

In My View: Smoking's allure finally wears off

By Timothy Parsons-Heather

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Hand on heart and tongue in cheek, it's time to hear the confessions of a chain smoker about America's conquest over tobacco abuse.

I smoked for 35 years before The State Journal-Register began its award-winning campaign against it and I was among the most stubborn opponents of its onslaught against my right to kill myself and live as a nicotine fiend in the ilk of the most noted lugs from the New York Bowery.

I was a drinker, too, and boy, did smoking and sipping on a cold brew in a seedy bar watching the Cubs and Cardinals slug it out on television seem like the foothills of heaven right here in central Illinois. I grew up that way; we all did. We were indoctrinated to believe that smoking was as much a part of American iconography as pinball games and lovers' lane.

That's what the argument about losing our freedom is all about. We watched Johnny Carson and Tom Snyder drag and puff on live television, along with the romanticizing of smoke-filled lungs in big screen movies, gawking in awe as Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney sent smoke rings into the faces of their dates de jour across nightclub tables.

Tobacco was marketed glamorously to the public as a privilege in the mid-20th century. Children could buy candy cigarettes at the grocery store and walk around town like Clark Gable. From the 1930s-'50s, radio broadcasts like "The Jack Benny Program" were sponsored by Lucky Strikes and "The Abbott and Costello Show" by Camel cigarettes.

In the 1960s, we watched Virginia Slim walk gingerly in high heels on TV, the square-jawed Marlboro Man riding a horse, the innovative way that Doral put a hole in the center of its filter for a "cool sensation," and menthol cigarettes claiming to be the best thing to refresh our nostrils since Vicks VapoRub.

We inherited the enculturation of smoking partly from our parents, too. I remember as a kid when my folks bought their first air-conditioned car, and we sat in the back seat with the windows rolled up while Dad puffed on his pipe driving down the road. The aroma was seductive, even as tears cascaded down our cheeks from our irritated eyes. We said nothing for fear of retribution. After a while, we took it for granted that climbing out of the car coughing our heads off was part of the glee of getting away from home. It seemed as natural as somebody with a new baby passing out cigars.

With most of us, however, reality finally sunk in. Our neighbors began to drop dead from heart attacks and linger in sick beds with lung cancer. We started to notice our parents' smiles turning brown, and their teeth falling out from bacteria growth and gum disease, not to mention their gamey smokestack breath. Ashtrays in our homes, vehicles, restaurants, barbershops and train stations began to upchuck from cigar and cigarette butts. And customers would bring their cars to my father's auto body repair shop with interiors caked so thick with tar that we could barely find the upholstery screws.

There are additional tolls to consider. We are unable to count the number of people who've died from breathing firsthand and secondhand smoke, and how many have been lost to accidental fires from people smoking in bed or throwing ashes in the trash can under the sink. Who knows how many motel fires have been caused by careless smokers, and explosions in factories and on farms? A small-town plumber once told me that a quarter of his business was unplugging his customers' drains from people flushing filters down their toilets.

And, in my professional landlord career, tenants would walk into my office carrying a \$35 carton of cigarettes saying that they didn't have enough money to pay this month's rent, the same tenants who'd burned so many holes in their carpet that there was no way their security deposit would cover the cost to replace it when they moved out.

Cigarettes are the currency of choice in prisons; they have been the subject of rampant blue- and white-collar crimes, smash-and-grab storefront invasions, fights between siblings and rivals, and one of the most physiological and psychological addictions ever known to man.

The State Journal-Register was right with its anti-smoking campaign, and history will prove that the recently mandated statewide ban is a sensible way to address the issue.

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