

HOBBY HISTORY

The Tortured History of the Match: IV

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

While fairly common in Europe, in 1878, there was only one factory making vestas in the United States, and that was running with French apparatus. A number of attempts had been made in the United States to establish factories for making so-called safety matches, but all had failed save a small one at Erie, Pa.

For these matches the box was coated on one side with red phosphorus, which had lost its poisonous qualities in being exposed to light and air. The matches were tipped with chlorate of potash, and were lighted by being rubbed on the box. But the box was angular and a nuisance to carry, not at all like the convenient book or paper matches of the present.

The safety matches were also, according to *The Popular Science Monthly* of 1877, probably “the most dangerous matches made.” In the majority of cases, according to the article, when a match was struck, some of the phosphorus on the box flew off, and being highly inflammable, always gave rise to the danger of fire. Moreover the safety matches always lighted with difficulty, and the box became useless if it got damp. It was stated that it was “impossible to get the Irish servants of that day to use them unless they were ordered to by the priests.”

Besides these more regular types of matches, there were various sorts intended particularly for pipe and cigar lighters. In European cities at almost every crowded corner there was a boy or girl who offered a light to smokers: “‘Ere y’are Sir, pipe light, cigar light, on’y ‘apenny a box—’ave a light, Sir.”

There were German paper fuses, from which bits perhaps an inch by a quarter of an inch in size could be broken off and put in a pipe to light it. Then there were Vesuvians ending in a large charcoal tip. But most remarkable were the flammers, which were intended to burn in spite of a wind. Of these, an English magazine wrote vividly:

“Who has not had them explode in his eye, on his cheek, down his neck, scarring the skin, burning holes in his coats and trousers, frightening passers-by and doing all manner of deep-dyed devilment.

“We want to light a peaceful pipe, and a flamer bursts out in a fury. If you have any respect for your tobacco, your lips, your nostrils, or your lungs, you will let him get rid of his flames before you apply him to your cigar. And when you do venture so far, he drops off the stick and burns a hole in the carpet.”

Beyond comparison the most popular match at that day was the lucifer. In England its production was carried on both as a hand trade and in factories.

A man could start making lucifer matches with a plank of wood, some quires of printed paper, a few bottles of chemicals, and simple hand tools. In fact, most of the inferior matches were made, according to the *Practical Magazine* of that date, in frowsy, dirty dwellings which hid their unsightliness up courts and blind alleys, where most of the lucifer match fires took place—safety, health, and cleanliness being alike disregarded. These matches were sold by children on the street for a half-penny, or a cent a box.

The factories were much larger, lighter, and more sanitary, and one or two employed as many as a thousand workpeople, mostly girls. But even in the factories...the work was largely by hand, and the whole force was more or less subject to the effects of the fumes from the phosphorus.

Part V in our next issue.