

A Brief History of Shaving by Phil Bock © 2012

My earliest memory of shaving is a sound: the “slap, slap, slap” of one of my father’s straight razors on the old leather strop. I was fascinated by the process and can picture the strop with one end curled from his grip, the other attached to the wall, and the gold lettering in what I guessed was Russian. The two razors lay in a soft lined case until he selected one. The shaving soap was in a special bowl, now lost, but I still have the silver-handled brush.

When he had worked up a lather in the bowl, he would often put a dab on my upturned face and remove it with the blunt side of his razor. Then he would lather and shave himself with great care, leaving a quarter-inch moustache on his upper lip and rinsing with water, then with Bay Rum.

These early vivid memories are connected with our house in Flushing, Queens, and seem quite separate from later memories of Fresno, where we moved in 1946, when I was 12. I didn’t yet have to shave, but a minor shaving trauma took place before a high school play, when a drama teacher took a razor to my “unibrow” without asking me, and separated it into two brows. I had some fuzz on my upper lip by then, but not enough to show.

Soon after that, I began to shave in earnest, using a “safety razor” with a thin, rectangular blade, probably a Gillette “blue blade.” The razor opened with a twist of the handle and one inserted the blade—after unwrapping it carefully, for both edges were very sharp). I probably used my father’s brush and soap until I got my own. The jingles at that time, played before televised sports events, asked “How are you fixed for blades?” and instructed one that “To look sharp, be sharp,” and use Gillette.



At some point in the 1950s, a new device appeared: the Schick “injector razor.” With its “push, pull, click, click” insertion of blades from a cartridge, it obviated the need for handling sharp objects and, while the shave it provided was probably no better, I used these devices for several years, including my time in Chicago and the Air Force. I don’t recall what kind of shaving soap I then employed, but my aftershave was still Bay Rum.

At some point, the pressurized foam shaving products came on the market and I tried several brands (Burma Shave, Foamy, etc.) with the injector razor. I often used Aqua Velva afterwards. When traveling, I sometimes took a disposable razor, or purchased one from a vending machine.

For several years, I experimented with electric shavers, one with three “floating heads” and another with two parallel heads and a trimmer blade. They gave only a fair shave, I thought, but with a Remington lotion it seemed to improve. For a close shave on some occasions I would use the disposable and, at some point, I traded Bay Rum for Witch Hazel.

There was an interim when I tried using an English razor that one could sharpen by drawing the blade back and forth on a stone (which they provided). The brand, Wilkinson, was said to be from an old British firm that had made swords for royalty. It was very

noisy as it slapped on the stone in the morning but might have lasted for years if I'd had patience.

Improvements in technology (and marketing) led to the next development: the twin-blade razor with various ways of attaching the cartridge to the handle, and later with strips of some white material that were said to improve “glide.” The twin was marketed with the claim that the first blade made facial hair “stand up” so the second cut closer. The animated graphic was quite convincing and I was among many customers who bought it.

Yet there were skeptics: I vividly recall a *Mad Magazine* feature that satirized the TWB, predicting that a razor with *three* blades would soon appear—“*because you'll believe anything!*” How right they were!!! After a few years, and with furious promotion, the Triple appeared, with names that implied great aeronautic speed, e.g., “Mach 3.” I confess that I tried and rather liked the new design, but the shave was little improved over the Twin, except possibly for men with sensitive skin. There were also new “shaving gels” that claimed to be better for people with bumpy epidermis.

Now we come to the heart of this essay. As the Triple gave way to even grander designs with names implying atomic power and with other enhancements (strips and even batteries), I found it impossible to locate blades for my now antique Twin razor. The price for the Triple and its successors rose to great heights, and refill cartridges were now kept in locked cases. Of course the profit had always been in the blades—much like the expensive batteries required for “cheap” electronic devices, the expensive toner cartridges required by “cheap” printers, and the pricey replacement brushes for electric toothbrushes. (At least the latter can be used *without* power, one of the few appliances of which this is true.)

I calculate that over the past 70 years I have shaved about twenty-one thousand times, allowing for the years when I had a beard and the days when I shaved twice for dates or performances (the same thing). That's a lot of blades! And skin.

I haven't looked lately, but I won't be surprised to hear about the device that I prophesied some years ago: a Nuclear Powered, Seven-Blade Robotic Razor that will shave anyone in under thirty seconds.*

*Not for use by children or pregnant women.