

## TWIST TOBACCO

By: Larry Fleenor

Recently the "Friends of the Museum News Letter" had a photograph of an antique tobacco twist cutter presented as its 'mystery item'. There is a whole culture and vocabulary that went with that instrument, which is in process of being lost. For those interested I thought that I would commit it all to paper before it is all lost forever.

A 'hand' is a unit of measure of tobacco. It is five leaves. A 'twist' of tobacco is a marketing unit for personal consumption, and consisted of a single hand. The maker would twist the five leaves of cured tobacco while it was still green into a rope about 15 inches long, and then double it back in a second twist upon itself.

The twists were then slowly smoke cured in a smoke house, which left them permanently in the twisted shape. For their own consumption, old timers would sometimes take a piece of hickory fire wood, bore a two inch diameter hole into its end with an auger, put a twist into the cavity, and seal the hole with a whittled plug of hickory. They would then put the log onto a bed of hot coals, and let it burn a little on the outside only. This would smoke the twist.

Twists were sold either whole in country stores, or pieces were cut off for single chews and sold individually. This is what the tobacco cutter did. The typical length of twist that was cut off was about an inch, and sold for between a cent and a nickel.

The vocabulary involved was very antique. The Latin word 'quid' meant in its most rudimentary way, 'for'. It is perhaps best remembered today in the legal phrase "quid pro quo", which translates as "exchange something for something". This simple three word Latin phrase is the basis for all contract law.

With the passage of time the word 'quid' evolved to mean a unit of measure of merchandise that one could purchase for a set price. It was the amount of goods that one could get 'for' a specific sum.

Therefore, an inch of twist cut off by the tobacco cutter was what you got for a penny, and was called a quid. It was the unit of measure of one "chaw" of tobacco. One bought a quid, and stuck it in their mouth and chewed it. A tobacco chewer would speak of having a quid in his mouth.

However, many an old timer got confused with his Latin, and since he chewed

his tobacco like a cow chewing its cud, he transliterated 'quid' into 'cud', and spoke of chewing a 'cud of tobacco'.

Many an old timer was more specific, and called the piece of tobacco a 'quid' before it reached his mouth, but called it a 'cud' after he chewed it a while.