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SNUFF, TRADITION THAT STILL PERSISTS

By ERICA BROWN, Special to the New York Times

LONDON, March 22— Taking snuff was the epitome of elegance 150 years ago, complete with its own social ritual. In modern times it has been associated with eccentric minorities such as dons and maiden aunts. But now it looks as if it may enjoy new popularity - for health reasons.

In recent tests at the addiction research unit of Maudsley Hospital here, half a dozen volunteers were asked to use nasal drops made of liquid snuff instead of smoking cigarettes.

"Since it's made from tobacco, snuff contains nicotine just like a cigarette," explained Dr. M.A.H. Russell, who was in charge of the project. "Although nicotine is addictive, it is not that which makes smoking so dangerous. It is the inhalation of tar, which causes lung cancer and bronchitis, and of such gases as carbon monoxide and oxides of nitrogen, which are associated with heart disease. None of these is present in snuff."

"We found that taking a small amount of the liquid snuff in each nostril gave the same nicotine buzz as one cigarette in about the same time," Dr. Russell continued. "We hope that, eventually, smokers will be able to use the drops as a substitute and then gradually wean themselves off the nicotine habit."

But why, ask the small band of snuff makers left in Britain, make life complicated? Why not just sniff snuff in its original powdered form?

"People say it's messy," commented Vivian Rose, who runs G. Smith & Sons, the last snuff specialists in London. "They associate it with dandruff and dirty fingernails. But our customers are among the most fastidious of people: lawyers, doctors, military and naval officers and a fair smattering of women. After all, with snuff you don't pollute the air, nor do you leave cigarette ash and butts in your wake."

Snuff is, basically, cured tobacco leaves ground to a fine powder. The grinding process releases the natural ammonia in the leaves, which gives snuff its pungency. Almost all snuffs are also blended with floral essences, spices or menthol.

Mr. Rose buys his more than 50 blends (traditionally called sorts) of snuff from three mills in Kendal, a small market town in the Lake District. The mills are easy to locate: You just follow your

nose.

"We use nine different tobaccos to get the various colors and grind to three different textures, coarse, medium and fine," said Geoffrey Gawith, managing director of Gawith Hoggarth, one of the three mills. "Then we blend in the pure essences, very much as a perfumer blends scents."

Taking snuff, along with pipe smoking, was one of the original ways of tobacco use introduced from the New World in the early 1600's. It hit its heyday during the Regency in the early 19th century, when Beau Brummell made it fashionable and the Prince Regent was a notable connoisseur, blending his own. Both men and women took snuff, and boxes of gold and silver, engraved, painted and enameled, were a minor art.

Then, as now, a few grains of snuff should be taken between forefinger and thumb, inhaled gently into the lower part of the nostril and then gradually ingested through normal breathing. It should never be loudly sniffed to provoke a sneeze.

The popularity of snuff declined during the last half of the 19th century. No one seems to know why exactly, but both Mr. Rose and Mr. Gawith speculate that the widespread introduction of white handkerchiefs around 1860 had a lot to do with it. "Snuff leaves a nicotine stain which was not noticeable on colored handkerchiefs," Mr. Rose said. "On white ones, however, it looked unattractive."

While snuff taking is not on the rise these days, it is not declining either. According to the Society of Snuff Grinders, Blenders and Purveyors, 750,000 pounds are produced in Britain each year.

"Most snuff takers use less than one ounce a week, so that's a lot of people," Mr. Rose said. "We are getting more converts all the time, especially as cigarettes get so expensive. Unlike other forms of tobacco, snuff is not taxed at all. A packet of cigarettes now costs about \$1.50 while Cafe Roy ale, our most expensive because it contains pure coffee essence, is less than \$3 an ounce."

Blends of snuff range from the earthy to the elegant and in many cases, such as Garden Mint, Aniseed and Carnation, their names describe their flavors. Others do not. Kendal Brown is the most "natural" snuff: it has no flavors added, only salts such as potash to hold its pungency. It is, explained Nigel Ash, a young aficionado who learned from his father, "for men, not boys, and if used injudiciously brings tears to the eyes."