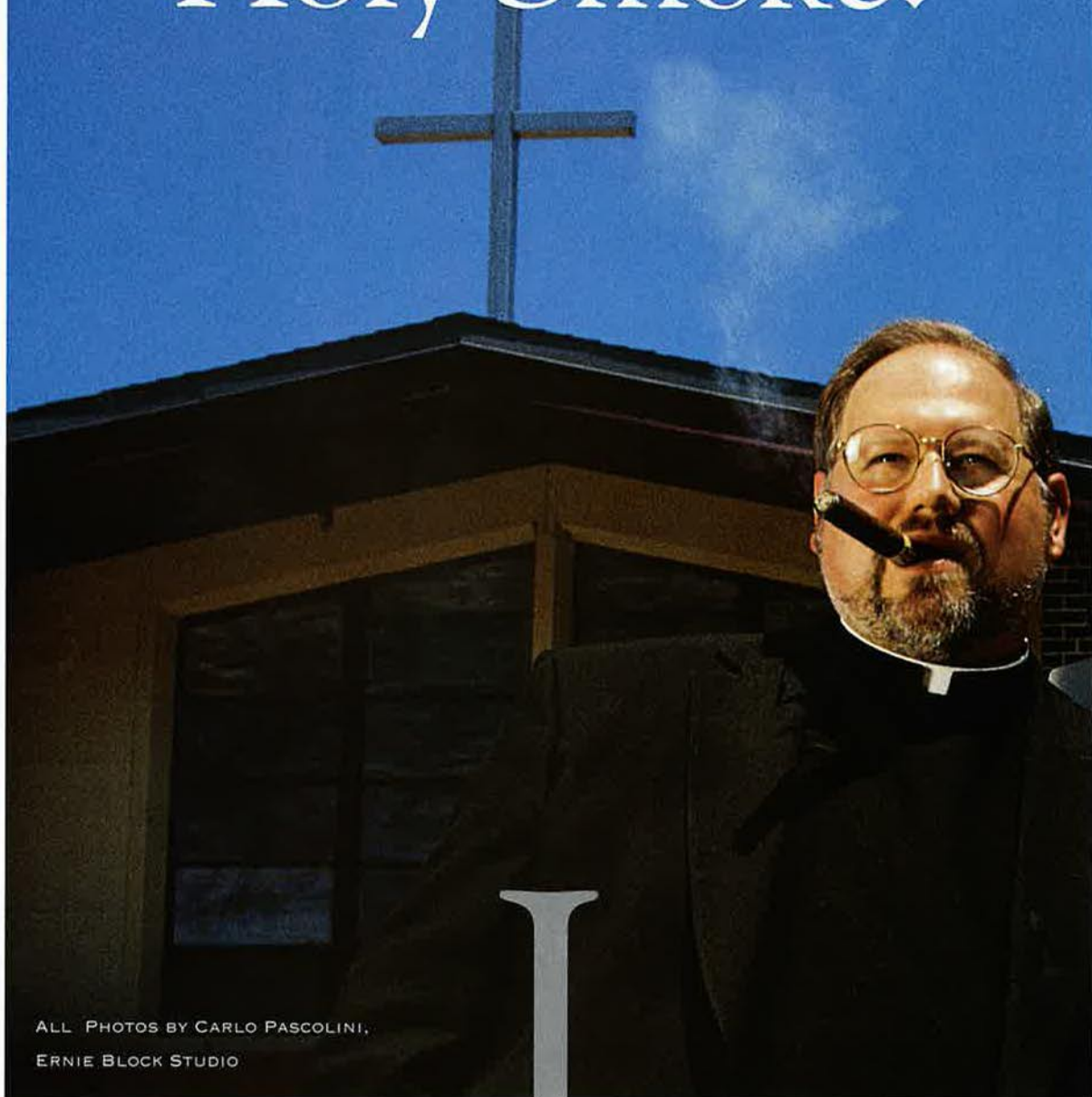


Holy Smoke!



ALL PHOTOS BY CARLO PASCOLINI,
ERNIE BLOCK STUDIO

If there is such a person as a “typical cigar smoker,” it isn’t Rev. H Setter. His 1,500-cigar J.C. Pendergast humidor and a photo-filled wall of him with the biggest names in the cigar industry reveal that he’s more than a casual smoker. But what truly sets him apart is that he has probably been to more CIGAR AFICIONADO Big Smokes than anyone else whose paycheck doesn’t have the words “tobacco” or “cigar” on it. ☛ If you’ve been to a Big Smoke, chances are good that you’ve seen him. A stocky 6-foot-5, dressed in black with a white priest’s collar, Rev. H Jay Setter (“H” is his entire name) stands out in a crowd.

IF YOU HAVE EVER BEEN TO A BIG SMOKE,
YOU’VE PROBABLY SEEN FATHER H

by Terrence Fagan



RELAXING IN HIS RECTORY "CIGAR ROOM" IN DERBY, KANSAS, FR. H SITS IN FRONT OF HIS "BIG SMOKE" WALL.

And there is no doubt that cigar aficionados are his kind of crowd. Watching him with the manufacturers and smokers at the May 23 Big Smoke at Manhattan's Marriot Marquis hotel, it was difficult to tell who was happier to see whom. Fellow devotees greeted him with, "Hey, Father! How've you been?" Cigar makers came out from their booths to shake his hand or give him a hug or a slap on the back.

"He's a very congenial guy, let me tell you," says Benjamin Menendez, General Cigar Co. vice president in the Dominican Republic. "It's very, very nice being with him. He's a great cigar smoker, and he enjoys the Big Smokes."

"Enjoy" is an understatement. "You go to a Big Smoke and you run into Carlos [Fuente] and Carlos Jr. [of Tabacalera A. Fuente y Cia.]

or Benny Menendez and Manuel [Quesada of MATASA], the list goes on and on—these people are like Lee Iacocca was to Chrysler. And for them to take the time to visit, to shake hands and take pictures,” says Setter, “that’s a very rare opportunity for people. To be there with them, it’s a privilege, a real, honest privilege.”

Setter, 37, has attended every Big Smoke since the first Chicago event in May 1994, for a total of 17 of the 20 held around the United States since they began the year before. He has become such a fixture at these events that the women who plan the Big Smokes at M. Shanken Communications (CIGAR AFICIONADO’s parent company) regularly print a special badge for him with the title of “Big Smoke Ambassador.” “The [events] girls,” says Setter, “have been some of the best friends I will ever have.”

The feeling is mutual. “He’s like our coach,” says Paulette Williams, the events marketing director. “He’s always there behind us, always thinking of us.”

Events marketing administrator Lisa-Marie Drummond, who has been to every Big Smoke Setter has attended, agrees. “He’s like a father,” she says. Any time of year, “he’ll call and make sure we’re OK.”

As a Big Smoke regular, Setter has created his own techniques for approaching these events. He scouts out the site beforehand, reviewing the space before the crowds arrive. (“Dallas was a complete joy,” he says. “Tall ceilings, lots of room, just a wonderful space.”) He then studies the floor map for bottlenecks. “Because there *are* going to be bottlenecks,” he says. “It’s where the spirits are—Cognacs, wines, import beers, the Ports—people stop there. If [the spirits booths] are placed in a location that’s going to be tight, I will go there first, get my cigars and move on.”

So when the doors open, “I have an order of business. I always get my cigars first. Always. I can always go to a restaurant and eat, but if I go home without a cigar that I haven’t tried before.... It’s not like I’m a fanatic about it, but there’s always plenty of food. And it doesn’t take that long to get the cigars.” Using his mapping and ticket techniques (he removes the staple from the booklet to facilitate easy removal), Setter regularly picks up his 30 or so cigars at each Big Smoke in under 30 minutes, leaving the remainder of the event for socializing. His record is 17 minutes at the 1995 Washington, D.C., Big Smoke.

His appearance at his first Big Smoke caused a bit of a stir. Setter’s friend Dave La Fleur, an artist in Kansas, was with him in Chicago. “He was a magnet,” says Le Fleur. “People came out of the woodwork to talk to this guy. I saw guys come up to him, ex-altar boys like you and I, who were so excited to see him. It’s like, they’ve got their cigars, they’ve got their toys and with Father H, it’s like their life has gone full circle.” La Fleur believes that Setter wears his priestly garb in public settings to put people at ease, to give them the opportunity to open up to him. “I’ve seen people flock to him in airports” just to talk and get things off their chest. (La Fleur created the painting on Setter’s wall, pictured on page 431, using his own bands for the decoupage.)

There was a lot of media attention as well. “There were a lot of [reporters] who were curious about me because of my garb,” Setter recalls. They constantly stopped him, asking questions. “It seemed to them an oddity to have a priest present at an event like this. I was a little overwhelmed by that.”

For some people, it comes as a surprise that priests use money, let alone smoke cigars. “That’s one of those misnomers that people have had about priests, that we’ve been these mystical figures that don’t share a humanity,” Setter says. “And it’s so wrong, it’s so stressful to be put on that kind of a pedestal, and to be expected to not have a human side that needs to be fostered and nurtured like everybody else. But what I have found by going to the Big Smokes is an incredible wave of support from people who said, ‘Isn’t it great to see that he is a human being, and he enjoys some things in life.’”

For those who consider cigars a vice, Setter sees a need for education by all premium cigar smokers. “When a person is willing to take the time to travel the three- or four-year journey from when those seeds hit the ground to the time the cigar’s on your tobacconist’s shelf, they begin to appreciate them a little bit more, and they don’t look at them as such a vice.”

But Setter sees more to cigars than that. Cigars, he says, are “one of those strange things—it’s every walk of life, from the workers in the garage, to the top executives sitting in these buildings. It’s a common language, it’s almost like music. You walk into a room full of cigar smokers, everyone is understanding each other. There’s a common bond that’s forged there just by the fact that everybody appreciates cigars.”

As pastor of St. Mary Church, a Roman Catholic parish of about 1,000 families in Derby, Kansas, and administrator of the 300-student St. Mary grammar school, Setter is kept busy year-round, with masses, weddings, funerals, running a parish and frequent consoling of people in need. “Cigars wind me down at the end of a day. They bring closure to a day that is totally chaotic on a regular basis. They’re very helpful.” He doesn’t hide his habit. His column in the parish newsletter has a caricature of him smoking a cigar.

One of his cigar smoking friends, Mark Sloyer, calls him “one of the most incredible people I’ve ever met in my life, both in affiliation with the church and as a friend.” And when it comes to cigars, “He’s my walking, talking encyclopedia of cigars. If you want to disturb his line of thought, just have a cigar sticking out of your pocket. He’s like a bird dog.”

With most of his family in nearby Wichita (he is the second of three sons), Setter plans his vacations in short three-day trips to Big Smoke locations around the country. He stretches his modest priest’s salary by planning far in advance. “I have to credit my travel agent, Toni Fitch,” he says. “She digs out the bargains that get me to the Big Smokes.”

Setter had dabbled with machine-made cigars while golfing in

high school, but it was during his freshman year at Wichita State University in 1977 that his cigar smoking started in earnest. He had bought a briar pipe at a garage sale and was enjoying it until he bought his first premium cigar. "I couldn't have started out with a stronger cigar," he says. He went to a tobacconist in downtown Wichita, "and I remember picking up a robusto-sized Punch with a very dark, almost black maduro wrapper. It had such an incredible amount of flavor! My pipe basically became a pastime that never again competed with cigars." His cigar smoking in those days was limited to about once a week, on the golf course or after a good meal. It picked up in the mid-1980s when he attended Mount St. Mary's seminary near Washington, D.C.

"The tobacco shops out East were very different from the ones in the Midwest," he says. "They were much larger and there was much more variety. So I figured I should try some new things." He and a priest friend would take trips to Georgetown Tobacco and experiment with different cigars. Today, Setter smokes one or two a day. His 1,500-cigar humidor is packed with La Gloria Cubanas, Macanudos, Avos, Arturo Fuentes and other cigars too numerous to mention. When asked if he has a favorite, he demurs, saying that part of the thrill of cigar smoking is constantly trying something different.

Yet it was music, not cigars, that is Setter's first love. His aunt took him to the symphony when he was a child, which intrigued him enough that he took up the trumpet, and "graduated up, if you will" to the French horn. He studied the French horn and conducting at Wichita State. "I wanted to be a conductor, so I started my own orchestra." He led a chamber orchestra for four years and then conducted a small community orchestra in nearby McPherson, Kansas, while still in his mid-20s. During this time he became involved as a music director in his parish, and from that, increasingly involved in the church.

"It dawned on me that there was a calling going on here that I couldn't explain," he recalls, "and it grew more and more intense, so I finally broke down and discussed it with a priest." The priest suggested that Setter consider the seminary to discern whether it was truly a calling. "I never really wanted to be a priest," he admits. "I had my heart set on being a conductor, and that's what I was doing. But the compelling force of [this calling] was just overwhelming."

In 1983, Setter applied to study with Leonard Bernstein as part of a summer training program of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. "Without

meaning to bargain, because we should never bargain with God and I never really meant to, it dawned on me that if I wasn't accepted to study with [Bernstein], it might be a good sign to try the seminary. Maybe that's where I was being led; maybe that's what I really needed to pursue." A letter arrived from Bernstein informing Setter that he had not been chosen for that year; Setter decided to enter the seminary.

Today, Setter serves as the only priest of St. Mary Church, living in the rectory with a yellow tabby named Butter. As he recently told a reporter from *The Wichita Eagle*, "God is absolutely no question No. 1 in my life. Then would come the priesthood."

Cigars are a pretty good bet for number three. He gets together each month with a group of friends to play poker, and, of course, smoke cigars. A room in the rectory serves as his cigar room, featuring his humidor, two curio cabinets—with everything from antique cutters to old Reina Bella and Camel cigar tins—and what some have dubbed his "Wall of Fame." The photos lining the wall show Setter with cigar makers, celebrities such as Jim Belushi and, of course, photos with Marvin Shanken, editor and publisher of CIGAR AFICIONADO.

"I'm Marvin's biggest fan," Setter says. From his first Big Smoke, Setter has asked for, and received, Marvin's autograph. "One of the most important rituals for me at a Big Smoke is getting Marvin to sign the editor's page." Setter then has the page framed with the ticket stub and program and hangs it on his wall. "The most meaningful things that Marvin has ever signed on any of my pictures were that I am 'The Number One Big Smoke Citizen' and 'Truly a Cigar Aficionado.'" To give Marvin a break, Setter is now only asking for a signature when the Big Smoke is in new cities. "I've gotta stop somewhere," he says.

Setter is prepared for the September Big Smoke weekend in Las Vegas. But these days, he's more excited about seeing his friends—the CIGAR AFICIONADO staff and the cigar manufacturers—than the event itself. "Without a doubt," he says, "those are the most cherished moments of each Big Smoke."

But it was the night *after* a Big Smoke that Setter says he received his most treasured Big Smoke memory. At a dinner of cigar industry leaders in Miami, Marvin introduced Setter to the group with these words: "There are cigar smokers and then there are cigar smokers, and then there's Father H." ❖



CIGARS HELP FR. H UNWIND AFTER A BUSY DAY RUNNING THE ST. MARY PARISH.