

# TOBACCO EXAMINER

A Monthly Newsletter of Writers Against Aids and Tobacco Smoking

May Edition

## EARLY OPPOSITION TO CIGARETTE SMOKING

American businessmen and innovators Henry Ford and Thomas A. Edison were among the most prominent supporters of an anticigarette movement that flourished long before the United States Surgeon General issued his 1964 “Report on Smoking and Health.” In this excerpt from *The Case Against the Little White Slaver* (1914), Ford summarizes his objections to cigarettes and responds to a letter of protest from Percival I. Hill, president of the American Tobacco Company. Anticigarette activists succeeded in outlawing the sale of cigarettes in more than a dozen states during the Progressive Era (roughly 1890 to 1920).

From *The Case Against the Little White Slaver*

By Henry Ford

While spending some time in Florida with Mr. Thomas A. Edison, the noted electrical genius, and Mr. John Burroughs, the eminent naturalist, the question of cigarette smoking and its evil effects, particularly upon boys and young men, came up for discussion.

Mr. Edison advanced some pronounced views in condemnation of the cigarette. For several years he had been experimenting with combustion of various substances for the purpose of discovering a suitable filament for use in incandescent lamps, and it was during this research that the harmful effects of acrolein [a component of cigarette smoke] were observed. I asked Mr. Edison to put his conclusions in writing. He did so...

Following receipt of this letter I authorized an interview in which I went squarely on record as opposed to cigarettes, making it plain that I do not feel called upon to try to reform any person over 25 years of age because by that time the habit has been formed. Then it is only a question of the strength of will or mind of the smoker which will enable him to stop. He knows the injurious effects and controls his own destiny.

'With the boys it is a different matter. Most boys are told to refrain from many things. Seldom are they given a reason. Boys must be educated so they will know why cigarettes are bad for them.

'If you will study the history of almost any criminal you will find that he is an inveterate cigarette smoker. Boys, through cigarettes, train with bad company. They go with other smokers to the pool rooms and saloons. The cigarette drags them down. Hence if we can educate them to the dangers of smoking we will perform a service.'

Mr. Percival I. Hill, president of the American Tobacco Company, in a letter sent broadcast, challenged me to produce proof of assertions he charged me with making, he declaring among other things that 'the scientific facts are all in favor of the cigarette;' 'that it contains less nicotine than any other form of tobacco products; that it is absolutely pure; that the combustion of the paper is harmless in its effects on human physiology.' I was challenged to either prove my contention or enable the manufacturers to disprove it; to give as much publicity to the retraction Mr. Hill felt certain would be forthcoming as was given to my 'original unwarranted attacks.'

I *do* not ask you to accept my word alone in this matter. I want you to read carefully Mr. Edison's letter, Mr. Hill's defense, and the opinions of doctors, judges, university instructors, athletes, etc. —a few selected at random from hundreds who have willingly testified. Then you will be in a position to judge for yourself whether 'the scientific facts are all in favor of the cigarette;' whether you can afford to become a slave to a habit that a no less noted person than Hudson Maxim [American inventor] declares is 'a maker of invalids, criminals and fools.'

### **Mr. Edison's Letter**

April 26, 1914

Friend Ford

The injurious agent in Cigarettes comes principally from the burning paper wrapper. The substance thereby formed is called 'Acrolein.' It has a violent action on the nerve centers, producing degeneration of the cells of the brain, which is quite rapid among boys. Unlike most narcotics this degeneration is permanent and uncontrollable. I employ no person who smokes Cigarettes.

Yours,

Thos. A. Edison

## **Mr. Hill's Defense**

New York, May 16, 1914.

Mr. Henry Ford,

Detroit, Mich.

Dear Sir:—Statements relative to cigarettes, credited to yourself and Mr. Thomas A. Edison, have appeared in the newspapers recently.

These statements are erroneous and so misleading that in justice to the millions of intelligent men who use cigarettes we are compelled to resent your unjustified attack. Slander of the cigarette by parties of less prominence than yourself attracts no attention, certainly from us. Since your prominence and fame give your words greater weight than the words of men of no importance there is imposed upon you a corresponding responsibility to make no statement reflecting on a product—and one million of users of such product—without investigation and the certainty that comes from investigation.

The form of your statement is of a character that denies us an opportunity to demonstrate its falsity and to prove the harmlessness of our product in a court proceeding. If you see fit to make a statement of the harmful effect of any of our brands, in such form that being false it is libelous, we will be delighted to institute suit for damages, and will devote the proceeds to some designated charity.

The scientific facts are all in favor of the cigarette, and no man can change these facts because he personally prefers a pipe to a cigar or a stogie, or a chew of plug to a cigarette.

Several years ago it was quite the fashion to attack cigarettes. Lurid statements of the evils of cigarette smoking were circulated extensively by well intentioned, ignorant people, by notoriety seekers and thrifty legislators. Anticigarette bills swept through the assemblies of several states.

The agitation was such that medical men and other scientists undertook thorough examination of the cigarette. Everything in connection with cigarettes—the tobacco, the ingredients with which it is treated, the paper, even the printing on the paper—were analyzed by the ablest chemists in America and Europe. Packages of all the leading cigarettes were purchased in the open market by representatives of state and municipal health boards, medical journals and other investigators, and analyzed thoroughly by public and private chemists. Scores of such tests were made in practically every state in the union, in London, and, I believe, in various other European cities.

Every one of these investigations resulted in exactly the same act of finding, viz.: that the cigarette is absolutely pure; that it contains less nicotine than any other form of tobacco products; that the combination of the paper is harmless in its effect on the human physiology; that its temperate use is in no way injurious to normal users.

I am enclosing herewith extracts from the *London Lancet*, a famous British medical journal, which has been making examinations of tobacco since 1853. Also an extract from the *Medical Journal* of New York; also an extract written by Leonard K. Hirshberg, M. D., M. A., A. B., Johns Hopkins University, taken from an article in *Harper's Weekly* entitled 'The Truth About Tobacco,' in which he quotes Dr. [William] Osler and other prominent authorities.

Pages of extracts from medical journals could be published and more pages could be filled with the statements of famous physicians and chemists, all of whom testify to the same general effect. As a rule, attacks on cigarettes are so vague and indefinite that it is impossible for manufacturers to bring the slanderers to account. However, some years ago a prominent Chicago newspaper gave a manufacturer an opportunity for action, which he promptly embraced by suing the newspaper for libel. Scientific examinations were then made by the newspaper—which might have made them before publishing its falsehoods—and the cigarettes were found to be absolutely pure. The newspaper settled the libel suit out of court and published a retraction and apology in its own columns and in various other newspapers at its own expense.

Certain customs officials of Great Britain made a similar attack, and the manufacturers immediately called the matter to the attention of the government. The government, in its desire to be fair and unbiased, caused a complete scientific examination to be made by experts, with the result that a public retraction was authorized and made by the officials.

As the results of these various scientific investigations and court actions became known, and as doctors and thinking men generally came to study the cigarette carefully, the prejudice against it died out even more quickly than it had arisen.

Aside from the overwhelming weight of scientific testimony, common sense will convince any reasonable man that the cigarette is not injurious. That this must be true is proven by the number and types of men who use cigarettes. Unquestionably the cigarette is the favorite smoke of doctors in every city and large town throughout the country. Preachers, lawyers, bankers, business men, laboring men and men of all classes have deliberately turned from cigar and pipe to the cigarette. Inasmuch as ten or twelve million American men use cigarettes, and perhaps

even a larger percentage of Europeans, your charge of feeble-mindedness lies against an overwhelming proportion of the commercial, professional, artistic, musical and industrial world. The increase of cigarette smoking in the United States in recent years is significant. In 1900 two billion six hundred thousand cigarettes were made in this country. In 1913, fifteen billion eight hundred million cigarettes were made here, an increase of 700 per cent.

This tremendous popularity, which is growing all the time, is possible only because millions of American men have convinced themselves that cigarettes are good for them.

If cigarette smoking is to be treated fairly, you must admit that the subject is one that can be discussed only as a matter of personal taste. You may or may not like cigarettes. That is, of course, the right of any man. But it is hardly wise to use one's personal likes and dislikes as a basis for declaring that several million men are feeble-minded—especially when that sweeping indictment is directed against thousands of doctors, lawyers, college professors, ministers, business men and other leaders in every department of thought and activity. Also, when one confuses his dislikes or likes with scientific facts he certainly can hardly be expected to be taken seriously.

You may exercise your personal privileges in liking or disliking anything, but you place yourself in an unfortunate light when you attempt to use your position as an employer of labor to coerce your employees into an agreement with your personal points of view. Americans cling tenaciously to the belief that they have the right to entire freedom of opinion and freedom of action so long as they do the work for which they are employed. The man who happens to be working in a factory has just as much right to his personal likes and dislikes as his employer; and the employee might as well resent any effort on the part of the man who happens to be at the time his superior in authority to tell him how he must regulate his personal private affairs.

In fairness to our industry, and in fairness to the millions of intelligent men who smoke cigarettes, you should either prove your contention or enable us as manufacturers to disprove it. We believe that upon investigation and reconsideration you will admit your error and give as much publicity to your retraction as you gave to your original unwarranted attacks.

Respectfully,

Percival I. Hill,

President The American Tobacco Company

## **Reply to Mr. Hill by Mr. Ford's Secretary**

May 19th, 1914.

Dear Sir:-

Your letter of May 16th addressed to Mr. Ford received during his absence from the city, and, inasmuch as the matter mentioned therein has had the attention of the writer, I take the liberty of replying thereto.

Not being entirely familiar with the extent to which the newspapers have referred to our attitude on the cigarette, I am not in a position to qualify their statements, except to say that the interview referred to in the clipping enclosed was given out by the writer and will be defended.

Our efforts have not been directed against any manufacturer, nor against the tobacco industry; but primarily to prevent our youths from acquiring and continuing the cigarette habit.

That this practice is injurious, even to adults, is evident from your letter, which defends the cigarette if used only to a temperate extent by normal users.

That the smoking of cigarettes is injurious is further evidenced by the fact that reports from colleges and other educational institutions show that young men addicted to the cigarette habit seldom if ever lead in their studies.

I also call your attention to the statement of one of the magistrates in your city, who states that 99% of the boys between the ages of 10 and 17, who come before him charged with crime have their fingers disfigured by cigarette stains.

If, as your letter indicates, scientists and others have thus far failed to find any injurious element in the cigarette, then we must laud Mr. Edison for being the first man to find the reason for the degenerative effect of cigarette smoking.

I doubt very much the statement you make in your letter that the popularity of the cigarette is possible only because millions of American men have convinced themselves that cigarettes are good for them, and would therefore ask you to point out what beneficial result has ever been experienced by anyone thru indulgence in this habit.

It would appear that the statements contained in your letter are not of such a nature as to be for the benefit and uplift of our wayward lads, and in justice to the American youth who knows not what permanent injury accompanies this habit, this growing evil should be combated.

Very truly yours,

Ernest G. Liebold,  
Secretary to Henry Ford.

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