

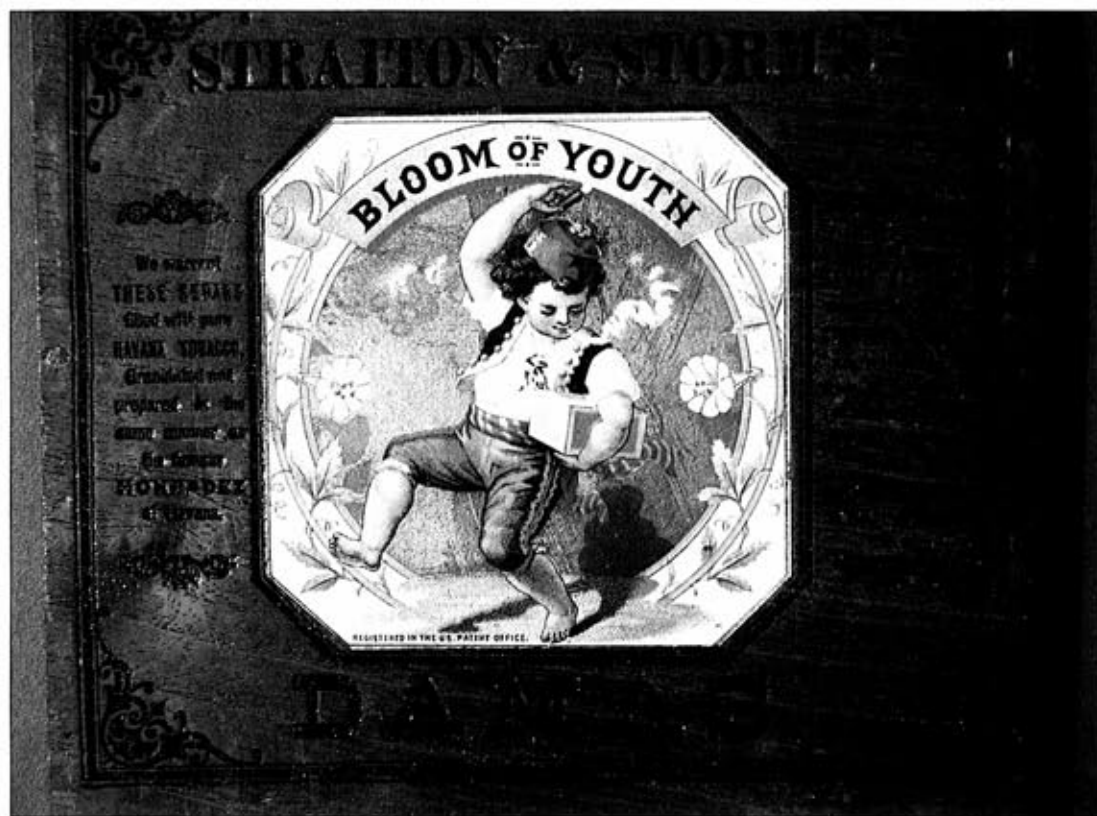


WHEN NEW YORK ROLLED ITS OWN

*Cigar making was once the city's
second largest industry.*



BY KAREN KRAMER



A cigar box label from Straiton & Storm, a firm that once employed future labor leader Samuel Gompers.

One of the most vibrant and economically important businesses in New York City around the turn of the century was that of cigar making; an industry whose heyday lasted from approximately 1880 to 1920. During that period, cigars were made by hand. Because it was labor-intensive, the cigar industry employed many thousands of workers, including entire families, most whom were recent immigrants. This colorful and little-known piece of New York's history gave rise to prominent leaders and had a major effect on union orga-

nizing in this country.

New York became the nation's cigar making center for two reasons, both related to the city's role as a major port: First, New York was the hub of the tobacco trade for both imported and domestic tobacco. Second, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the city was home to huge numbers of immigrants who brought cigar-making skills with them.

As early as the 1860s the Dutch, English, and Germans began to set up cigar manufacturing shops around the Lower East Side. The Germans were the

largest and most skilled group, but cigar makers came from many nationalities, including Bohemians and — later — Italians and Eastern European Jews. At the height of the industry, cigar shops could be found every two or three blocks. Although some of those enterprises employed as many as twenty workers, the majority were small places, with three or four employees.

In 1870, the Federal Census counted 5,549 cigar makers living in Manhattan, with 2,182 of those being German immigrants. Cigar making was the second

largest industry in the city, following the garment trade. By 1890, New York was producing four times more cigars than Philadelphia, the next largest producer; one out of every three American cigars was made in New York. All of this output was eagerly consumed by a public who came to see cigar smoking as a status symbol and sign of progress. According to one estimate, by 1890 four out of five American men were cigar smokers; the habit was so prevalent, that even children smoked — a phenomenon that shocked foreign visitors.

As the industry grew, many immigrants came to work in large tenement house factories. A manufacturer would rent a tenement building from the owner, get a special manufacturing license from the Internal Revenue Commission, and use the building as if it were a regular factory. Apartments were rented to cigar makers who then worked in their homes. These workers were doubly vulnerable to the boss's whims, since he controlled not only their livelihood, but their dwellings as well.

Tenement work was considered degrading by social reformers, politicians, and the cigar makers themselves. Its only "advantage" to the hard-pressed immigrant workers was that it enabled the entire family to work; women, who might otherwise be unemployable, could thus contribute to the family income. Bosses liked it because it enabled them to save on the cost of heat, light, and other amenities.

The proliferation of cigar making as a trade was spurred by the gradual introduction of mechanization. Prior to 1880, almost all cigars were made entirely by skilled hand labor, with one individual fashioning an entire stogie by himself. After the introduction of molds in the early eighties, methods changed, although skill was still needed to produce a good cigar. The finest cigars were still made from beginning to end by one skilled worker, but increasingly, the cheaper product was made by teams comprising skilled and semi-skilled laborers. The latter would roll the cigar's body using a mold, while the skilled team member most often formed the outer wrapper.

The transition from the old hand-made style of cigar making to the mold-made process was not abrupt, however. Many New York factories produced various grades of cigars requiring different levels of skill and it was not uncommon to have separate floors or areas, some devoted to all handwork, others to team cigar making.



Bohemian cigar makers in a tenement factory, ca. 1890, captured on film by documentary photographer Jacob Riis.

Whether the skilled cigar maker worked at home or in a shop, the procedure was the same. The basic tool was a heavy wooden board, which he placed on the work table. The other major tool was a cutter — a long blade, usually curved on the cutting side and used in a back and forth rocking motion to cut the tobacco leaves down to proper size. These blades and the other simple tools needed for the work were owned by the workers themselves.

The tobacco was divided into three parts — the filler, the binder, and the wrapper. First, the cigar maker would gather up the leaves of the filler tobacco to form the particular size of the cigar being rolled. It was important how the leaves were folded and placed, because that determined how well a cigar burned. Air pockets had to be laced throughout. Too much of a pocket would create a draft, and too small a pocket would restrict the draw. Sometimes, different types of filler would be blended to give different tastes. The tips of the filler leaf were considered the sweetest, and if the cigar maker put most of these in the lighting end (which took a lot more time), the cigars would sell for as much as a dollar extra.

During the filler stage of the rolling, as the worker added different amounts of tobacco, he would get a "feel" of when the cigar was beginning to take the proper shape. After he had the right size bunch prepared, he would take the binder leaf, wrap it around the entire piece, and trim it to size with his cutter. The wrapper was a thin leaf of tobacco, which was rolled around the entire piece. It had to be perfect, without holes, for it gave the cigar its appearance.



Cigar makers considered themselves professionals and often dressed the part.



The popularity of cigar smoking extended to children, a fact which shocked foreign visitors.

After the wrapping, a small end or “flag” remained and would be sealed using a harmless, colorless adhesive over the head of the cigar to keep the wrapper in place. Each cigar had to be uniform in size and shape, and the workers prided themselves on a keen sense of touch. As one maker put it, “Not everybody could be a cigar maker. You had to have a certain feeling in your hands.” Another said, “It takes a man ten years to learn to make a cigar right and to know the feel of the tobacco.”

Until complete mechanization was perfected and became widespread in the teens and twenties, cigar making was a skilled trade, and cigar rollers considered themselves professionals. It was the rare cigar maker would go to work poorly dressed and it was a matter of pride and dignity for them to dress as elegantly as possible. Many wore ties and coats on the job, and some even came to work in a top hat and tails. The fancy apparel of the cigar maker was legendary and exceptional — some even carried a cane to the workplace. Although there is some debate about how widespread this practice was, old photographs of even the smallest shops show male workers sporting neckties.

If the fancy dress of the skilled cigar maker did not cement their reputation as something special in the minds of the public, something else did: One of the most unique aspects of the cigar rollers’ history — and one reason they were held in such high esteem by outsiders — was their practice of hiring readers. Following a tradition which had started in Cuba, many shops had readers or *lectores* who read to the workers while they rolled the cigars. Paid by the cigar makers

themselves, the readers would recite from books or periodicals to keep the workers entertained and informed. As a result, cigar makers gained a reputation as among the most well-informed workers in the city. This practice pleased them, but not management which felt that the readers created unrest with their sometimes Socialist readings. Because of this management opposition, the practice was eventually abolished.

One of those readers, a cigar maker himself, was Samuel Gompers, who later went on to form the American Federation of Labor. Gompers was born in London in 1850, the son of cigar makers who had emigrated from Amsterdam. At the age of ten, he learned cigar making from his father. Three years later, the family immigrated to the Lower East Side where Gompers first made cigars with his father in their Lower East Side apartment and soon went to work in a small factory, M. Stachelberg.

Gompers was proud of his work. “The leaves,” he stated, “had to be handled carefully to prevent tearing, the craftsmanship of the cigar maker was shown in his ability to utilize wrappers to the best advantage, to shave off the usable to a hair breadth, and to roll so as to cover holes in the leaf, and to use both hands as to make a perfectly shaped product.”

When Gompers became a reader, he often included the work of Marx and Engels and other labor tracts in his selections. In 1875, he became president of New York City Local 144, and six years later, when over one hundred workers met in Pittsburgh to establish a national labor body in America, modeled after the trade unions in Britain, Gompers sat in for the cigar makers. Gompers spent the

best part of two decades tirelessly proselytizing for unionization of all workers, and in 1886, Samuel Gompers — a cigar maker from the Lower East Side — was elected the first president of the American Federation of Labor.

The Cigar Makers International Union, which started in 1864, has often been called the model for craft unionism in the United States. Because of its organizational and political structure, the CMIU was a model for other unions in the late 1800s, as well as for the AFL as a whole. In New York, the local chapters were often separated by language and ethnicity, and membership requirements were strict: Only skilled rollers were admitted; those who used the mold or who were employed as “stem-strippers” and in other less-skilled jobs were excluded. As a result, many cigar makers preferred to join benevolent associations, which were more supportive and had a financial stability that the CMIU lacked.

In 1877, a huge strike rocked the cigar making industry. One hundred workers, demanding higher pay, walked out of a cigar factory on the Lower East Side, followed two weeks later by the workers from M. Stachelberg and three other factories. A month later, they were joined by the tenement workers.



A small upstate factory, similar to those found in New York City.

By October, two months after the strike began, the number was growing, and there were at least ten thousand strikers from sixty factories. The most basic demand was a raise of one dollar per thousand cigars as well as the inclusion of all classes of workers in the settlement offers. Although the demands were basically for higher wages, the workers were eager to improve their working conditions as well. In one factory, the strikers wanted the “right to sing and talk” as they worked. The tenement workers asked for “the rent to be lowered, the

houses to be cleaned and whitewashed, light on the floors." The strikers would have undergone more hardship than they did, had it not been for outside support: CMIU locals all over the country sent contributions. Mutual aid organizations also sent support, with much of it coming from Bohemian groups who made large and repeated contributions.

The manufacturers retaliated by evicting tenement workers from their homes, and the union was forced to find shelter for fifteen hundred families. Manufacturers also began to hire and train unskilled young women, whom they promptly fired when the strike was over. The union was not financially strong enough to keep the strike going, and by December, most of the cigar makers were back at their benches. Although the strike failed to achieve its immediate goal of higher wages, it was important because it put the New York cigar makers and their union on the map of American labor. It was also important because it was the first time that different ethnic and class factions within the union had come together, and this was to later strengthen the union as a whole.

Although the mechanization of cigar making started as early as the 1860s, it wasn't until the turn of the century that workers became alarmed over rumors of machines that would replace hand rolling. In 1917, the first, all-machine-made, long-filler cigar (the highest-grade cigar) was made. Once a practical way to mechanize the industry was found, the practice spread quickly: In 1925, only twenty five percent of all cigars were made by machine, but a decade later, that figure was over seventy percent. One tactic manufacturers used to gain sympathy for mechanization was the "spit campaign," saying that handmade cigars used saliva to glue the end of the cigar, while the machinery kept cigars more sanitary.

With the onset of the Great Depression, cigar makers found it increasingly difficult to make a living and took up other kinds of work. Throughout the following decades, the industry dwindled, as mechanization and inexpensive foreign imports took over. Small shops began to close. Finally in 1974, the union which had such a rich and colorful history was down to fewer than two thousand members and ended its one-hundred-ten-year history by merging with the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union.

Karen Kramer is a New York based filmmaker and writer. Her documentary film, The Last of the New York Cigar Rollers, will be released this fall.



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