Straight Razors and Straight Razor Shaving

A straight razor, or straight, is a blade that can fold into its handle or can be a non-folding straight. They are called open razors or cutthroat razors. They also have many slang names, some are due to the manufacturers names, IE; Choppers, Swedes and so on. They also make straights with disposable blades. For this article we will talk about traditional straights that are not disposable.

A little history on the straight razor. The first modern straight complete with decorated handles and hollow ground blades was constructed in Sheffield England by Benjamin Huntsman around the mid 1700's. The first straights, as we know them, were used in the 1600 era. Huntsman's process was adopted by the French sometime later. The English manufacturers were even more reluctant than the French to adopt the process and only did so after they saw its success in France. Straight razors were the most common form of shaving before the 20th century and remained so until the 1950's. Barbers were specially trained to give customers a thorough and quick shave.

Straight razors fell from fashion when King C. Gillette produced the safety razor with replaceable blades. The new safety razors were easier to use and did a fine job of beard reduction. The safety razors also required a smaller initial investment, though they cost more over time. Despite its long-term advantage, the straights lost significant market share. With the safety razor, shaving became less intimidating and men began to shave themselves more. The demand for barber shaves with straights also decreased.

With the term "cutthroat razor", it's easy to understand that a person would be hesitant to use a straight razor. There is a learning curve. I started using a straight only a short time ago; I also use a double edged safety razor for when I'm in a bit of a hurry as there is a little more to using a straight than just shaving. While I like the DE, I can't wait to shave with one of my straights. It's a big "ME" time and really relaxes me. You have to forget about everything else except for the steel on your neck. My first shave with a straight was a little nerve wracking, but after a few strokes, I knew I found something really special. In fact, I look forward to my next shave. The biggest thing with using a straight is a very sharp blade and a very light touch. Now, I'm 55 years young; and I found it very easy to use. And yes, I am still a little green to using a straight, but I won't turn back. If I can do it, anyone can. And there is a real cool factor when you see the expression on someone's face when you tell them you shave with a straight. There are even women that shave their legs with straights. Also after your initial investment you won't need to do any purchasing except for soaps. A straight razor will last for a very long time if they are taken care of and can be handed down to your grandchildren. Every time I shave with a straight, I am left with a feeling of accomplishment. You can get into straight razor shaving for a reasonable cost, and if you find it's not for you, the possibility of reselling your razor is good as the straight razor shaving community is very large and continually growing.
Getting started

You can get started with straight razor shaving fairly inexpensively. The basic items needed are a razor and a strop. Other items that you will need, and might already have, are a shaving brush, soap and other shaving items. These aren't going to be covered here.

The Razor:

You can spend anywhere from twenty dollars to several hundred dollars on a straight razor, depending on the age of the razor, the condition, the manufacturer, and the materials used. There are some good online shaving forums and communities, such as Badger and Blade, that can help you choose your first straight as well as some good online sites that sell reconditioned razors. Remember, you want a "Shave Ready" razor. These will have been honed, sharpened and made ready to use. As you are new to straight razor shaving, you will want a round point on your straight. I would also suggest starting out with a 5/8" blade as it will be easier to handle. If you do little research, you should have no problem finding a fine razor in your price range. Be careful when opening and closing the blade; you can dull the edge by hitting the scales. The scales are easy to distort, just take it slow and careful.

The Strop:

A strop is a surface used to align the edge of the blade to help keep it sharp. It also cleans and dries the edge to keep rust from forming. The most common material for a strop is leather. Your first strop will likely have a ring or clip on one end to attach to a wall, doorknob or other stationary object. Don't feel that you have to spend a bundle on your first strop. You will be learning and tuning your technique with this one, and it's likely it will be damaged by a nick from your blade.
Stropping:

The straight razor needs to be stropped before each use to align the blade for sharpness. It's also a good idea to strop after the shave to keep it clean and dry. This is where the ring or clip on your strop comes in. The strop is attached to a doorknob, wall hook or other stationary object. This is so you can pull the strop taut. You do not want the strop to bend or sag as this will roll the edge of the blade, making for an uncomfortable shave.

Before each shave you should make 30 to 40 passes on your strop. A pass is once up and back. If using a strop with a non leather, "linen" or "canvas", you should make 20 to 25 passes on the non-leather then make your 30 to 40 on the leather strop. Do not hit the razor against the strop or press hard against it. Only the weight of the razor is needed to align the blade. The blade is drawn across at a slight angle starting at the heel of the blade and ending at the point. On the return you roll the blade over and in an X pattern you start at the heal again. ALWAYS roll the blade on the spine, NOT the cutting edge. When you are at the top and rolling the blade, before you let the edge touch the strop, you can slide the razor over to start the return trip. ALWAYS lead with the spine. Do not lift the razor away from the strop at the end of the stroke; roll the razor on its spine. Do not make the mistake of trying to be fast, just work for slow and steady. A hanging strop should not need any treatment before use. The only real care it will ever need is careful use. Keeping it clean and dry is very important. Do not store the strop in the bathroom or any other room that has high humidity. If you feel like you need to treat the leather, you can use a few drops of neetsfoot oil and using your palm rub the strop. A daily palm rubbing is really all the strop should need. The more you rub it the better it will become.

The first shave or beard reduction:

DO NOT shave with a straight in the shower, just think about this. I advise you to have on at least some underwear and a t-shirt. If you do drop the razor, DO NOT try and catch it, let it go; Try not to get the scales wet, as the shank will rust and damage the razor. This will call for extra work.

On the WIKI'S in Badger and Blade they have some pointers on how to hold the blade. On your first shave you will be experiencing "drag" or "pulling" on your beard. This is normal. You need to reduce your beard. To do this you should start with a very wet lather and lay the blade almost flat against
your face and shave with the grain. Start with one side of your face, make your pass and re-lather and repeat. I started with my checks only. Others will say to go ahead and do your neck also. That's fine if you feel confident. You should repeat the reduction a few times, then if you think you are getting the feel and you think you need to, go ahead and raise the spine to give the razor a 20 to 30 degree angle. Use short strokes and a light touch. Just the weight of the razor is plenty. You also must "pull" your skin tight to raise the whiskers. The passes should be a lot smoother the shorter your beard gets. I started with just my cheeks and then went to my neck. I did, and still do, clean up with a DE razor. I can't stress enough to use a light touch. There is a learning curve but it will get smoother each time you shave. There are plenty of you tube videos on straight razor shaving and stropping; also you can get on to Badger and Blade and read the Wiki's. You can't do too much research.

Post shave:

Dry that blade! Use a stropping motion on a dry towel. This will get most of the moisture off the blade and get it ready for true stropping.

Now you can do your post shaving routine. I rinse, dry, apply witch hazel, let dry, and use an after shave or a shave balm.

Blade Storage:

Keep the straight out of reach of children. Storing straight razors on display in the bathroom when guests come over is asking for an accident. Store the straight in a dry area. The carbon steel in most of the straights can rust very fast. They do make stainless steel straights but you still need to care for them. If you live in an area with high humidity, or for long term storage, you can lightly coat the steel with mineral oil or petroleum jelly.

Have fun and enjoy using the straights. You will be experiencing some of the best shaves of your life and with a feeling of accomplishment.

They have many "hone Masters" that will sharpen your straight for you. You can get your own stones but for now, at least until you find you like using the straights, use a sharpening service.

My thanks to David Turnupseed for graciously allowing me to use his article here.