

<http://greatnorthernpipeclub.org/index.php/club-history/>

# Great Northern Pipe Club History

**The purpose of The Great Northern Pipe Club is to stimulate and advance the general welfare of pipe smoking, pipe collecting, and tobacco. It develops a fraternal spirit among pipe smokers and provides a medium for the exchange of information among members.**

## The Early Days

The Great Northern Pipe Club was founded on a rich history of pipe enthusiasts in the upper Midwest. As early as the late 1960s, an active and diverse group of pipe collectors was meeting regularly in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota. The “Twin Cities” was a lively “hotbed” for pipe collectors. The local newspapers covered the club and many articles attracted an increasing number of members.

Unfortunately, as pipe smoking interest declined through the '70s, so also did the interest in the pipe club. A few determined members continued meeting irregularly (most often on Saturday mornings) at J. R. Fielding's on Larpenteur Avenue in St. Paul. Through the efforts of Ryan Brase, a pipe club eventually achieved recognized status as an official organization at the University of Minnesota. But, the membership roster included only 16 names, and its future was uncertain.

## 1990's saw an increase in Cigar and Pipe Smoking

As the University Pipe Club declined in 1998 and 1999, a new spark was ignited. A couple of instigators got together and forged ahead with an organization that would eventually become the Great Northern Pipe Club. With the help of several local pipe shops and tobacconists, the time seemed right for the existence of a new pipe club.

Jon Werner was one of the founders of the “Kapnismologists of Southern California” which eventually became the “Southwest Pipe and Cigar League” (more commonly known as the “Los Angeles Pipe Club”). Jon left the Los Angeles area (claiming it was not due to restrictive anti-smoking laws in California) and returned to his home in Minnesota where he obtained part-time employment at “Golden Leaf Limited” (one of the busiest tobacco shops in the Twin Cities). It was while he was working at Golden Leaf that Jon met another avid pipe collector, Tony Soderman. By 1998, Tony had been collecting long shank Canadians for over 30 years and was eager to create an outlet for buying, selling, and swapping pipes.

It all started as a lonely adventure as Jon set out to find a meeting location visiting half the bars, restaurants, and hotels in the Twin Cities. Tony tried to locate potential members and talked to pipe shop owners and other collectors in the area. Thanks to his alter ego, “Mr. Can.” on eBay, Tony had the e-mail addresses for several other collectors in Minnesota. One of them, Chuck Doerr, had a membership roster from the old University Pipe Club. And, one of the listed members was Greg Stromath who was also a regular participant at the Saturday morning gatherings at J. R. Fielding. Greg provided the name of Wally Loucks who had some contacts at area establishments, which might permit a gathering, and soon the pipes were puffing!

## Great Support for a New Club

Fortunately, the Twin Cities has a number of good tobacco shops and owners who were supportive of the fledgling pipe club. World-famous pipe maker, Rich Lewis (owner and proprietor of Whitehorse Pipe Company now known as Lewis Pipe and Tobacco in downtown Minneapolis) gave immediate

support. Rich was the authorized repairman for Ashton, Upshall, Radice, and most recently, Ser Jacopo. He contributed his artistic efforts to designing graphics for logos, letterhead, and so forth.

Equally supportive was pipe maker Frank Storm (owner and proprietor of The Smoke Shop – That Tobacco Place in Lilydale, Minnesota, which is a suburb of St. Paul). Frank was the authorized repairman for Savinelli and Peterson. He contributed names, advice, and encouragement.

By August of 1999, an organizational meeting was held at the Embassy Suites Hotel in St. Paul, Minnesota. Nearly 40 founding members attended that meeting which included any number of key, critical contributors. Pipe smokers traveled from great distances to attend (including Duluth, Minnesota, and Eau Claire and Stevens Point, Wisconsin). Enthusiasm was immediate and obvious thus providing the foundation for future growth. Richard Cummins (Lane Limited) and Bob Pierce (Ashton Pipes) are both local residents of the Twin Cities, and at the first meeting encouraged our growth towards a goal of supporting local pipe shops and tobacconists. Largely because that direction was accepted and followed, the new pipe club garnered the support of the pipe shops, which were instrumental in furthering the development, growth, and expansion of the club.

We didn't last long at the Embassy Suites Hotel, which invited us to leave after our second meeting. Larry Seavert (owner and proprietor of Golden Leaf Limited) hosted the third monthly meeting at a conference room in his offices away from his shop. Eventually, a name was selected from a long list of interesting possibilities. The Great Northern Pipe Club was officially borne.

### **Well-Established as “The Great Northern Pipe Club”**

As months passed, meetings continued on a regular basis (usually on Sunday afternoons once a month). The local newspapers covered a couple of our meetings as a “newsworthy event” (See [Twin Cities Journal](#) in our features area) and the pipe shops posted notices of our meetings in conspicuous locations. Over time, a logo was selected, dues were established, a trade name registered, a bank account opened and a treasurer elected (Tony Espeseth from Eau Claire, Wisconsin). John Enger volunteered his time and expertise to the creation of a web site. At last, our club was prospering, growing and developing an unstructured opportunity for pipe smoking enthusiasts to swap knowledge, pipes, tobacco's and comradeship!

### **By-Laws Established and First Official Election**

In July 2002, the club ratified the official club By-Laws and held its first official election for President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer. The first board of directors consists of Tony Soderman, President, Tom Rowe, VP, Greg Stromath, Secretary and Tony Espeseth, Treasurer. A new logo was established to be included on membership cards and club pins. The downstairs of a local bowling alley served as our base of operations at that time.

### **Post-Smoking Ban**

In 2007, a statewide smoking ban went into effect for Minnesota. This drove all pipe smoking activities out of our bowling alley location. But it didn't stop the club from continuing. Club meetings rotate to various Twin City tobacco shops. These tobacco shops include the Perfect Ash in Inver Grove Heights, Tobacco Grove in Maple Grove, and more recently, at Sodies Cigar and Pipe in Oak Park Heights. See our web page at <http://greatnorthernpipeclub.org/> to find out where we are meeting. Over the last five years our pipe swaps have been held at The American Legion, Post 39, located at 2678 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue East in North St. Paul.

### **New Technologies/New Outreach**

In 2013, The Great Northern Pipe Club converted their base website to a WordPress platform. This will give our site a lot more flexibility, and will allow for multiple “content owners”. In addition to this upgrade, we also launched the official club Facebook page. We expect that by using these types of

tools, our membership will continue to see a healthy growth... especially of younger pipe smokers/collectors.

### **Club's future**

Happily, we have a strong foundation of very active members and the future for The Great Northern Pipe Club is healthy and secure. We invite members of any other pipe club to contact us when their travels include the Twin Cities, Minnesota, or west central Wisconsin. We are always willing to guide visitors to the local pipe shops, or even get together at a pipe-friendly establishment on relatively short notice. Service to pipe smokers everywhere is one of our objectives and we welcome the opportunity to share our hobby with other enthusiasts!