

Shaving

I am 70 years old and have been shaving for about 55 years. I don't remember when I first started shaving, nor do I remember what I used. I have a vague memory of a metal razor that unscrewed; the top came apart and you placed a blade, like the contents of a sandwich, between two slightly curved pieces of metal that screwed back onto the handle.

My father died when I was three so I had no role model to show me how to shave. The closest I came to observing how it was done was in the movies. But it was not too difficult. In the 1940's, you took a shaving brush, made lather by rubbing the wet brush over a cake of soap, applied the lather to your face, and shaved. In the bathroom medicine cabinet, I found several Gillette razor blades which had belonged to my father, just about the only thing I had that was my father's. Shaving with them brought me closer to him in a way. Unfortunately, I believe those 20 year old blades were dull, so the nicks and cuts I received were somehow connected to him, which was a little weird, symbolically.

After a few years, a friend of my mother, Mrs. Gitter, gave me an electric razor that belonged to her late husband. It must have been one of the first electric razors, dating from the late 1930's. It didn't do a very good job, but I dutifully shaved with it for a while. Then I went back to my twin blade twist-apart razor and began buying razor blades at the drug store, though occasionally I bought them from people who would be selling them along with shoe-laces on the street. (I later learned that along with blades and laces, they sold condoms.) Gillette dominated the razor blade market as far as I can remember. Competitors included Schick and an English company--Wilkinson, but most everybody stayed with Gillette.

When I was in college, I discovered that there was something called brushless shaving cream, and that you could get a terrific buy at Macy's, both in a tube and in a jar, so I switched: another great advance in the art of removing facial hair.

The ever-busy scientists at Gillette developed a one-piece razor. Instead of the tedious process of unscrewing the razor, removing the top, inserting the blade, and screwing the top on again, the revolutionary new razor opened up like a flower when the bottom of the handle was turned, the blade was placed inside, the razor was screwed shut, and there were no parts to be misplaced, or dropped. The new, one piece razor, came in various qualities, and I received a fancy, silver-plated one from a cousin for graduation.

I had no idea that shaving implements constituted such a lucrative market, because soon after, a new razor appeared. It had a very different design and a much smaller and heavier blade which came in a cartridge. I believe it was manufactured by Eversharp. I didn't buy it. And through the '60's and '70's electric razors flooded the market. I didn't buy them either: Remington, Norelco, etc.

When I was a kid, I always went to Mr. Shaikin, the barber on Longwood Avenue, for a haircut. However, I was aware that he also had a lively business shaving customers as well. (There were several "rites of passage" associated with the barbershop. First, when you went by yourself, not accompanied by your mother. Second, when you were no longer placed on a booster chair. Third, when you no longer paid children's prices. And

fourth and most important here, when you said to Mr. Shaikin, who by this time you called Sam, "I think I'll have a shave." He tipped the chair back; put a hot towel on your face; stropped the straight razor; removed the towel; applied the lather, and shaved. I don't want to give the impression that this was a frequent occurrence. The fact is I have treated myself to a barber shave only twice in my life: when I graduated from college and Mr. Shaikin (Sam) said that I had a beard that was hard to shave. And when I was living in Brooklyn and I was feeling particularly good about something.

I can't remember when the disposable razor appeared, but they eventually sucked me in. I am sure I resisted their blandishments, since I am basically a very frugal person and this new razor constituted waste of the most conspicuous kind. But as the price of razor blades began to exceed the price of disposables, I succumbed.

Another change in my shaving habits took place with the introduction of foam shaving cream in a can. Press the top of the can and out comes lather as good as any barber's. Soon the market was flooded with different brands: Gillette, Colgate, Barbasol etc. And a few years later came a gel that claimed to give an even better shave than the foaming kind.

For most of my adult life, my routine was the same: wake up, go to the bathroom, turn on the radio, wash and shave. I try to get as many shaves out of a razor as I could: at least 10 to 20. I seldom bother with after-shave lotion and I use a styptic pencil if I cut myself (which is a good indication to discard the razor blade). My wife uses disposable razors to shave her legs, and though I have never discussed it with her, I believe she disposes of them after use. So when I see them sitting on the bathtub edge, (the razors, not her legs) I place them with my razors.

The big change in my routine, now that I have retired, is to skip a day from time to time. This was common practice on vacation, and one can consider retirement permanent vacation. A couple years ago, I grew a goatee, but it requires as much shaving as without it.

A couple of years ago, my son David began shaving. He asked for, and received an electric razor, and I believed his Norelco electric razor was the best shaving implement around. It did the job quick and close. Turns out that when David wants a close shave he uses a disposable razor and shaving cream. So much for technology. Perhaps he will let me use his electric razor when I don't want to bother with the radio, washing, lathering and shaving with a blade.

Jacob Schlitt October, 1998