



## The History of Tobacco

Tobacco has long been used in South America, both as a form of drug, usually smoked, and as a medicinal herb. Owing to its perceived hallucinatory effects it was often used in religious rituals and there are extant depictions of Maya priests smoking tobacco by means of reeds or tubes, a sort of early cigarette. The habit soon spread across America, Northern tribes also used tobacco in ceremonies, often mixed with other drugs, such as mushrooms, to enhance the experience. This practice has parallels with European culture with the burning of incense in churches, the intent being to induce a soporific trance wherein the observer would more readily believe the practices. So popular did it become amongst the Native Americans that they took to carrying bags of tobacco (there were not many convenience stores to pop in and pick up a pack) which they smoked in a pipe, often to seal a bargain when trading.

So what good was it? One use was to mix it with lime and chalk to make toothpaste, rather an ironic utility. In fact, if all the reports were true, it was something of a miracle drug. Applied as a poultice it relieved abscesses, sores and polyps. Breathing in the smell of fresh tobacco relieved headaches. Rubbing leaves inside the mouth cured the common cold while removing lesions on the neck and applying a compress of hot tobacco and salt healed the wound. It is even thought probable that it was used as an anaesthetic for brain surgery (yes, they did trepanning back then!)

In 1492 Rodrigo de Jerez sailed with Columbus and, while on the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas, was presented with some dried leaves with a strange smell which were supposedly valuable. Not realizing their potential, Rodrigo threw them away. 2 months later in November 1492, he and a shipmate, Luis de Torres, were looking for the Emperor of China on Cuba (something of a wild goose chase as it turned out) when they saw some natives smoking the leaves. The two sailors soon learned to roll up palm leaves with tobacco inside and smoke it. Inevitably Rodrigo was hooked and upon his return to Spain was conspicuous by walking around town surrounded by a cloud of smoke. His notoriety caused his arrest and imprisonment by the Inquisition as the Devil's lackey; on his release, 7 years later, however, he found that various friends had also taken up the habit and smoking soon became popular.

As the primary trading nation of the Mediterranean, the Ottoman Empire soon found out about tobacco and it quickly became the current craze. Initially it was prescribed for all manner of ailments but fairly soon the medical community, at that time the Ottomans led the world in medicine, noticed that it caused

fatigue, dizziness, made the senses dull and made ones breath stink. Too late to stop it! By 1682 a Syrian judge noted that tobacco use was pervasive throughout Islam by both men and women, even by 5 year old children. Meanwhile back in Western Europe mention is made of a tobacco merchant in Lisbon in 1523 only five years after the Spanish started importing it.

Sir Walter Raleigh is credited with bringing tobacco to England but it was already there before his travels to the New World, brought from Spain and Portugal. Again it caught on like wildfire, to such a worrying degree that in 1604, King James I wrote a polemic stating that smoking was "*A custome lothsome to the eye, hatefull to the Nose, harmefull to the braine, dangerous to the Lungs, and in the blacke stinking fume thereof, neerest resembling the horrible Stigian smoke of the pit that is bottomelesse.*" entitled 'A Conterblaste to Tobacco' (quite a modern title). He also authorised Thomas Sackville to levy an excise tax of £1 per 3lbs of tobacco imported (the equivalent of £5000 today) But nothing could assuage the desire for the weed.

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Jean Nicot, the French ambassador to Lisbon, fell in love with tobacco in 1560. He prescribed it abundantly and recorded such miraculous cures it was called Nicot's herb or Nicotine.