

Former – a skilled and social pipemaker. By Jakob Groth and smokingpipes.com

I have been a friend of Former for 25 years and I have written several articles about him over the years in Danish pipe magazine Piber & Tobak. I was very honoured when Former asked me to help him with his history for his web-page. However Former has told his pipe history many times and Former and I agree that smokingpipes.com has written a very good version which we by kind permission bring here. After that I will try to describe Former as a person from my long lasting friendship.

Hans “Former” Nielsen set out into the world in pursuit of employment at just 15 years old. Looking for work a machinist, he applied for job in Copenhagen, but when he arrived for the interview the job had already been filled. Without work and without much in the way of marketable skills, Former was willing to take anything. He found employment at a small pipe shop. Initially, this was not what Former or his family wanted: the hours were long and the pay wasn't very good.

He was working with an excellent pipe carver, Poul Rasmussen, and what the job lacked in salary it made up for in education. Former learned how to repair and clean almost any pipe. Working with different pipe companies, learning about different shapes and finishes helped hone Former's skills. The broad exposure to all aspects of pipe production seems to have been fantastic training for the pipe carver. It was in these early days as a pipe carver that Former learned what worked and what didn't and what constituted an exceptional pipe.

The work was still not as fulfilling or satisfying as Former would have liked. He was somewhat restricted as to what he was allowed to do. Poul did all the bowl turning and Former never made a pipe from start to finish. Their relationship was a little strained as Former was eager but felt unchallenged. The job seemed like a dead-end; Former wondered if he would ever get a chance to progress beyond this entry level apprenticeship. Financial concerns and a little frustration with his situation prompted Former to leave and find work as machinist.

Shortly afterwards though, Former was contacted by Poul Rasmussen who, due to his failing health, needed help around the store and knew he could count on Former. Former began working on Saturdays at the store while keeping his machinist job. This allowed Former to keep up connections with the pipe world. Very soon afterwards, Sven Knudsen left W.Ø. Larsen to start his own pipe factory and Sven hired Former part time. So Former was holding down three different jobs, still gaining valuable experience in the world of pipes and learning more as a machinist that would be of great benefit later, as intimate knowledge of machinery is a must for pipe makers (and there are many pipe makers that make or modify their own machinery).

All three jobs were put on hold when Former turned 20 and had to fulfill his mandatory term of military service. After 16 months, Former was again looking for work in Copenhagen. His old friend and employer Poul Rasmussen told him he knew that there was an opening at the W. Ø. Larsen workshop, a perfect position for Former. Former was slightly taken aback by this suggestion. He had never carved a pipe entirely by himself. Poul reassured him that he had the skills necessary, handed him a block of briar and told him to carve a pipe. After half an hour Former had roughed out his first pipe. Poul approved, picked up the phone and placed a call to Sven Bang who was W.Ø. Larsen factory manager then.

Bang needed a little more convincing than Poul's recommendation, so he asked Former to carve eight specific W.Ø. Larsen shapes by which his ability could be judged. Former called his old employer Sven Knudsen and asked if he could make the necessary pipes at Knudsen's workshop. This was quite a fortunate piece of luck, for not only did Former have access to a great workshop, but Knudsen had worked at W.Ø. Larsen for years and in fact had been the first carver the company had hired. After a weekend of intense effort, Former presented his eight different pipes to Bang and at 21 years old became a professional pipe maker with W.Ø. Larsen.

Former's education continued at a rapid rate. Shortly after joining the company, W.Ø. Larsen received an order from the United States for 80 pipes. The challenge was to make pipes as close to the catalogue designs as possible. When the pipe is shaped entirely by hand it is difficult to be consistent to the degree of accuracy desired. Former often turned to his friend Knudsen for advice and under his tutelage became more and more adept at the W.Ø. Larsen catalogue shapes.

Former worked at W.Ø. Larsen for ten years. He advanced from carver to master carver and eventually to supervisor. He was responsible for quality control, training new carvers, and making and grading pipes. While he was there, Teddy Knudsen and Tonni Nielsen worked as carvers, both of whom have become world-class pipe makers in their own right. During this time, he set up a small workshop at his home where he developed new shapes and designs for W.Ø. Larsen on the weekends.

Pipe makers Emil and Jess Chonowitsch were buried with orders from Japanese market and asked Former if he could help meet the demand. Former began making high-grade Danish freehands out of his workshop on the weekend. Former agreed to produce 15 pipes a month, following initial successes in the Japanese market. When the Japanese demand grew Former decided to leave W.Ø. Larsen and set out to make pipes under his own name. Japanese demand kept him busy, but the German market soon learned that pipes of exceptional quality and beauty were being made by Former. Within three years Former was working to capacity, unable to fill any more orders.

In 1986, Former was presented with an interesting opportunity. A businessman asked him to move to Switzerland and oversee the revival of the Bru-Bu pipe factory, with the goal of producing a new high-grade pipe. Former took the offer and Bentley pipes were soon born. Designed by Former, the pipes were sold mostly in Switzerland and Germany. The demand from Germany though was so large the factory moved to Hamburg in 1991 and focused entirely on producing pipes that could be fitted with a filter.

While working in Switzerland, Former met his wife Daniela. In 1997 they decided to buy the factory machinery and move the company to Denmark, where they now reside producing around 1,500 Bentley pipes and 500 Former pipes a year. Daniela works mostly with the Bentley pipe line.

Former is most excited and enthusiastic about the Former line of pipes, of course. These pipes demand creativity and attention to detail. There is more freedom for his creativity but also some self-imposed restriction for these higher end creations. The briar often has a mind of its own and Former knows a carver must constantly adapt the shape – the image in his mind's eye that he began carving with, to the will of the briar. Former is not only concerned with aesthetics, of course. Each pipe is meticulously engineered to the most exacting standards. All forty years of pipe making experience go into each creation resulting in a wonderful smoking experience. Former says his own pipes are “the best he is capable of.” Considering the demands Former places on himself, and the high standards he sets, this is no small guarantee.

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Hans Johnny Nielsen is Former's real name. Coincidentally this means Shapes or shaping in Danish, and previously in English. But there is nothing previously about Former's pipemaking and creativity. Former founded one of the three schools of Danish pipe making when he became manager of the W.Ø.Larsen-work shop (see my article about Danish Pipe History on www.scandpipes.com) and has constantly developed his shapes and production methods since then. The semi hand made Bentley pipes required new machinery which Former acquired and made him self.

Former sees new assignments as a challenge, not an obstacle. He became independent pipe maker, he moved to Switzerland to modernize an old fashion pipe factory, he moved to Germany to meet his customers and finally back to Denmark. In 2005 Former and Daniella had to end the production of Bentley Pipes. Instead they are making special edition or annual pipes for retailers or pipe clubs round the World.

Former likes to live at the countryside. For many years he has lived and worked in rural areas. Today he and Daniella lives with son Michael in a small village called Toxsvaerd in the middle of Seeland. Again it shows that Former is a social person: He is trainer for Michael's soccer team, he is member of a local card club and for several years he was a board member of the local business council. You are always welcome in the work shop.

Former is a humble and modest pipe maker. He is carving some of the finest pipes but his prices are very reasonable compared to the quality of the pipes.

Jakob Groth, april 2006