I have spent many hours discussing the shaving industry with Charles Roberts, the father of Method Shaving. This Q&A presents Mr. Roberts' philosophies on the characteristics of shaving brushes and the evolution of wet shaving.

What exactly is the purpose of the shaving brush in wet shaving, and how does one become a wet shaver?

Without doubt one of the most frequently asked—and, in my view, least satisfactorily answered—questions in all of wet shaving is about shaving brushes. It is one I encounter constantly. This question about shaving brushes typically come in three forms: What exactly is a shaving brush? How is it used? Which is the best brush to own?

Consider the wet shaving “newbie.” He enters a store and asks to see the shaving brushes. He is immediately confronted with literally dozens of different shapes, sizes, and hair types. Some of the brushes are good and inexpensive; others are terribly overpriced and inadequate to his needs. Which shaving brush to buy? In the right hands, the third rate brush will perform adequately; if used improperly the $800 white tip badger will be destroyed in less than a month. Helpless in the presence of such overwhelming choices, our newbie turns to the clerk for help—but the clerk only knows how to shave with HIS brush. Inevitably, our poor newbie soon finds himself overwhelmed and quickly leaves the store, both unsatisfied and without any prospect of future shaving bliss. How, then, can we help the newbie? Here are some excellent pointers to get the newbie started in the right direction.

Learning to properly load and control a shaving brush is one of the glories of modern wet shaving. At same time it is a fundamental skill; one that forms the very basis of all wet shaving itself. Failing to master the basic functions of even the simplest shaving brush is the chief reason why beginning shavers fail at the wet shaving game. The task at hand, then, is to help the newbie buy the best brush that he can for the money he wants to spend. But this task is not nearly as easy as it sounds. For this reason it is therefore a good idea for beginning wet shavers to master the basic elements of mix building by using dry potted creams.

Shaving soaps are often a puzzling category of goods for the wet shaving newbie. The companies listed above that manufacture potted shaving creams also offer shaving soaps. However, the quality of these can fluctuate wildly both organically, (the way they are made) and

in use. Most commercial shaving soaps are extremely hard in composition. The other, softer varieties are more desirable. However this latter group is extremely rare and generally unavailable. In my view, most shaving soaps are entirely too hard. When using such soaps, the use of a small, very soft badger brush is definitely not advised. Softer soaps, especially those that are glycerin based, generally respond well to small shaving brushes. These soaps generally peak quickly and exert far less direct stress on the breech of the shaving brush itself. The main problem with shaving soaps for the beginning shaver is that of too rapid dry down. No sooner has the shaver peaked a soap mix then it dries down to nothing. This is called a "cracked mix." It is always caused by excessive air being pumped into the mix via the shaving brush. For those newbies wishing to try their hand at shaving the single blade, a good badger brush, and a soft shaving soap is highly recommended.

You've often referred to the existence of two "schools" of wet shaving. What makes these two groups distinct from one another?

It is essential to understand that wet shaving as practiced in the U.S. consists of two distinct approaches—or "schools." These schools are respectively known as the "traditional" and "Method" forms of wet shaving.

The "traditional" approach is the one that has been with us for over 200 years, though it has changed dramatically during this long period.

The traditional school is largely based on the European—primarily British and German—models of brush shaving. These forms are well established and their several brands very well know in most wet shaving circles. Today, the equipment used in traditional wet shaving is very consistent in range: it usually includes a short hair, silver tip badger shaving brush; a MULTI-BLADE, Gillette style razor; and a commercially produced potted cream or shaving soap. The traditional "dry" paste cream typically uses a form of hydroxyl acid as its formulary base (the use of the term "dry" is not intended as a negative; it simply means it is sensitive to the presence of air—not water). The list of dry wet shaving cream manufacturers is extensive. However, a short list of some of the best dry pot shaving creams should include Geo. F. Trumper, D.R. Harris, and Taylors of London. Art of Shaving offers a U.S. version of the same product. It is usually a very good idea for beginning wet shavers to learn wet shaving basics with a dry pot cream. The mix media they produce is extremely stable, easy to load in almost any shaving brush and is usually consistent in performance across different brands. At the same time, these dry potted creams are not suitable for use with DE or Open blade razors; because of the high acid content, the average commercial potted cream cuts very hot soon after application.

The second school of wet shaving we must consider is the one mentioned earlier—the Method school. This school is often referred to as the “American” school of wet shaving, to distinguish from it from its European counterpart. At this point, some mild confusion enters the picture. As noted earlier, the European school is based on the MULTI-BLADE Gillette/Schick PIVOTING PLATFORM razor. Method shaving, however, uses a SINGLE blade, on a FIXED PLATFORM razor. This single blade is commonly a “double edge” or “DE” for short. Please note that a DE blade is NOT a Gillette SENSOR! You will probably not find any suitable DE blades at your local store; the best are only available from Internet vendors.

This vital distinction between “single blade” and “multi-blade” shaving must always be kept in mind when purchasing any shaving brush. Every wet shaving newbie needs to decide whether to shave “SINGLE” or “MULTI-BLADE” style. In short, does he want to be a “traditional” or “Method” shaver? If he chooses the traditional route he will generally use a Gillette style blade cartridge. If he chooses the Method approach, he should use a double edge blade.

Considering that everyone’s beard growth is different, how do our individual characteristics influence the way we shave?

What kind of beard mass does the newbie have? Is it exceptionally thick and coarse? Or is it relatively thin? Does he have problems with razor burn and ingrown hair? Or does he simply want to shave as close as possible? These basic questions need to be answered next in determining exactly what kind of shaving brush to buy.

Since the subject of beard mass index is a complicated one, I will restrict my comments to a few basic points. The process of determining whether one has a heavy, medium or light beard is simple enough. Stand before a mirror and look for the following indicators: is there very little beard mass ABOVE the jaw line? In other words, is the distribution of hair spotty or thin across the cheeks, moustache area and chin? If so, this pattern indicates a light to light medium beard. This distribution will generally respond well to a traditional—or multi-blade-- wet shaving set up. However, if the cheeks, moustache and chin areas are particularly thick; in other words the beard mass is thick and consistent across the upper face area, then a Method approach should be used. A shaver who needs greater “reduction” (cutting power) to clear heavy beard mass should use the Method approach. Lighter beards can generally be cleared just fine using a traditional system. How does any shaver know for sure which system is best? Here is a simple test any shaver can use: look at the upper neck (the 3rd quadrant) and both sides of mouth (1st quadrant/left, right). Do you see ingrown hairs anywhere on either quadrant? If so, Method shaving is right for you. If not, you can comfortably use a traditional approach.

Now that we've identified the basics of different styles of wet shaving, how would you direct a new client in making his first brush purchase?

At this point you are now ready to select a shaving brush. However, before doing so it is first necessary to briefly describe the design, construction and purpose of the shaving brush itself. This description will then be extended to cover its use in either a traditional or Method shaving setting.

A shaving brush is a hand held, mixing tool. Nothing more; nothing less. It is NOT a hair brush, a massaging tool, or holy artifact. A shaving brush is nothing more than a highly specialized tool that is used to "build mix." Depending on the type of shaving you are planning to do—traditional or Method—your brush will either need to build mix externally or internally in relation to the brush itself. Put differently, if using a traditional technique your shaving brush will either build the mix outside of the brush itself; if using a Method approach the brush will build the mix internally—inside the brush itself. This distinction is fundamental to success in all modern wet shaving.

If using a traditional "dry mix" paste, you will need to build your mix outside the brush itself. You will do this in one of three different ways:

1) Through the use of a shallow mixing bowl.
2) In the palm of the hand.
3) By using a commercial shaving soap in a bowl. There are several such shaving soaps to choose from. (Some of the best come from D.R. Harris and Geo. F. Trumper.).

When building a "dry mix" using commercial wet shaving products like those already described, the shaving brush is used to inject air into the mix itself. By working the bristles of the shaving brush against the passive chemical agents of the shaving soap or cream, air is introduced. In this way, the dry chemical agents combine to form a spontaneous "froth" or "lather." Through vigorous movement of the brush bristle tips, the lather billows up in the shaving bowl much like a meringue pudding. The result is called "shaving cream." ("Shaving cream" is the expression used for traditional shaving media; "wet mix" is the media used in Method shaving. The two share nothing in common).

It is critical to always keep in mind that “shaving cream” (as distinguished from wet mix) in any form is primarily comprised of passive chemical agents brought into active combination through the introduction of air and water. These elements are then combined through agitation by the brush. And though usually thicker and more pleasingly aromatic, this medium is not all that different from the dry foam agent that comes out of a conventional can of shaving cream bought in the supermarket. In the process, therefore, of creating “shaving cream” the shaving brush is required to perform the role of a hand held “air pump.” For the shaving brush to perform this role properly, the shaving media itself must be kept from penetrating too far into the brush where it cannot be effectively combined with sufficient air to volumize. Once the shaving lather is fully volumized at the top of the shaving brush, the brush itself is then used to “spread” the lather uniformly across the face and neck. It is accurate, in this context, to describe shaving cream as a “dry mix” media.

If the shaving cream lather used in traditional multi-blade shaving is “dry,” why, then, is it called wet shaving in the first place?

The reason for this nagging confusion will be found farther back in American shaving history. Prior to 1970, with the exception of the clanky, unreliable electric shaver, ALL shaving was done wet style. One need only watch any of the popular movies during the period to see what I mean. In any movie produced during the 1960s—and even later—every man is depicted shaving with a single blade razor. It was this form of shaving and none other that was called “WET SHAVING.” Indeed, what made shaving wet prior to 1970 was the simple fact that only one kind of blade was used—A SINGLE BLADE. The advent of multi-blade shaving only began as a serious venture with the advent of the Gillette Atra razor in 1970. Ultimately, the Atra would merely be the first in an entire series of such multi-blade shaving systems from both Gillette and Schick. A decade after the Atra came the Good News disposable razors. This latter form dominated the 1980s. Bic produced a very similar bladed disposable during this same period. The multi-blade shaving system eventually culminated in the famous Sensor razor in 1990. The Sensor was the first razor to ever appear on the cover of Fortune magazine.

Prior to 1970, then, the double edge blade was king. It was quite impossible to shave any other way. In any event, by the late 1970s, traditional wet shaving had largely disappeared. By then the multi-blade system was king. Few people had ever even seen a double edge razor. When I first came to shaving in the early 1990s, the very expression itself—wet shaving—had not been used in living memory. Indeed, until I offered the first definitive meaning of the expression “wet shaving” back in 2003 (wet shaving=single blade shaving) no clear rendering of the term even existed. To most people during those years, wet shaving simply meant shaving with water in any form or amount. Indeed, it was only a few years ago that most people thought that wet shaving meant shaving in the shower.

Today, the movement in shaving I initiated over a decade ago-- which goes by the name of Method shaving-- is strictly focused on reviving, teaching and perfecting the products and principles of single blade—or “wet” shaving. Those interested in learning more about this fascinating dimension of shaving, should begin their efforts with a review of my Internet textbook on the subject “The Systematics of Wet Shaving.”

With every brush manufacturer we see brushes of various grades such as Pure, Best, and Super. What the primary differences in these hair types and how does that effect the performance of the brush?

A final word about hair quality and shaving brush performance: beginning shavers are always confronted by a virtual barrage of conflicting claims regarding the relative quality of various shaving brush brands. These claims are invariably based on the relative quality of the badger hair used to produce the shaving brush “knot.” Since badger hair used in shaving brushes is harvested from various parts of the animal’s pelt, the hair itself displays characteristic differences depending on precisely where on the animal the hair is procured. The process by which this fastidious culling process is done is maddeningly vague. Nothing in the entire process is conducted with convincing clarity, transparency or consistency. Complicating matters further; nearly all badger hair comes from China; however, wet shaving is not a Chinese indulgence.

In generations past, nearly all shaving brushes were produced in extremely small lots. As a result, the quality of the hair used was fantastically consistent with the highest imaginable standards one could invoke today. Since so few brushes were ever made at one time, it was easy enough to simply load the best available hair. Indeed, until very recently, demand for high end shaving brushes was still small enough that it was possible for manufacturers to economically use the highest grade. This grade is commonly called “silver tip” badger. For those unfamiliar with the esoteric term “silver tip,” it is enough to know that in today’s shaving brush business, the use of the term “silver tip” is used to describe a specific category of superior hair. In real terms, silver tip is a short hair badger, distinctly banded, exhibiting a very fine silky finish. In addition to silver tip, however, two other grades of badger also must be considered: these are the grades broadly called “best” and “pure.”

These three grades—silver tip (or “super” as it is also known), best and pure—comprise the general declension of hair quality for nearly all premium shaving brushes manufactured today. However, the shaver must always be alert to the fact that the distinctions between these various grades of hair quality are distressfully elastic. I have encountered many so called silver tip brushes loaded with best. Conversely, I have seen best brushes loaded with silver tip. These

distinctions are so vague that even the manufacturers themselves are sometimes unsure of the hair they use.

To the above group of hair types a mass market category can also be added. It is called “junk badger” or “boar.” However, these brushes are completely irrelevant to our present discussion. So, no further consideration will be given to them.

As a broad group comprising premium grade badger, most super badger brushes are clearly superior to any other. The hair is short, fine, and glossy. These distinctions are surely aesthetically pleasing. But, on their own, do these elements actually contribute to a superior shaving result? Quite frankly, they generally do not. This does not mean that a silver tip grade material is irrelevant to the overall quality of the shaving brush. It simply means that we must augment our present discussion of intrinsic hair quality with a few other equally salient points.

Aside from hair alone, what other aspects of shaving brush design need to be taken into consideration?

In addition to considering the importance of super badger over the other two, less refined, grades mentioned above, we must also consider two other equally important factors affecting brush performance. These are:

1) The quality of brush construction.
2) The specific kind of wet mix that is to be used for shaving.

Point number two is discussed at length in the above section on dry versus wet mixes; thus I will not consider it further here. Right now, I want to briefly consider point number one, as its relevance to our subject is considerable.

The central role of shaving brush construction is generally ignored. Several reasons can be offered for this omission. Chief among them is an abiding lack of interest in so prosaic a subject. This omission, however, is a serious error. Nothing is more important than the careful and purposeful construction of an outstanding shaving brush. More emphatically, I submit that the skillful design and construction of the shaving brush may rank as one of the most difficult enterprises to which the modern imagination is fitted to undertake. Indeed, I currently have in

my possession a very expensive silver tip shaving brush that has never been used; however, despite its impressive appearance, the entire casing is cracked from top to bottom. Clearly, when constructed, this brush was improperly pressurized. The brush itself is over $300; my own loss entirely. Please make no mistake: Proper shaving brush construction matters.

A shaving brush consists of two basic elements: at the top is the bucket; it is attached to a second half; this element is called the grip—or casing. Together they form a basic, binary construction of both fixed and motile elements. The knot is flexible; the grip is not. If one of these elements—either bucket or grip—is incorrectly sized in relation to the other, the brush will malfunction. Indeed, the mere shift of 1/16 inch of the bucket either up or down will exert a directly alter the mixing speed of the brush, the quality of the mix produced and the shutter efficiency of the brush breech.

Second, the action of the brush bucket is a fantastically complex kaleidoscope of variation and movement. In order to build mix properly, a brush bucket needs to perform two basic functions during mixing. In addition, both of these functions must occur simultaneously. First, the brush must continuously agitate the mix; it does this by efficiently mixing the hydrate (water) with the (buffer). In Method shaving this process of mixing the hydrate and emollient is achieved through the combined action of the hard primer (in the form of a shaving cube or priming round) and wet shaving paste. In traditional brush shaving, the process is simulated through direct chemical action.

The second function the brush must simultaneously perform is to divert the compounded mix outward, away from the core of the brush itself to the outer periphery. This outer periphery is called the brush gutter. This dual process of compounding the mix and then diverting it smoothly and efficiently out to the brush periphery is simply astonishing. It is also a maddeningly difficult function for the brush manufacturer to effectively create. Invariably, one function overpowers the other. It is for this reason that all shaving brush companies (except mine) shear their gutters. Indeed, it is easier to simply shear off the gutter than build it. I disagree; the shaver will know the difference soon enough.

A mix that fails to migrate efficiently through the brush is basically unformed and inert. It is nearly impossible to easily cut. This form of asymmetric mixing is notorious in traditional shaving brushes. At the same time, even the most diligent brush construction can not completely prevent its occurrence. Ideally, the wet mix media should spontaneously charge off the primer; mix efficiently with water inside the brush bucket; and release from the brush canopy fully peaked and perfect for cutting with a new single edge, platinum blade. That this process does not always occur precisely the way I have described only proves that man is a fallen creature.

At the same time, readers should not despair. We are much closer to shaving nirvana today than mortal man has ever been.

The mere fact that a brush looks good in a picture proves nothing. In recent years various dabblers in wood turning have turned to making shaving brushes. Most of these are comically unsuitable. Indeed, it is not uncommon for these brushes to be constructed entirely in China. The more skilled U.S. producers will often insert pre-made knots to which they later add a hand turned grip. Purchase these also at your own risk. Currently in the United States nearly all shaving brushes are derived, either whole or in part, from China. Along with flammable pajamas and exploding cake mix, Chinese shaving brushes should probably be studiously avoided.

So, how does one intelligently discern the fact from the fraud? In this instance the matter is settled easily enough. If someone is offering shaving brushes for sale, it is helpful to make an effort to determine the sum of his knowledge of wet shaving. A few simple questions will admirably work to this end. Is the brush entirely hand made? Are all the elements of the brush constructed at one place? What kind of wet mix is the brush constructed to run? Is the brush casing properly pressurized? Are the gutters sheared or intact? What is the height of the knot loft? Why is it that height? And so on.

In my opinion, the best shaving brushes must absolutely be constructed by hand. A machine made shaving brush is garbage. The shaver who purchases a machine made shaving brush will always regret having done so. Having dissected numerous shaving brushes over the years, all acquired from a broadest range of producers, I can attest to the vast and important differences between the two types. At the same time, it is not surprising that nearly all brushes are machine turned. The creation of the hand made shaving brush is a difficult and tiring undertaking. Tying knots causes the joints to ache; specific errors of construction are never revealed until the entire brush in completed. When done properly, it is impossible for one person to accurately tie more than a few brush knots in a single day. Ultimately, any attempt to automate the process of brush making is pointless. Even the best machined brush is little more than a cosmetic tool. It is for this reason that brush manufacturers today load their brushes with standard knots, pre-made in China.

Ultimately, the best wet shaving experience in the world demands an incredibly close collaboration between the blender of the wet mix media, the brush manufacturer, the artificer of fine, single blade steel and, finally, the wet shaver himself. It is through this inspired collusion between passionate minds, devoted hands and sustained, thoughtful enterprise that the modern wet shaving experience acquires its infinite power to both please and transform.