

WHOLLY SMOKES



Sample Chapter

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WHOLLY SMOKES

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Contents

Introduction	4
Henry Badcock and the Noble Red Man's Gift of Golden Tobacco	6
Erasmus Badcock and the Great Business Opportunity .	11
Samuel Badcock and the Gob Heard 'Round the World . .	16
Jezreel Badcock and the Gettysburg Address	20
As American as Base Ball	27
The Tobacco Gin	30
A Cure for Malaria	33
A Good Cigar is a Smoke	39
A Lucifer to Light Your Fag	41
Charleston Snuff, and Other Disasters	44
Sophisticated Ladies, Satin Dolls, and Brothers Who Could Spare a Dime	55
Lord Chamberlains	59
"Keep 'Em Smoking!"	63
Morse Code	68
Filtered Dreams	73
Castro's Cigar	80
Hazardous to Your Health	83
Puff Love	87
The Final Days	102
Chronology	106

Introduction



Today, in 2020 A.D., it is easy to look back and dismiss GST as “just another tobacco company.” But this kind of 20-20 (or 2020 A.D.) hindsight is possible only because we have forgotten so much. There was nothing ordinary or common about GST; it was one of a kind. If we Americans loved it – if we hated it – it was always for GST itself, and never because it was “just another” anything.

It is hard to find a company more deeply American than the General Snuff and Tobacco Company (GST). The roots of GST are deeply twined around the roots of the USA. It has grown with this nation, from the settlement at Jamestown to the War of Independence, to the Civil War, the dawn of baseball, two world wars, and on into the twenty-first century. The story of GST is also the story of the Badcock family, who owned and operated the company throughout its magnificent history.

This book follows that history, stopping to explore a few of its more dazzling events. You will meet the Badcock who kidnapped Pocahontas, the Badcock who burned London, the Badcock who started the American Revolution, the Badcock who almost killed a president, the Badcock who delivered the real Gettysburg address, the Badcock who wanted to prolong World War One

(because he was doing so well out of it), the Badcock who tried to bribe Roosevelt, the Badcock who tried to kill Fidel Castro, and many others. They are all connected with GST, the firm that grew from a humble plantation in the woods to a powerful international conglomerate, marketing tobacco and food products throughout the world.

But the history of GST is also the history of advertising and marketing in America. An early GST genius not only invented baseball cards, but made sure that all ballplayers henceforward would chew and spit their way through games. Later the “Lady Fantasy” campaign brightened the lives of American soldiers through a world war. Still later, a GST market research study led to the *Hindenburg* disaster. And will America ever forget the (1950s) audacious live TV commercial of Horace Badcock? Or the (1990s) even more audacious – some would say outrageous – campaign for the hearts and minds of America’s children – called “Operation Puff Love”?

Whether we read it as a great family romance or a cautionary tale, the story of GST is a story for all times, all Americans, all family folk everywhere.



Charleston Snuff, and Other Disasters

The period between the world wars was one of growth and consolidation. The 1918 armistice meant the end of Lady Fantasy. She was far too wholesome and old-fashioned for the Jazz Age. Men no longer dreamed of a Gibson girl – they were beginning to dream instead of a girl who liked to drink gibsons (concocted from bathtub gin), a girl who knew how to flap, how to neck, how to dance the Charleston on the wing of a biplane.

The packet with Lady Fantasy and her slogan “Fragrant and Graceful” (F.A.G.) had to go. Somehow the word “fag” had been debased to a pejorative term for a homosexual. Clearly it was time to scrap Lady Fantasy and start over. But how?

Augustus was getting old. He realized he could not run the company forever, so he began grooming his son LeRoy to take over. He started him in the advertising department. There young LeRoy plunged in, eager to show his stuff.

The trouble was, LeRoy Badcock didn’t have any stuff to show. Under his direction, GST in the 1920s saw many false starts. Lucky Lindy cigarettes lasted a year, mainly because Lindbergh (who didn’t smoke) never endorsed them. Then came a series of disastrous

product names. Charleston Snuff appeared just as interest in the Charleston was disappearing.

“They’re all dancing something new, called the Black Bottom,” LeRoy complained. “I don’t suppose we could bring out a Black Bottom Snuff?”

“Doesn’t convey quite the right image, sir,” a chorus of advertising lackeys informed him.

“Damn! I suppose we need to rethink.”

Nothing seemed to go right for LeRoy. He launched Houdini cigars in 1926 (the year Houdini died shortly after an escape). He launched Tutankhamen cut plug (which seemed as popular as a mummy’s curse). Finally in 1929, he launched a new cigar called Wall Street (the crash made it a national joke).

Augustus wasn’t laughing. He informed LeRoy that he had one more chance to bring a successful product to market. “Son, maybe your problem is all this modernism. We don’t need it. I say, stick to the old tried and trusted products. Remember, a comely young woman can always sell a seegar. Of course it’s your decision, my boy.”

It was 1936 before LeRoy Badcock came up with the his next product, a cigar as new, sophisticated,



LeRoy Badcock

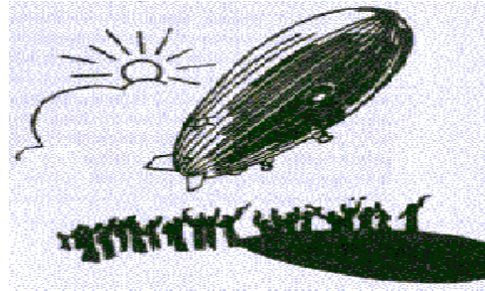
utterly modern as that latest mode of transportation, the airship.

They're always saying that zeppelins are *cigar-shaped*. By jing, so are our cigars! Why don't we cash in on that? They say the zeppelins are quiet, smooth, elegant, real tasteful, and just the thing for the upper crust. We too must hammer on those themes. "Relax with a high-class cigar," stuff like that. We can make our new cigar as exciting as the Graf Zeppelin itself.

Reactions to this odd memo varied. Some thought it was a stroke of genius. The Freudian connotations of zeppelins (the longest objects ever sent into the sky) would perhaps carry over to the new cigar from General Snuff:

The Hindenburg Cigar

**The Ride of Your Life
A Smoke to Remember**



If you are fortunate enough to take passage on the world's largest and most luxurious Airship, the Hindenburg, you'll experience a quiet, smooth ride in tasteful, elegant surroundings. The whole atmosphere is one of tranquillity.

That's what we aim for too in our newest creation, the Hindenburg Cigar. It's the longest, most gracefully tapered cigar in the world. One puff, and you'll experience all the smoothness, the good taste, the elegance of a ride on the famous Airship.

So if you can, take a ride on the great Airship itself.

If not, light up a Hindenburg, relax, and enjoy the ride.

Yet LeRoy was not satisfied with this advertisement:

It lacks substance. It says very little about what I call "the Zeppelin Experience." We need to tell people what it must be like up there, floating through the sky, drinking and playing bridge with

earls and princesses, all the swells, while the map unrolls down below. Gliding along far above the cares of the world, above the clouds. Like being God. The Zeppelin brochures make it sound just peachy.

Somehow we need to convey all that in our cigar ads. I think I must give it a whirl myself. I'll take passage on the Hindenburg and keep a detailed journal.

LeRoy Badcock boarded the *Hindenburg* in Frankfurt, on May 3, 1937. It was of course the great airship's last voyage. The following entries from his journal detail the trip:

May 3. Boarded the great ship at Frankfurt-am-Main. They keep it in a huge hangar, with the tail sticking out. The tail fins are decorated with huge swastikas. The steward tells me the Nazi Party paid the company a lot of money to put them up there. The great airship was flown on propaganda flights over Germany, dropping pamphlets and showing the flag. I wonder if we couldn't pay more, and get them to take the big swastikas off the tail fins and put up *GST* instead. It's a thought ...

You just walk up a gangplank and there you are. They make you hand over your matches and lighter when you come aboard. That irritated me – the Germans are good at giving irritating orders – so I kept back one box of matches – how would it look, the president of a tobacco company not having a light! Evidently this has something to do with the

ship being filled with hydrogen, not helium as planned. I don't understand all that chemical mumbo-jumbo. There was some problem about buying helium from America. Political stuff again. I don't understand all that political mumbo-jumbo, either. I'll wager the big swastikas didn't help. Anyway, they assure me we will be able to smoke in the Smoking Saloon.

They also make you hand over your camera, but the steward says we'll get them back after we get past the three-mile limit and head out to sea. Meanwhile, we watch from the windows while a hundred little men pull ropes and somehow back us out of the hangar. They play some music for the occasion. It really is all very smooth, no bumps or noises at all. Nothing like a ship. Then we are on our way!

My cabin is tiny, but adequate. I took a stroll around the ship, looking over the rather luxurious Dining Saloon, Drawing Room, and Reading and Writing Room. Then I descended a wide staircase to the Smoking Saloon. I thought to myself, this airship has everything you might expect on a luxury liner, but I will be in New York in two and a half days.

May 4. In the morning, took a tour of the ship. We were shown the bridge with all its fascinating controls. The braver souls were taken up a ladder to walk along a dim corridor and look at the huge gas bags.

At lunch, met a pretty Bavarian woman named Diesl, an English tennis player named Hatney, and a large, red-bearded fellow with a monocle who introduced himself as Count Exon Waldiz. Some kind of Ruritanian aristocrat or something.

Count Waldiz joined me later in the Smoking Saloon, where I was enjoying a perfecto and a glass of whiskey. He seemed to be drinking absinthe. "Two days of boredom," he said, and suggested we play cards for money. I explained that I know no games but "SlapJack." We played that for an hour, and I lost over \$800.

In the evening, I watched the stars with Fräulein Diesl. She says she lost over 4,000 marks to Count Waldiz, betting on the relative speeds of two ships down below.

May 5. Read a few cables in the morning and sent off replies. In the afternoon, I took a brisk walk with Mr. Hatney. He says he lost over £750 to Count Waldiz. The Count had bet he could seduce Fräulein Diesl before we landed. This morning, Hatney had seen her come out of Waldiz's cabin. I wonder about Waldiz. Is he really a count, and not some kind of swindler who preys on airship passengers?

In the evening, Count Waldiz again drank absinthe. He was up to no good. First he bet me a thousand dollars he could name more cigar types than I. This he did by cheating. After I had named the Claro, Corona, Corona Gorda, Double Corona,

Figurado, Giant, Grand Corona, Long Corona, Lonsdale, Maduro, Panatela, Perfecto, Petit Corona, Pyramide, Robusto, Simple Corona, Toro, Torpedo, and Triangular, he named the Valdez.

“The Valdez?” I asked.

“Named after my family. Valdez is the Spanish version of Waldiz,” he explained.

After I paid up, he showed me a pistol and suggested a sporting game of Russian roulette. When I refused, he suggested we try “taking the bridge.” We could force the captain to make the ship do some “dives and loops and things. Great fun, what?” I again refused.

“But LeRoy, my old friend, does it not drive you mad, all these German rules and regulations? Do you not feel like doing something, making something happen? I mean, here we have to sit in this room to enjoy a smoke. It is an insult to you as a cigar tycoon! Don’t you feel like having a cigar in your cabin?”

I said yes indeed, and I had hidden a box of matches for that very purpose.

“Capital! And did you do it? Did you smoke a cigar in your cabin?”

I explained that I was afraid the steward would smell the smoke or find the ash.

“Afraid of the steward. LeRoy, you have a sad case of German-itis! But I will think of some cure, fear not.” There was a mad gleam in his monocle. I’m glad we land tomorrow.

May 6. Towards evening, we approached our destination, Lakehurst, New Jersey. I had not seen Count Waldiz all day. Then all at once he popped up in the corridor and grabbed my lapels. “LeRoy, my old friend, come and have a final cigar. I’ve found a place where the steward won’t bother you!” He indicated the ladder leading aloft, to the gas envelope – an area expressly forbidden to unaccompanied passengers. I murmured something about seeing to my suitcases.

The Mad Count leaned towards me, his breath reeking of absinthe (I will henceforth forever hate licorice). “LeRoy, my old friend, you must not be a coward! Imagine, a tobacco czar, afraid to light up! Come up and have a last smoke with me!”

I followed him up the ladder to the dimly-lit corridor. We found ourselves on a catwalk running the length of the airship, past these rows of great cylinders of oiled silk – the gas bags.

“Just think, LeRoy! These big sausages contain the clouds of hydrogen that hold us up in the sky! Marvelous!” Waldiz bit the end off a grand corona. “Got a light?”

I did not feel like a smoke myself, but I handed him my matches. He was about to light it, when a crewman appeared. “Verboten. This deck is off-limits to passengers! What do you make here, gentlemen?”

Waldiz looked at him. “We came up because I smell gas.”

The crewman started, then smiled. “You make

a joke, sir. Hydrogen gas has no smell. No smell at all.”

“Not for ordinary people, but I have a very sensitive nose.” The Count pointed to his nose, which was red and bulbous. “Years of absinthe have sharpened my senses. I tell you, I smell gas! There is a leak!”

The crewman chuckled indulgently. “Really? Where is this so-called gas leak?”

Count Waldiz pointed to a dark corner between two gas bags. “Over there, I believe. Let’s have a closer look.”

He struck a match and lunged forward.

That’s all I recall until this moment. I am lying on the ground, and my leg seems to be broken. There’s burning stuff falling all around me – falling, I fear, from the mighty *Hindenburg*. The ship itself is still intact in the air above me, though ablaze.

Miraculously, my journal and fountain pen have fallen with me, so I can continue my chronicle. No sign of Count Waldiz. Not that I want to see him again. [No one ever did see the Count again]. Damn him! He’s created a disaster! There go all our hopes for a decent, up-market stogie!

I’d better wind this up now, for the *Hindenburg* seems to be falling towards me! Evidently if the hydrogen burns up, the darned thing can’t stay aloft! It sinks to earth as surely as a ship sinks to the bottom of the sea! I wish I’d paid more attention in chemistry class. If only –

LeRoy was crushed to death by a piece of the falling wreckage. Near as anyone can tell, it was a giant tail fin, emblazoned with a swastika.