his own.”

Big-city journalists exposed unsanitary conditions when they wrote about immigrants making cigars in tenement-based operations. But it's unclear whether such scandal affected the longevity of any Iowa cigar factories.

As U.S. cigar sales declined steadily after 1920, the number of cigar factories nationwide began to drop. Iowa followed suit. In 1918 Fecht's employed around 119 local residents—in 1922, only 53.

From the 1880s to the 1920s, the cigar had been the tobacco king in America and Iowa and a powerful icon. Smoking cigars signaled masculinity and status. Manufacturing cigars represented success for the owners who had expanded from backrooms to brick factories. And for the actual cigar workers, it was a symbol of pride in craftsmanship. Patsy Burton, who boxed up cigars in Ottumwa, put it simply: “It took a lot of skill to be a cigar maker.” ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Personal stories of Iowa cigar workers are from two sets of oral history interviews. For interviews of James Engstrand, Fred Powers, and Clem Schadle, see transcripts of the Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City center). Interviews of Pansy Burton, Edna Breon, Margaret Davis, Bernhardt Diehn, and Martha Eddy appear in Tom Quinn, comp., *Cigar Manufacturing in Ottumwa, Iowa: An 83 Year History* (Ottumwa: Wapello County Historical Society, 1989). Additional Iowa sources are Marlys A. Svendsen, et al., *Davenport, Where the Mississippi Runs West: A Survey of Davenport History & Architecture* (Davenport: City of Davenport [?], 1981); and Sharon E. Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Several county histories were useful, as well as State of Iowa, *Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* (Des Moines: various years); State of Iowa, *Directory of Manufacturing Establishments, Bulletins* (Des Moines: various years). Agricultural historian Joe Anderson provided information on tobacco cultivation in Iowa. See also Earle Ross, *Iowa Agriculture* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1951), and Iowa Department of Agriculture, *Ninth Annual Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture* (Des Moines: 1909).

A rich context for U.S. cigar making appears in Eric Burns, *The Smoke of the Gods: A Social History of Tobacco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007); and Patricia A. Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women, and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900–1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987/1992). For online versions of the following sources, google the publication title: Anonymous, “How Cigars Are Made,” *The Manufacturer and Builder* (April 1872), 77–78; and *United States Directory of Cigar Manufacturers*, compiled and published by Jay Y. Trout (Philadelphia: 1902). Trout also edited *The Tobacco World*, an excellent online resource.

Annotations to this article are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).