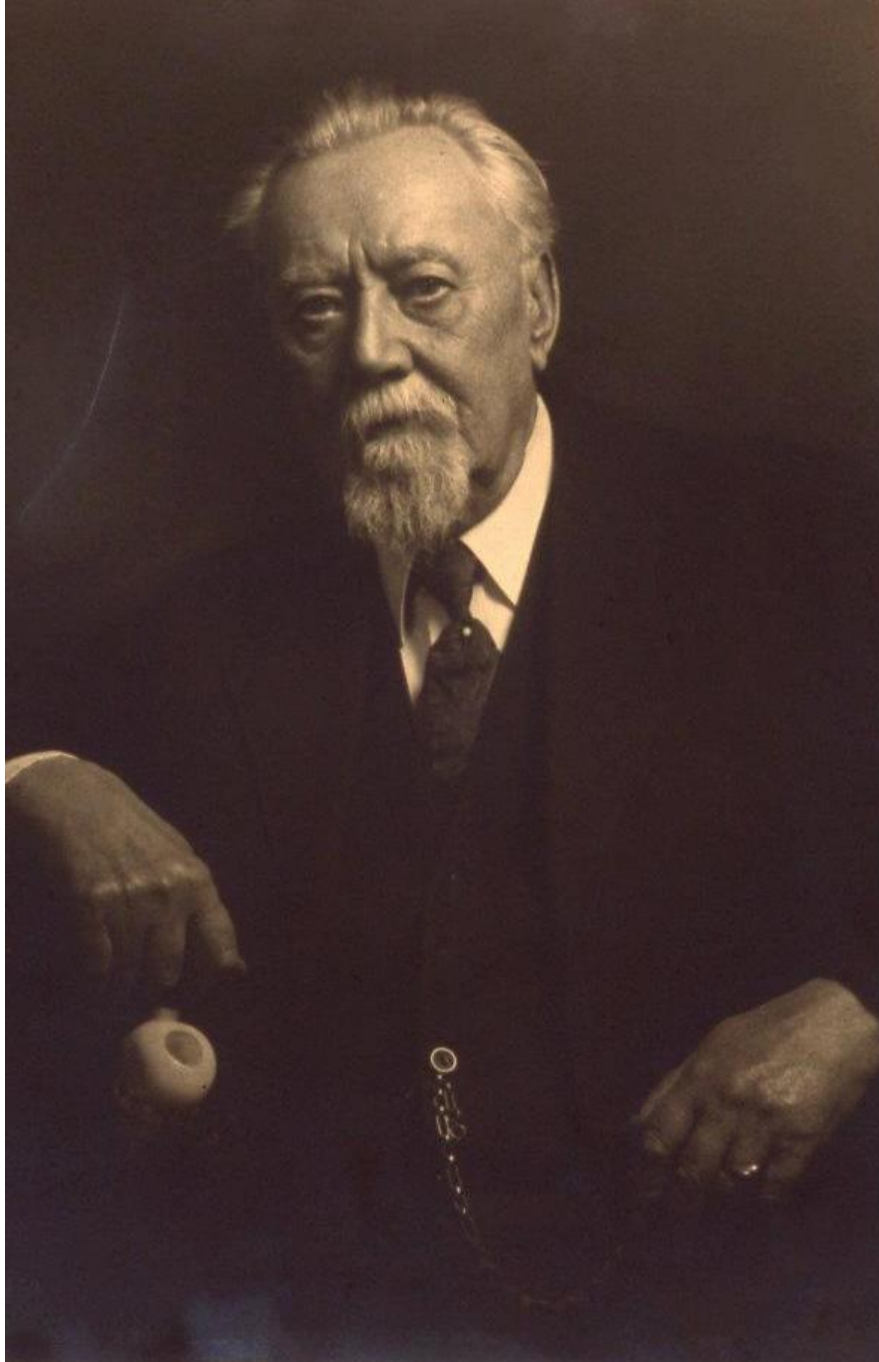


Remembering: An Oral History of Gustav Fischer Sr.
and Gustav Fischer Jr. of Boston, Massachusetts



By Ben Rapaport
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If you search the Internet looking for Gustav Fischer, you'll find information about many Gustav Fischers: a publishing house in Stuttgart, Germany, an explorer, an artist, an Olympic equestrian, and several other notables, but none of these has ever been the catchword for dedicated antique meerschaum pipe collectors or had the cachet of the Fischers detailed in this article. An unrelated family of skilled pipe carvers with the name Fischer had a shop in Orchard Park, New York, but much less is known about them than this father-and-son team from Massachusetts' Bean Town. (For a more expansive treatise comparing the two families of Fischer carvers, see *Pipes & Tobaccos* magazine, Fall 2012.)

In 1977, Messrs. Robert A. Howard, Anchorage Productions, L.L. C., and L. Richard Littlefield, a pipe collector, interviewed Anna Fischer, the wife of Gustav Fischer Jr. at her home in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, and transcribed that interview, known as an oral history. I am lucky enough to have obtained a copy of this transcript, and I want to share parts of it while I have the opportunity and a venue. Presented for the first time in an historical context, Anna shared many of her memories and insights with these two rapporteurs about the way it used to be in those days when the Fischers were in business.

In *Collecting Antique Meerschaums* (1999), I discussed the career of Gustav Fischer Sr. (1846-1937), who came to the United States in 1882. His son was born in 1887 and died in 1975. For more than twenty years they had their own shop on Tremont Street, and then were located at various addresses on Massachusetts Avenue in the city. For a period, Sr. worked at D.P. Ehrlichs when its store was at one end of Washington Street near Faneuil Hall, now called Quincy Market. (Anecdotally, one of Anna's two daughters lives in Massachusetts, but she did not participate in the round of interviews of her mother, although I know that she has her own fond memories, as she told me, of visiting the store often to model her hand for many of her grandfather's renderings of various 'hand and _____' pipe motifs.)

The Q&A was conducted at several intervals during 1977. Unfortunately, the interview was not structured, that is, these two gentlemen had no prepared questionnaire to follow, so what I have elected to report on are those responses from Anna—as best she remembered—that shed the most light on how Sr. came up with ideas for his pipes and how he made them, and some observations about her husband, Jr., with whom, of course, she had daily contact. Hopefully, what I have captured herein is illuminating and informative about Gustav Sr., a craftsman whose pipes and cheroot holders are much in demand today for their finesse, balance, and artistic execution. I know no intimate history on record about any other famous U.S.-based pipe craftsmen. (Gus Jr. was more noted for his bench skill as a pipe repairman. He lacked the deft and agile hand of his father.)

Well, here for your reading enjoyment are first-person comments from someone who lived through her husband and father-in-law in the struggling pipe business in the early to mid-20th Century. Of the more than 120 typewritten pages, I have lifted what I believe to be the more salient elements of this oral history. In instances, the questions are poorly phrased, and some answers are non-coherent. Therefore, I took the liberty to modify some of the questions (both Howard and Littlefield had their own) and Anna's responses in order that the information flows better together, and I strived to provide verbatim text, where possible, yet eliminate extraneous words and phrases, so that the substance remains unchanged and nothing is lost. Furthermore, in some instances, I combined several of her responses when the questions seemed to me a bit redundant. The reader will also encounter the occasional gratuitous, but relevant, sidebar comment worthy of inclusion. If there are substantive errors in her responses, I attribute them either to Anna who may have misunderstood the question, or to a poor quality tape recorder used for the interview that was the basis for the later, written transcription. I present the information in the order transcribed, and as you read, you'll notice that the questions are random—no rhyme or reason to their order—and so the dialogue is choppy and disorganized. There is also the additional bit of confusion, and that relates to the word "he." Because of the poorly structured interview, it is near-impossible to determine whether the question and its corresponding answer pertain to Sr. or to Jr.; nonetheless, it is my understanding that only Sr. worked on meerschaum, and Jr. made the amber mouthpieces, briar pipes, and

repaired pipes, so as you read, take this into account. But, in defense of both interviewers, Anna, at the time, was in a very senior-moments stage of her life.

Q: (About Sr.): Did he learn as a pipe carver?

A: As a sculptor, I guess. Then he turned into the pipe business. At one time he was going to go into the furniture business.

Q: Did he (Jr.) work for another pipe company in New York?

A: I never heard him speak of it. I know he started a little pipe shop in our flea market here in Boston. Ehrlich's didn't like the idea of him starting his business. They were going to give Gus a job at Ehrlich's. Instead of that Gus wanted to open a place of his own. That was a place down on Tremont Street.

Q: Was Gus with his father?

A: No, his father still continued to work in Ehrlich's because he got a weekly pay down there. He got a little pay.¹ They never paid him what he should have had. Then Gus continued too. He started when he was fourteen years old. He had a business.

Q: Are any of these scenes that he (Sr.) carved over and over again, or are they only carved once, or is there a combination?

A: He might have carved some over, you know. He had a model, like that...

Q: How would he come up with a model? Did he start off with a picture or something, then make the model, or how was it done?

A: I think just in his head...just in his head or mind...anything. He had an idea and he would see a picture and he would copy it.

¹ In presenting the verbatim views of Anna Fischer, it is evident that she had ill feeling toward Ehrlich's. I feel obliged to quote her response accurately, and I hope that the current owners of Ehrlich's will accept my apology for including this comment.

Mrs. Fischer shows Howard and Littlefield a reproduction of a famous painting by John Trumbull titled "The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill," and said that she had run across this picture the other day. "This is the one he had made the pipe out of." (She is referring to the famous "Battle of Bunker Hill" pipe that remains with the family.) Littlefield observes: "It seems to be that Gus told me once about his father picking up a piece of meerschaum and looking at it and deciding just by the way it looked what sort of a figure could be carved out of it."

Q: There was no pipe making history in the family before Gus' father, then, was there?

A: Not really. Not that I know of. His father came over from Austria, that's all I know and then they landed in New York and then came up here to Boston. Gus had the business down on Tremont Street and his father worked at Ehrlich's. Gus' father used to carve pipes for Gus and then he would put them in the shop and sell them, you know. So they kind of worked hand in hand, you see.

Q: Gus, then, didn't do much carving himself?

A: He could do it, but he never took the time to for it. He was more interested in repair work. He could do all kinds of repair work. He made a lot of those briar pipes.

Q: How did he (Sr.) go about making a meerschaum pipe from start to finish?

A: It (meerschaum) comes in blocks of different sizes. He used to buy a big case of it, you know, of the different sizes. Then, years ago, they used to just bore a hole in it and put a reed stem in or something and we used to sell them for twenty-five or fifty cents a block of meerschaum. You couldn't make a pipe out of it because it wasn't big enough. We used to sell them like hotcakes. Everyone wanted one. Well, they start, they have this block and then they have to see how they can get the shank out of it and how the stem will fit into it, sort of design it in their heads.

Q: They have this block and they have a series of standard shapes and they see if they can fit any of them in?

A: You can make all the amber stems. Gus made all the amber stems out of pieces of amber, then he would bend them whichever way he wanted them. You have to heat it. You put it in oil and it gets to a certain stage and he would take it out and just go easy on it, bend it easy. First he would make it straight to fit the pipe, you know. And then when he wanted a curve on it, he would heat it in the oil and then curve it so it was always the way he wanted the pipe to go.

Q: He made it straight so that he could bore it?

A: Oh yeah, when it was straight. You couldn't very well cut it when it was bent. He had the case at the side of him there. The wax was here. He'd have this in the wax, and then he would bend the thing and then that was there and he fitted it into the case.

Q: So the cases were made before the pipes were... before the stems were put on?

A: Oh, yes. If he wanted a case to fit the pipe, he'd have to have the case down first and have the stem made like that. That's quite the trade. In most cases, all blocks of wood, they are all solid wood. That's all cut by hand. There used to be case makers, you can't get a case maker today. There's nobody around who makes cases anymore. If they did make them, why they'd charge so much it would be impossible to use them on a pipe.

Q: Who were some of the people who used to make the cases? Do you remember any of the names?

A: Yeah, but they're all dead now. They were from down New York there. There was a Mr. Beck that I used to know, and he is dead now and his family is all dead now. I used to chum around with his daughters.

Q: Were there several pipe carvers and they all knew each other, or ...?

A: Oh, yeah, there used to be a lot of them around... not pipe carvers, I would say, but... like one would make the case, one would cover the cases, one would put the lining in, one would cover them with the leather on the outside, you know. That was all... sort

of a family affair, I guess. They used to live here in Jamaica Plain. A whole lot of them lived around handy so they would see one another and they would go down to the pub and have a glass of beer or something.

Q: Could you tell me how they made a meerschaum pipe? Did they start by working the shape out?

A: You have to. They study the piece. There may be a long piece that has a long shank there that they can start the bowl on that and continue with the stem, you know, and then the amber goes on at the end of that. And then it has to be bored. The hole has to be bored in the top. And then it has to be drilled so that the draft hole goes through, you know, the amber has to be on that. Then your stem has to fit into that. And then the pipe has to be cut. And then afterwards it has to be waxed. For this you put it into, you know, sort of a wax... he used to have a double boiler and the wax would be in there. He'd hold the pipe in it, and he knew just when to pick it up and put it down again. He could tell by the bubbles on it or something when it was through drawing it out.

Q: Did you ever get a chance to watch Gus' father work?

A: Yes. He used to sit in his room right behind his own house, and I used to go down and I never paid any attention to him. I was a young maid. He had a way of cutting it under in some way, I don't know the term, that made it exceptionally good.

Q: How many meerschaum pipes did they make to how many briar pipes? Were most of the pipes meerschaum or were most of them briars?

A: Well, he only worked on meerschaum. Mostly. He made some briar pipes, but when he carved pipes, it was mostly meerschaum.

Q: (Discussing meerschaum) Some of those he would have made cigar holders out of.

A: Yes. These are what I was telling you about. He would bore a hole in them and then put a stem on them and he would sell them for fifty cent or a dollar, you know. Years ago.

Q: Did he buy all of his briar bowls, or did he make some of them?

A: He bought them because they are all imported from France. He went into the importing business after a while, importing a lot of pipes and block. His pipes that he made himself out of blocks of briar.

Q: Was there a place he could just go out and buy all the stems?

A: Yeah. Out in New York. You'd buy them like that. If he wanted to make a special stem, you would take that rubber (I believe that she meant to say "bakelite") I showed you, that solid rubber.

Q: Gus did his own carving on the ducks and the snipes, didn't he?

A: His father did it... Gus did it until his father got it over to make the feathers on it.

Q: Why did they use bone screws? So that the bone would break before the meerschaum would?

A: Well, bone is tougher than the meerschaum. You couldn't make a screw out of meerschaum. It is too soft, I think, anyway.

Q: Did he make most of these tools?

A: Make them? He might have made them, yes. Because you couldn't buy them I don't think.

Q: Did Gus do much carving on his own, or did he do mostly repair work?

A: He could do it (carving), but he wasn't like his father. No. He did more of the repair work. So, well, then he was down on Tremont Street there for twenty-three years. And then I guess they were going to sell the block where they were in. So he went to Mass. Avenue, first in one place, then they went into another store. He was first at 191 and then he went up to 275.

There is more to this story. One of Anna's married daughters living in Massachusetts, her three children, and the offspring of Anna's other daughter all have retained a few of Gustav Sr.'s better meerschaum pipes as remembrances. The largest that Sr. carved, The Battle of Bunker Hill, came out of hiding after some 60 years to be the centerpiece attraction of an exhibit at the Brandywine River Museum, Maryland, from May through July 2003, and many of the kin were there for the debut. Although none of the extended family are pipe collectors, they are proud owners of some of the more exquisite meerschaum pipes and holders carved in the United States by an Austrian émigré. Although it is apparent to me that no living member of the family was interested in tracing the family lineage, were it not for two random individuals with a curious interest in interviewing Mrs. Fischer and recording that interview, even the slim quantity of information contained in this article could never have been written.

It's 'Mission Impossible' to report on the life experiences of a notable carver who's now long gone. By stating the obvious, I am of the opinion that we who admire and respect today's pipe craftsmen are, by necessity, somewhat obliged to conduct these oral histories, or their life work will also be lost to all those who come after us. However, it's relatively easy to capture the life and times of a living pipe maker with any of our new-fangled electronic gadgets. *Carpe diem* and interview him at a time and place of his convenience, but the track record, to date, is not exemplary. Here's a bit of evidence that is irrefutable, the result of having reviewed several hundred book titles on the topic. Although no one, to my knowledge, has ever taken a tally of all the 18th and 19th century European and American meerschaum pipe carvers of note—and there must have been at least several hundred—only in 1985 did a certain B. Clergeot write and have published the first biography of a little-known French meerschaum and briar pipe carver, Charles Harnisch, who lived from 1845-1895; his information source was Charles's grandson, Sylvain Harnisch. This is the *only* account of its kind, and we know almost nothing about all the others who made their mark on the pipe trade in that almost 200-year period. In 2008, Jan Andersson's *Bo Nordh, Pipemaker* was the very first attempt *in any language* to document the tradecraft of a Swedish artisan, Jan's fellow countryman. Will there be

others among us to accomplish what Clergeot and Andersson have contributed to pipe lore? It's the proverbial \$64 question begging an answer.