HOBBY HISTORY

History of the Match: III

Fuzees, Vesuvians, Wax Vestas, First Safety Match, and Phossy Jaw

[Ed. Note: keep in mind that this was probably written in the late 1940s]

The year 1832 saw the birth of two further forms of matches—the remarkable Fuzee and the Wax Vesta.

The fuzee was not intended for ordinary or domestic use, but rather for a special purpose—the lighting of cigars and pipes out of doors. Its stalk was usually composed of a thick, coarse, loose-textured cardboard, steeped in nitre, each piece about five inches long and an inch and a half wide. He strips were then neatly cut nearly through transversely into twelve smaller strips. Roughly a quarter- inch wide, thus leaving all the smaller strips still partially attached on the principle of the book matches of today. One edge of the long strip was dipped in a phosphoric inflaming composition. When dry, it was easy to tear off one of the small strips for use as required. When ignited, it smoldered slowly with a spluttering flame and could not be blown out by the wind.

The name of the maker was usually roughly printed on the long strips, which w ere folded and sold in chip boxes of the sliding matchbox type. Later, many makers scented their cardboard fuzees, and they remained in common use in England until about 1865, although in some continental countries, especially Bosnia and Spain, these old cardboard fuzees were still used up to the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1849, James Palmer, of Camberwell, introduced another form of match—Vesuvians—intended, like the fuzee, for use solely out-of-doors, for lighting pipes and cigars.

It had a large pear-shaped head and consisted, in addition to the usual tip of phosphoric igniting composition, of a mass of nitre, powdered charcoal, wood dust, and cascarailla bark, held together by an admixture of gum or glue. On ignition, the head burnt briskly for ten or twenty seconds and could not be extinguished, even by the highest wind. The one great drawback was that the stem often burned through before the match had ceased to flame, allowing the large, heavy head to fall while still alight, often setting fire to clothes, carpets, the seats of carriages, and the like. Later, to avoid this, Palmer patented a method of braiding the stem, which secured the head to it by a network of sized cotton threads. Later again, the stems were often made of glass or porcelain and made tubular to prevent them cracking in the flame, and also plugged near the top to prevent the flame from descending the tube, issuing from the bottom and burning the hand.

The Vesta, which had a stem originally made not of wood but wax taper, was named after Vesta, the Roman Goddess of the Hearth, in whose temple the sacred fire was kept perpetually burning. Richard Bell coined the name “vesta” for the new wax tapers, which are still produced by this firm and Bryant & May—now amalgamated together—a stem of cork pine wood replacing the wax taper.

The wooden stem vesta has become so popular that the wax-stemmed form is now only made here in small quantities, but is still used widely in Australia and New Zealand, as well as in Italy and Spain.

Matches were decidedly stronger in those days. A century-old matchbox carries instructions on the box warning weak-lunged people not to use them because of the fumes. All the early forms of phosphorus friction matches were, however, dangerous to some extent. A box of them left on the kitchen mantelshelf, or in the hot sun, would often blaze up spontaneously. Destruction of carriers’ carts passing over rough roads was caused by the boxes of matches, including their lading, igniting through being jarred in transit.