

A Whiff of Class

Leavitt & Peirce, tobacconist, is a haven for discerning smokers, a fragrant monument to days gone by

IN THIS nonsmoking era, the first whiff of the ambient air at Leavitt & Peirce, the ancient Harvard Square tobacconist, comes as a shock, as though one has sniffed evil itself. But gradually the smell of pipe tobacco and fine cigars works its way into that part of the brain that registers pleasure, and it makes a little home for itself there. Nothing else is quite like the sweet, mellow, inviting aroma of Leavitt & Peirce, evocative as it is of leather furniture, glowing fireplaces, kindly old gents and clinking glasses of port. It is the smell of quiet conviviality, of solace.

As a Harvard student in the Seventies, I used to stop in at the store for Balkan Sobranies, the exotic Turkish cigarettes I acquired in hopes that, with their black shaft and gold tip, they would improve my standing with a certain Radcliffe girl I wanted to impress. Now that my Sobranie days are behind me (as is the girl), I come to Leavitt & Peirce solely for the atmosphere.

Amid all the geniality, there is a bracing hint of manliness at this old smoke shop. Within its confines, there are counters filled with meerschaum pipes, glass jars stuffed with burley and black cavendish, display cases replete with Pleiades and walls stocked high with Piel Roja cigarettes.

Although the rest of the Square has turned bustling and hip, Leavitt & Peirce remains delightfully languid and unhurried, like the drifting of cigar smoke after dinner. Its salespeople display the sort of affability one usually finds only in private libraries. The store has the feel of a gentlemen's club—something attributable partly to the wealth of Harvard athletic memorabilia on its walls, partly to the store's prevailing aristocratic tone and partly to its neighbors. Harvard's elite Porcellian Club is next door, and its private garden—the so-called Mrs. Graham's Hole—is visible out a window in the back. Paul Macdonald, the shop's current proprietor, thoughtfully maintains a private locker for the Porkers and other finals clubmen in the store's spacious humidor.

In the grand old days, there were billiard tables in the back for the undergraduates to use while they sampled the latest blends. And, for a time, the L & P ran a

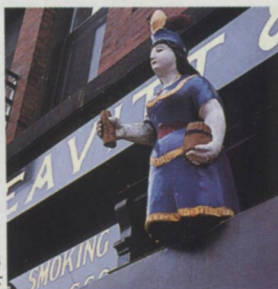
Current proprietor Paul Macdonald, below, contributes to the store's atmosphere; a classic cigar-store Indian stands watch, bottom.

sandwich counter, offering what is widely remembered as the best pea soup in Cambridge, for those seeking sustenance beyond tobacco. Now, patrons needing an excuse to idle have to make do with the five chess tables set up on a narrow balcony overlooking the store's main floor.

And while they are at it, they can smoke. Leavitt & Peirce recognizes that it has a sacred responsibility to its patrons nowadays. It services smokers, and it harbors them. The store has wangled a special permit allowing its customers the unique privilege of smoking on the premises—something now forbidden in every other retail establishment in the Square. So it is not unusual to find customers lingering for hours, perhaps enjoying a pipeful of Leavitt & Peirce's special Cake Box mixture upstairs as they play chess, or merely standing about in blissful quietude amid the fragrant tobacco on the floor below.

Even if the place didn't smell so good, Leavitt & Peirce would probably be a compass point for fogbound Harvard alums such as myself solely by virtue of its antiquity. Founded in 1883, it is the oldest continuously operating store in Harvard Square. The Hayes-Bickford, Max Keezer's haberdashery, Jimmie's Lunch, Felix's newsstand and a thousand other monuments of the good old days have all come and gone, but Leavitt & Peirce has remained, and it has remained virtually intact. The cigar-store Indian—his right hand raised in

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elements of style

(continued from page 33) greeting, his left offering a bundle of cigars—that was long a fixture out front was moved inside for safekeeping after some rowdies knocked him to the pavement a few years ago, separating his left arm from his shoulder. But the store's trademark lady in blue is still suspended over the door, leaning forward slightly like a clipper-ship figurehead. (Actually, college pranksters made off with her arms some years back, but the thieves came to their senses and returned the package of purloined limbs with the sender listed as "I.M. Sorry.")

And inside, the store sticks pretty much to the layout established by Frederick Leavitt and Wallace Peirce in 1883, with long rows of glass cases standing out from each wall and a table running down the middle of the store. Only the spittoons are gone.

Leavitt & Peirce's reputation was made by the Cake Box mixture, a combination of burley, Virginia and latakia tobaccos that received its name from the large cake box out of which it was dispensed. Graduating students carried the blend back to their hometowns, inevitably creating new demand for it in the hinterlands. Thus the store's fame spread. L & P still sells the Cake Box mixture, although the cake box itself has departed in favor of the airtight glass jars that house all the loose tobacco. Because of the predominance of the harsh latakia in its mix, the Cake Box is no longer the best-selling blend, although graduates frequently still come by to request it. One old Harvardian, now forbidden to smoke by his doctor, bought a package of it to use as an air freshener for his car. The number-one seller these days is the milder, more aromatic Black & Gold, which leavens the coal-black cavendish with some vanilla-scented Virginia.

Messrs. Leavitt and Peirce died within six months of each other, in 1919. The store passed first into the hands of a pair of former Harvard athletes and then to the Ehrlichs, proprietors of an even older, although possibly less distinguished, Boston

A tier of chess tables, below, overlooks the store's main floor; the spacious humidor, bottom, offers myriad cigars.



tobacco shop, and finally to Paul Macdonald's father, who brought in his son to run it eighteen years ago. A product of Boston College and Suffolk University and a devotee of La Gloria Cubanas, Paul, 35, not unreasonably feels he deserves an honorary degree from Harvard for his services to the university. "In humanities," he suggests.

Leavitt & Peirce has developed an association with Harvard athletics dating back to the early days, when the store took on the task of selling football tickets. For big games, students used to sleep out on the sidewalk overnight to keep their place in line. The store no longer sells tickets but still posts the notices for Harvard's crew and rugby teams in its front window. As a result, the store has an astonishing accumulation of Harvard sports memorabilia. By the chess tables on the balcony is a rare picture of John the Orangeman, a heavily bewhiskered old gent who, at Harvard athletic events a century ago, used to dispense oranges from a cart pulled by a donkey named Annie Radcliffe. About him stand photographs of Harvard football teams of the same era. Oars from great Crimson rowing victories hang crisscrossed on the downstairs walls, as do the Harvardian Cleary brothers' hockey sticks from the gold-medal Olympic hockey team of 1960. Atop one cabinet stands a row of historic varsity footballs, including the one used in the famous 29-29 "victory" over Yale in the Game of 1968.

The most important ball of all is positioned in the front window. That is the one used in Harvard's only Rose Bowl appearance, a hard-fought 7-6 win over Oregon on January 1, 1920, in a game billed as a battle of East and West. I was surprised I'd never noticed it before. My father had played in that game as Harvard's strong tackle. All through my childhood he regaled me with stories about it—how the train had stopped during the four-day ride west so the Harvard men could disembark for calisthenics; how the Oregon coach had approached the Yale coach for secrets about the Harvard attack—only to be rebuffed out of loyalty to the Ivy League; how Charlie Chaplin had sat behind the Harvard bench; and how my father, unused to California weather, had lost more than twenty pounds in the game.

I was proud to see the ball there, puffy and antique, among the fumes of so many other Harvard memories. Long may Leavitt & Peirce reign. —JOHN SEDGWICK