

# *Charatan Pipes: The Mysterious and Marvelous Marriage of a Pipe-Making Family and a Renowned Tobaccoman*

by Tad Gage

Among collectible pipes, few brands offer variety and interest equal to the venerable Charatan. For a very modest sum of money, it's possible to acquire a collection of attractive, great-smoking pipes. At the other end of the spectrum, you can spend a fortune and create a collection of some of the finest high-grade pipes ever made. And to-



day, you can start a collection of fine new Charatan pipes, resurrected by Dunhill.

Part of the charm, confusion, and delight of Charatan pipes comes from the fact that this brand has had three distinct identities in its history. Not to apply too much Barling logic to the situation (pre-transition, transition, and post-transition), there is a distinct pre-Lane Charatan period (before 1950), a Lane era (1950-1984 or so), and a post-Lane era (1984-present).

Do you want classic English shapes, generally small and almost always well-made? Charatan made such pipes through the early 1950s. If you seek larger, but still relatively standard-shaped English classics, you can easily find Charatans to your liking made from the 1950s through today.

Or, do you prefer some of the most striking and daring freehand designs ever created? These are also available as collectible Charatan pipes made from the 1950s through the 1980s, and again today. Despite the company's tradition of making small, attractive standard-shaped English pipes before 1950, the Charatan name is synonymous with handcrafted pipe shapes that are un-

*Herman Lane made Charatan pipes a globally recognized name.*

mistakably Charatan to the trained eye, that might be labeled "Danish" (certainly not "English") by many.

## ***How It All Began***

Austrian immigrant Frederick Charatan began his business in 1863 with a small factory on Mansell Street in London, later moving to Prescott Street, and finally Grosvenor Street. Charatan is one of the oldest names in pipemaking and one of the first English firms to create briar pipes (along with Britain's Best Briar, Comoy and Barling).

Almost from the outset, Frederick Charatan had a particular fondness for seeking out and producing straight-grain pipes, making him one of the first pipemakers to identify and exalt this rarest of all grains. During the early 1900s, as companies such as Comoy, Dunhill and later Sasiemi were starting to turn out large numbers of briar pipes, Charatan remained a small family-run business, making really fine briars in small numbers. The brand was virtually unknown outside England.

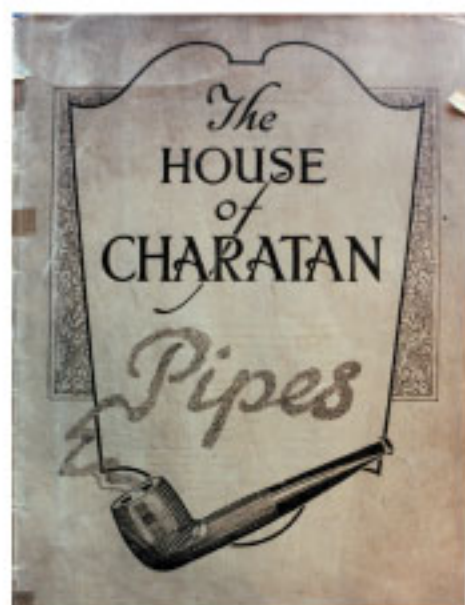
Charatans created before World War II are extremely rare, because production was limited—as mentioned, later they were a bit lax about filling orders for their pipes. Like many old pipes, most pre-World War II



Charatan's Summa Cum Laude:  
The world's most valuable pipe. It's not for sale.

While we regret that this famous pipe is not for sale, Charatan's Summa Cum Laude is available in a limited quantity. This pipe is a unique and valuable pipe, and is not for sale. It is a pipe of the highest quality and is not for sale. It is a pipe of the highest quality and is not for sale. It is a pipe of the highest quality and is not for sale.

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The most famous Charatan ever carved? A Dublin Summa Cum Laude freeband carved by Reuben Charatan for Herman Lane (above left). The Summa was the biggest Charatan grade ever marketed. Although many other fine pipes were being made at the time, no other brand was backed by such extensive marketing. This ad ran in national magazines. Before Lane, Charatan was a small English pipemaking firm selling primarily standard English shapes. Above center is an ad for the short-lived tubed and filtered Underboar pipe. It appeared at the same time other English makers were marketing filter pipes, such as Dunhill's Innertube, Barling's Trotube, and Comoy's Grand Slam. At right is an early example of Charatan marketing, pre-Lane.

Charatans were smoked to death or broken. Sometime in the 1920s, the Supreme emerged as Charatan's top grade. It featured the finest straight-grain available, and was often sold in a fitted leather case. The stamping, which usually was centered on the shank, was simple: "Charatan's Make, London, England, Supreme (shape number)."

The DeLuxe and Underboar (it was spelled this way, not "bore") stampings were also used, and were discontinued after World War II. DeLuxe signified a smooth, well-grained pipe. Like so many filter pipe experiments of the day, the metal tube filter Underboar wasn't much of a success.

The Underboar was a system pipe designed to keep moisture from backing up into the smoker's mouth. Most pipes manufactured by Charatan in these early days were made from Algerian briar (at least, so I've discovered from early literature). Algerian briar was a commonly used wood back then, despite its soft and spongy qualities. Only careful and long curing helped this wood achieve high quality, but old-time makers seemed to have plenty of time to cure this stuff.

Charatan pipes made before 1955 have recently been commanding large

sums in the collecting world, although a decade ago, their prices were on-par with other collectible pipes of similar age. Rarity has certainly driven the prices, and the pipes did incorporate fine old briar in well-made standard English shapes. While some collectors say these are among the best smoking pipes ever made, others consider them good, but cannot understand the prices they fetch.

During World War II and the bombing of London, production naturally slowed to a crawl, as it did for most English pipemakers. Unfortunately for pipe company history buffs, a German bombing raid damaged the factory and destroyed all the company's pre-war records. After the war, Charatan's rebuilt factory once again began creating pipes, and the company contacted jobbers and wholesalers with an eye to building sales in the fast-growing U.S. pipe market. Herman Lane, who was already building a large and thriving pipe and tobacco shop near Grand Central Station, was one of the wholesalers contacted.

#### Lane Takes Charge

Despite being a well-made English pipe for many decades, the company's worldwide eminence wasn't established

until the 1950s, when Herman Lane, a tobacco wholesaler who immigrated to the United States with nothing but his beloved wife and the shirt on his back, assumed U.S. distribution of the Charatan pipe.

Lane and his wife fled Germany in 1937, leaving behind one of the largest family-owned tobacco and cigarette concerns in Europe. He had already taken over leadership of the family business, but at 34 years of age or so (he was always reticent to reveal his birth date, but he passed away in the 1990s in his 90s), he had the wisdom and courage to leave before Nazi re-cremations took their toll on both Jews and business owners alike. The family company was eventually dissolved and absorbed by the Nazis, and Lane most likely saved his and his wife's lives by fleeing to America just before serious Nazi persecution of German Jews began.

A poor immigrant traveling to America, dreaming of being a self-made man, is one thing, to be sure. But imagine coming to a new country with the knowledge that you were once a wealthy man with an assured family fortune, but now, you have nothing! Fortunately for him and for Charatan collectors, Lane had tremendous street





Although top Charatan grades such as Supremes or Achievements get a lot of attention, Charatan aficionado Paul Bender's collection of Charatans in "lower" grades is also attractive and interesting (top photo). Frequently, unusual shapes and great grains were to be found among grades such as Special, Distinction and Executive. At top left, a special with a good dose of straight grain. Middle left, a Distinction stamped "Extra Large" bowl with lots of bird's-eye and flame grain. At bottom left, an Executive featuring Charatan's Dublin shape, albeit modified in a freeband style. Top, middle row, a Special standard-shape full-bent apple, shape #311, with a Double Comfort stem. Middle row, center, a ring-grain freeband relief from the new Dunhill-owned Charatan line. Dunhill has resurrected the quality and revived the nomenclature of classic Charatans. Middle row, third down, a graceful Belvedere chimney. An older, and smaller, pipe (before Lane started stepping up the average size of its pipes). Bottom center, a "bumble" Perfection shape #490 from the 1960s. At top right, an Executive canted Dublin shape from the 1970s. Second from top, right, another Executive Dublin stamped "Extra Large." Third from top, right, an elegant Distinction – almost a calabash shape. At bottom right, a modified bent Distinction that borrowed heavily from modernistic Danish carving themes. As opposed to superhigh-grade Charatans that carry extremely high price tags, such Charatans are unusual, interesting, beautiful, and can be had at affordable prices. Typical nomenclature seen on Lane-era Charatans (bottom photo).

smarts, the benefit of a fine education, and tremendous worldwide connections in the tobacco business.

A resident of Dresden, Germany, he was fluent in several languages, a superb student and, by 1937, already an accomplished businessman. His father and grandfather (the company founder in 1890) were tough taskmasters. They were hard-driving Teutonic shape-up-or-ship-out guys. Lane carried this motto to his business, as anyone who worked for Lane Ltd. could attest. So, this was not a man who would give up easily.

Having been appointed executive vice president in charge of operations

for his family's business at the relatively tender age of 24, he developed many business connections with tobacco growers throughout the world, and played a major role in building the company within a very short time. This would serve him admirably in his new, unplanned career move.

After leaving Germany and arriving in America in 1937, Lane scraped together enough money to establish a smoke shop in 1938 at 122 East 42nd Street in New York City. Although America was soon to enter World War II, Lane picked the right spot—where ample money and the love of pipes and tobaccos could overcome both the

Great Depression and the onslaught of the war.

He worked tirelessly, stocking shelves, making connections with sellers, and doing whatever it took to build a business, including selling high-quality tobaccos and pipes. Within a few years, he had established a tobacco and cigarette empire, with 150 employees. During this same period, over in England, Charatan grew considerably more slowly, as it had for the past 80 years.

Charatan would be a historical asterisk in pipe annals if it wasn't for Herman Lane. The same could be said for the Ben Wade brand, which he acquired and promoted. ▶





*The Dublin shape, a real specialty of Charatan, was a recurring theme in both standard-shaped pipes and the company's elegant carved freehand pipes such as this rare Crown Achievement.*

A little-known fact is that he also adopted the Luciano brand (later known as Brebbia), which was his effort to popularize Italian pipes and craftsmanship. Sure, Savinelli and Castello were making pipes back in the '60s, but Lane saw the marketing promise of the lovely handcrafted Italian pipe while it was still a relative secret to the American market. And he wanted to bring Italian pipes to the forefront, even while the English-made Charatans were in their prime. Herman Lane was always thinking ahead, even as he saw the tide turn from English to Italian pipes in the 1970s.

His gift of Captain Black to ordinary pipe smokers (yes, he created this blend) and his popularization of rich English blends such as Crown Achievement are legendary. He hated Captain Black, by the way, but he knew that

millions of pipe smokers would love it, and he knew how to market it. And Captain Black isn't a bad tobacco, as aromatics go. It's just that Herman Lane hated flavored tobaccos. But Captain Black did and still does contain good tobaccos as a base. He sold a lot of cigarettes in his day, and he hated them, too.

His love was fine briars and the finest Oriental tobaccos. He loved haggling with Middle Eastern tobacco merchants—in their own language, mind you, for he spoke many languages. The man was brilliant. As head of Lane Ltd., he gave many now-legendary members of the pipe and tobacco community their start, which they sometimes acknowledge. Herman Lane was a marketing maven, first and foremost. In Herman Lane's mind, if it made people feel good, and it had

something to do with Lady Nicotiana, and it made money, then it was worth doing.

According to Lane, who brought business and marketing discipline to the Charatan company, the generations of Charatans who ran the family business for nearly 100 years were artisans, not business or marketing experts. Charatan was just one of the many pipe brands that Lane imported to his pipe shop in New York, but for one reason or another, its potential caught his attention. Following the war, the importation of Dunhill, Comoy, Sasiemi and Barling pipes into the U.S. moved into full swing. With the popularity of pipe smoking and a booming post-war economy, Lane saw the opportunity to introduce the Charatan brand. In the late 1940s, he turned an increasing amount of attention to this little-known maker.



*In the 1960s, Charatan carvers were pushing the envelope on unique hand-carved pieces. One of Charatan's hallmarks was the intricately carved knurled shank, as exemplified by this lovely Charatan Selected FH (freehand).*

In 1955, he struck a deal to become the sole U.S. distributor of the Charatan pipe.

"I remember being shocked when I started going through the company records and discovered stacks of orders for pipes that had never been completed," Lane once said. "Unfilled order forms were stacked up in the shop's display window. What a mess! And their pricing on pipes did not necessarily relate to the quality or rarity of the briar, but seemed rather indiscriminate. The quality of what these pipemakers produced was absolutely first-class, but I may say that running a profitable business was not the top priority for the family. So, we made a good team."

When he became exclusive distributor, Lane and Charatan agreed to have the distinctive script "L" stamped on

every pipe sent to the United States. European market pipes did not carry the Lane mark.

Shortly after the "L" was added to pipes being shipped to the United States, Charatan added the "Made by Hand" stamp on the side of the shank opposite the standard Charatan name, shape and grade nomenclature. This was one of many marketing concepts introduced by Lane, one that he felt would enhance the aura of exclusivity. Indeed, the better grades of Charatan were made by hand, from the tip of the vulcanite button to the end of the hand-turned bowl. But by no means were all Charatans handmade!

Lower grades, such as the sand-blasted Relief and others, were good "everyman" pipes by any standard. The "Made by Hand" stamp appeared mostly on the Charatan Selecteds and

Executives, and was occasionally used on Supremes and very occasionally on large or unusual shapes in lower grades—both smooth and freehand relief. The stamping was haphazard, in retrospect. This makes perfect sense, because it was all about selling pipes and creating a niche for Charatan.

The variety of grades and stampings was rapidly expanding at this point. At collector shows, Charatan fanciers still wonder how they can find a Distinction-graded pipe, noble but carrying a low grade, with grain that far outshines the grain they see on a higher-grade Selected or even Supreme. So if you ever find a Charatan low-grade for sale, with the owner's caveat "The grain is far better than grade stamp indicates," don't discount it!

Lower-grade pipes gave new smokers, or those with limited budgets, the



chance to buy a real, branded Charatan, not a second. They got a Charatan, but they got a production pipe no better than the Comoy London Pride or average Sasieni being turned out at the time. But virtually every Charatan, at least in Herman Lane's reign, had some kind of name. Even if you bought a clunky sandblast Relief, you felt like somebody. There was a connection with the top-grade Charatan pipe, which was being promoted and advertised heavily. You were buying a little piece of heaven, albeit a modest piece. And if you saved your pennies, you might someday be able to step up to a Charatan Supreme—or even an Achievement, or a Crown Achievement.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Charatan continued to expand the variety of lower-grade pipes offered, adding pipes such as the After Hours, with an elegant whitish shank extension. It was not unusual for a great pipe to "blow out" at the shank-end as it was being turned, yielding an unacceptable sand pit or an even more horrid flaw. So, lopping off the shank and adding an extension to compensate for a short shank resulting from a flawed piece of briar that couldn't yield a reasonable length shank allowed some nicely grained pipes to be used instead of discarded. Again, this reflects the business acumen of Lane, who couldn't imagine a good piece of briar going to waste, despite a flaw in the shank! Those short-shanked After Hours pipes are still pretty darned good-looking, even if you know why the shanks are short. After 30 years, the white shank extension turns a bit yellowish, looking a little like ivory and a bit like cheap Japanese faux ivory-plastic.

Whatever it took to turn a pipe smoker into a Charatan collector was OK with Lane, as long as quality wasn't compromised. Even with the After Hours, it's impossible to deny that the final result was an elegant-looking pipe, with a great straight-grain bowl. Once you hooked a man and he became a dedicated Charatan smoker, it became

hard for him not to eyeball the higher and more expensive grades.

Charatans under Lane's guidance were all consistently well-made, well-cured, good-smoking. As with all pipes, some smokers swear by them, while others can take them or leave them. But the number of Charatan devotees, all these years later, speak to the enduring quality of the wood and the craftsmanship.

There is nothing to indicate that the "Made by Hand" stamp appeared before 1950. A similar debate exists over the famed Charatan "Double Comfort" (DC) vulcanite bit, a relatively flat bit featuring a distinctive and sharp ridge (see photos).

Charatan records indicate the DC bit was introduced in the 1950s, but a few longtime Charatan smokers say they remember Charatan pipes fitted with DC bits appearing before and shortly after World War II. As with the Barling dental bit (sometimes called a "saddle" bit), perhaps competition for the denture wearers of the world led to

creating bits that were flat and extremely comfortable, regardless of your dental condition.

Whenever the DC bit appeared, it was a big hit, and it's still a big hit with collectors, who praise its comfort, whether or not they have dentures. Remarkably, this interesting dental bit has never been adopted by any other pipemaker.

During the 1950s, extra-large "Giant" briars were available by special order (the No. 42 billiard, No. 43 Dublin and No. 44 billiard). While they were supposedly available in Selected or Supreme grades, there are also a few freehand Relief Giants. This was one of the first instances of a pipe company catering to the growing desire for larger-bowled pipes expressed primarily by U.S. smokers.

### *Shapes, Sizes Explode*

Until 1957, the company had four primary smooth-pipe classifications that featured varying degrees of straight grain: Supreme, Selected, Ex-



*From Herman Lane's personal collection—a gold-banded, cased Royal Achievement with amber and vulcanite stems.*

ecutive and Belvedere. But with direction from Lane, Charatan also became a leader in innovative shapes and designations. Somehow, this move to adopt the emerging Danish concept of freehand pipes was to be the defining moment for Charatan. Dunhill eventually proffered its Collector freehand pipe. GBD came out with its Unique pipe. Comoy jumped on the freehand bandwagon with an occasional Extraordinaire. But back in the early 1960s, no English company grabbed the artisan-made pipe with the gusto that Charatan showed.

Charatan was the first English company to produce the freehand pipe. The Ben Wade brand, also distributed and eventually owned by Lane Ltd., was exclusively a line of craggy freehand pipes. The Danes, led by Sixten Ivarsson and others, were taking pipemaking to an entirely new dimension by carving free-form expressions on standard pipe shapes, and beyond. They were an expression of a pipemaker's artistry, not constrained by

having to conform to a classic standard shape. They followed the grain of the ebauchon, not a command to crank out so many billiards or so many bulldogs.

These English-made Charatan freehands, as well as the company's standard-shape high-grades, were handmade by three women and two men in the Charatan factory (as far as I know, although there were probably more). They were all veteran employees. Of these skilled artisans, Dan Tennison is perhaps the best-known, although Barry Jones (James Upshall pipes) is equally revered, and started his own line of pipes.

These shapes were designated by an "FH" stamp to the lower right of the maker's stamps. Between 1957 and 1967, three different sizes of "FH" stamps were used, each larger than the previous one. The "FH" stamp continued until 1967 or 1968.

While taking on a variety of unusual, sometimes bizarre shapes, many of these freehands echoed the Dublinesque shape that Frederick Charatan

introduced. Lane never interfered with that, and he was smart for leaving this "hallmark" alone. Reuben Charatan (probably the finest carver in the Charatan family) felt the tapering, conical bowl of the Dublin was the ideal shape to fit in the hand and provided the perfect shape for a tobacco bowl. The Dublin had been a classic Charatan shape for decades.

In fact, Lane featured a pipe carved by Reuben Charatan in an ad published in several magazines in the early 1970s. It was a freehand Dublin with straight grain, square shank, and large gold band. It was advertised as "Charatan's Summa Cum Laude: world's most valuable pipe. It's not for sale." It was a lovely pipe, and never left Lane's personal collection. It was pretty spectacular then, and very fine today, although many of today's handmade artisan pipes eclipse the grain, if not the lovely line and balance.

Using the Dublin as a foundation for pipe-shaping was a great leap for an English pipemaker, when counter-

parts such as Barling, Dunhill, Sasieni and Comoy stuck to standard English shapes such as the billiard and the bulldog.

Some of these freehand pipes featured a natural, or plateau, bowl top, which was (supposedly) the exterior of the briar burl. It was often left rough and unstained, although sometime during the 1970s, many freehand pipes emerged either with a stained natural top or a top carved to look like the craggy plateau top. While the plateau top was advertised as being the natural outside of the burl, it often wasn't the case. Sometimes, the plateau top was actually the outside of the briar ebauchon, but usually it was carved to resemble the craggy outside of a briar burl.

It was well done, no doubt. How many times does a pipemaker find the perfect pipe within an ebauchon, with the top ending in a lovely, perfectly craggy, but not too craggy, burl exterior? Not often. A little carving completes the picture. Still, the effect was captivating.

Some Charatan pipes are, admittedly, so grotesque that they're somehow appealing. Several collectors have referred to the larger freehand Charatans as "war clubs," albeit in a very loving fashion, after the Native American tomahawk. And if those "war clubs" were available for anything less than \$300, those same teasing collectors would snap them up with no questions asked! Even when originally offered, backed by the Lane marketing mystique and the support of pipe shops, they all sold.

The best of the 1960-to-1980 freehand pipes—which are perhaps Charatan's greatest claim to fame—are large yet graceful, beautifully grained and, for their size, remarkably light. Many collectors believe they represent the perfect combination of impressive size, excellent balance and outstanding smoking properties. These are pipes you just have to appreciate, even if you don't love them or wouldn't want to smoke them.

Large, straight-grained pipes, whether freehand or standard-shaped, continued to receive the company's top stampings. However, it's hard to keep track of the many changes that started to occur during the 1960s in the

higher-grade Charatan pipes.

In 1957, the first Supreme S—designed to be the flagship of the Charatan line—was introduced. For many years, the Supreme was Charatan's top grade—mostly standard-sized billiards and Dublins. And lovely they were!

This was the top Charatan until 1964, when Lane and Charatan introduced the S-100 freehand, which sold for \$100. That was a heck of a lot of money in 1964. Although commonly credited with being the first pipe to break the \$100 barrier, it was not. Rare top-grade Dunhill DR (Dead Root) specimen straight grains had broken that barrier several years earlier. The S-100 was, however, the first commonly available \$100 pipe, and certainly the first "market" pipe with a set price point.

Yet it did not, as some predicted, spell doom for Charatan. Instead, the pricey pipe worked to perfection, adding marketing cachet to the Charatan line. Herman Lane was quite proud of this coup. And the S-100 expanded beyond the standard English shape, exploring larger sizes and slight variations on the theme of traditional English shapes.

Lane somewhat explained his marketing strategy, although it is no secret to those who bought and sold Charatans in the 1960s. If you establish a price for a rare, handmade creation, and people buy it at that price, then it is worth that price. Not much different than today's high-grade handmade pipes, which have prices starting at around \$800.

It was time that people respected the value of a work of art, in addition to a fine-smoking pipe, Lane believed. And who could argue with his strategy? It worked. In 1967, Lane had become such an integral part of the company's success that he bought the company, as well as Ben Wade, which was part of Charatan. He almost immediately installed Col. Ken Barnes, one of the important names in contemporary English pipemaking, to oversee European operations from the London office.

Col. Barnes had, until his appointment with Charatan, been connected with William Barling and the famed Barling pipe. His addition was as much an asset to Charatan's prestige as it was

a blow to Barling's (which by 1967 was no longer owned by the Barling family, anyway, and the brand was in steep decline after its purchase by Imperial Tobacco Co. in 1962). Col. Barnes had a magic touch when it came to pipe manufacture and marketing.

From the late 1960s on, Charatan felt intense competitive pressure from the growing number of pipemakers in Denmark, who also created unusual freehand shapes, but always responded with the new and different, even if it was a marketing coup and nothing more. The company's attention was continually divided between the English and U.S. markets and the growing West German and Japanese markets. The Germans preferred larger pipes and the Japanese wanted smaller, more traditionally shaped pipes.

Some collectors believe that by the 1980s, the attention to marketing began to overshadow the company's traditional attention to quality. Lane sold the company to Dunhill in the 1980s, and Charatan production moved to Dunhill's London plant in the mid-1980s.

The company ceased distributing pipes to the United States in 1988. Charatan made a comeback in the early 1990s with a French-made pipe distributed in the United States by James B. Russell. The Supreme grade again reigned supreme, and it was followed by several other grades, but this renewed distribution soon fell flat. The name today has been rescued by Dunhill, which has resurrected the old names and is valiantly trying to re-create Charatan pipes with the same grain and quality as the old pipes. So far, the effort seems to be showing signs of success.

Charatan is a fascinating brand for the collector, and proclaimed for the balance, comfort, interest and quality. And for the many of you who may wonder what happened to all the super high-grade Charatan and Ben Wade pipes in Lane's personal collections: An unfortunate family fracas led to the pipes being taken by one of Lane's children without the family's knowledge. They have never reappeared, to anyone's knowledge. It is a somewhat sad note for an otherwise illustrious relationship between Charatan, one of the world's great pipemaking names, and



Herman Lane, one of the world's great tobacco and pipe marketers. Fairy-tale rags-to-riches stories don't always have a totally happy ending, but the wonderful selection of Charatan pipes available provide ample testament to this enduring tradition.

One final note to all this: Lane loved

supporting classical music, the arts, higher education, and those less fortunate than himself. With his considerable wealth, he provided great support to many causes. I think he'd like to be remembered by the following quote: "I can't separate my business from life. It's easy to talk like that when you are comfortable. Well, I have

known what it is to be uncomfortable. Now I have a thriving business and I want to help people. I want to see them live in a world without ignorance, poverty and war. I consider life my business."

That is a fitting tribute to a great person and something to aspire to for pipe smokers everywhere. **P&T**

### COLLECTIBLE CHARATAN GRADE GUIDE

Consistent, predictable grading and the name Charatan have never gone hand-in-hand. In fact, since 1957, there has been very little predictable about a pipe carrying the Charatan logo. It's one of the things that drives collectors crazy. It's one of the things that makes collecting Charatan pipes so much fun.

In any large group of Charatans, one is bound to find a mid-grade Selected or Executive with more straight grain than a top-line Coronation or Supreme. When collecting any pipe, it's best not to be a slave to grade stampings.

While stampings and nomenclature are major factors in determining price and rarity, it's often best to let the senses be the final judge: how the pipe looks, its balance, and ultimately, how it smokes. With Charatans, this is particularly true.

Charatan's history was strongly influenced from 1950 onward by Herman Lane, a U.S. tobacconist who helped change the direction of the company and the shape, size and look of the pipes. Before 1950 (pre-Lane, if you will), there were few grades and they were pretty straightforward. Charatan had a good selection of straight and semi-straight grains, plus great-smoking lower-grade smooth pipes and relief, or sandblasted, pipes. Most of the pipes were standard shapes and carried numbers designating the shape.

After 1950, stampings (at least on U.S. market pipes) were as much a function of marketing as they were of grain quality. Despite their often cryptic nomenclature, they remained a generally beautiful, sweet-smoking brand of briars.

Because pre-1950 Charatans and European-market Charatans are relatively hard to find in the United States, this listing primarily focuses on all Charatan sizes and grades collectors are likely to encounter in smoke shops that carry estate pipes and at pipe shows and swaps. The ranking may not always be accurate, but it's close.

In general, the higher grades commanded the highest prices when originally sold. The same holds true today. Lower-grade used Charatans are great smokers and can be excellent values at \$15 to \$75. Pre-World War II Charatans have been commanding very high three-figure prices.

Pipes above the Executive grade have varying degrees of straight grain. Specials were usually pipes with some straight grain, but pipes of undistinguished grain having exceptional size or interest could also be marked "Special."

The following five grades were introduced intermittently into the United States during the late 1960s through the 1970s by Lane Ltd. as a way to expand the Charatan line of high-grade pipes. Many, if not most, were larger pieces of wood and were dominated by the classic Charatan freehand shapes (as opposed to standard shapes). Usually, you'll find the cursive "L" in a circle, but many collectors have noted that due to the *joie de vivre* of the Charatan factory, you'll find American market pipes that didn't have the Lane stamping. English market pipes, which weren't distributed by Lane, per se, don't carry the "L" marking. Collectors, start your engines.

**Summa Cum Laude** – There are reportedly only three of this wedge-shaped, gold-banded freehand in existence. Originally priced at \$2,500, it was certainly one of the most expensive pipes of its day and was never meant to be a production pipe. Herman Lane told me, however, that a few dozen of these pipes were manufactured. Where they are, nobody knows. If you're a Charatan fanatic, would you want to find one at the right price? Of course.

**Crown Achievement** – The Achievements supplanted the Supreme as the top-grade Charatan pipe at one time.

**Royal Achievement** – As far as I know, and in my discussions with Lane, only a few of these were made. They are perhaps rarer than Crown Achievements. Lane had two in

his private collection, which has disappeared.

**Coronation** – The Coronation was introduced as a grade bridging the Achievements and Supremes. They're available as collectibles, but pricey.

The next grade, the Charatan **Supreme**, has a rather schizophrenic role in the history of Charatan. Until 1957, Supreme was the top grade, reserved for the finest straight-grain examples of the pipemaker's art.

Charatan, at the suggestion of Lane, introduced the Supreme S in 1957 as the top-line pipe. In 1964, the company introduced the freehand Supreme S-100.

The S-100 supplanted the Supreme S as the top-line pipe, followed by the Supreme S-200 and the S-300. In 1967, the Supreme S was dropped and the S-150 and S-250 were added. In 1971, as inflation, the price of wood and manufacturing costs made it impossible to create a top-grade pipe for \$100 or \$150, the Supreme S-100 and S-150 were dropped and the Supreme S reinstated. Although not listed in Charatan catalogs, I learned that a few Supremes exist that are stamped "S-500." They're somewhere out there, I hope.

**Supreme** – Top of the Charatan line until 1957, when the Supreme S was introduced.

**Supreme S** – Top of the Charatan line from 1957 until 1964, when the Supreme S-100 was introduced. Discontinued in 1967, it was reinstated in 1971.

**Supreme S-100** – Top of the line until the Supreme S-200 was introduced in late 1967. Priced at \$100.

**Supreme S-150** – Supremes priced at \$150.

**Supreme S-200** – Supremes priced at \$200.

**Supreme S-250** – Supremes priced at \$250.

**Supreme S-300** – Priced at \$300, this was the top of the line until the Coronation was introduced in 1968. ▶



Supremes made before 1957 were the top of the Charatan line. Those made before 1955 will not necessarily feature the cursive "L" stamped on them. European market pipes (some of which have made their way to North America) never featured the cursive "L" designating a product distributed in the U.S. by Lane Ltd. And as some collectors remember, the cursive "L" was probably introduced on and off between 1950 and 1955, as Lane became more heavily involved with distributing the brand.

Pre-1955 Supremes will probably tend toward standard shapes (as opposed to freehands) and smaller sizes and will usually feature the thin, tight straight-grain characteristic of pipes before the advent of freehands.

Freehand Supremes made between 1955 and 1983 are often difficult to date. Collectors can use stampings such as "FH," "Extra Large" or the "S" series to get an approximation of when the pipe was made, but exact dating is a futile endeavor.

The following Charatan pipes are ranked according to their pricing in the late 1970s, but pricing doesn't always denote collector preferences. For example, most collectors today prize Distinctions and Specials over After Hours. Yet, when new, After Hours pipes sold for more because the bowls were primarily straight-grained, even though the shanks were short due to flaws in the briar.

In pre-1955 pipes, the "Belvedere" stamping carried considerably more weight than it did by the 1970s, when it was downgraded to a smooth pipe with great smoking properties and undistinguished graining.

The size group designations of the Special, Belvedere and Relief Grain pipes are similar to Dunhill bowl gradings, but Charatan pipes were generally larger than similarly sized Dunhills. However, group size stampings were not put on the pipes.

Selected (Extra Large)

Selected

Executive (Extra Large)

Executive

After Hours Superba – Higher-priced with a well-grained bowl, but never particularly popular.

Distinction Deluxe

After Hours Walnut

Distinction (Extra Large)

Freehand Relief (Extra Large)

After Hours Relief – Although priced higher than Specials, this is decidedly inferior to a good Special in many collectors' minds.

Special (Extra Large)

Freehand Relief

Special (Group 4) – The Special was usually smooth, but could also be an unusually sized or shaped pipe and might be fully carved/sandblasted or part smooth and part carved/sandblasted. Why waste a mostly good bowl if it had a flaw? Carve it and market it as something Special.

Special (Group 3)

Perfection

Special (Group 2)

Belvedere (Group 4)

Special (Group 1)

Belvedere (Group 3)

Relief Grain (Group 2)

Relief Grain (Group 1)

Belvedere (Group 1)

Rarity – This was usually a well-grained pipe with a bowl flaw, and so was carved to cover the flaw.

There are three grades that defy standard Charatan listings. The **DeLuxe** (not to be confused with the Distinction Deluxe) was a marking used on well-grained pipes before and shortly after World War II.

Even more unusual is the Charatan **Underboar**, which was produced well before World War II. Although the selection of shapes listed in the old Underboar catalog is quite extensive, either few were made, or few have survived. This is an extremely rare pipe.

Starting in the 1970s, Charatan also produced the **Crown** model, which is very different from the Crown Achievement. The Crown model was somewhat like the After Hours, in that pipes with good bowls but unacceptably short shanks were given new life. A black vulcanite military mount ferrule was added to extend the shank and two bits were always provided.

Crown models came in a variety of grades, depending on the quality of the bowl's grain, from Supreme down to Belvedere. P&T