

# 361 Irwin Ash Tray and Cigarette Container

Did you ever take a high school career test? You know, one of those tools intended to help you either to decide on a career path or to determine whether the path you had chosen was really suitable. I did, and I vividly remember a question from it. The test question was simple enough: Would you rather (a) design flower pots, (b) make flower pots, or (c) sell flower pots? You had to choose your most and least favorite options. For me, designing pots won out. Making them came in as a less appealing but still respectable second choice. To say that selling flower pots was my least favorite choice is to understate the case. It was the choice from Hades. Not only “no” but “he...”, well, “emphatically no.” A life in sales was not the life for me.

A. H. Heisey & Co. relied on its salesmen. Criss-crossing the country, lugging huge trunks of full-sized samples and traveling by train (at least at the time we’re talking about), these hardy souls took orders from department stores, jewelry stores, all the up-scale outlets that Heisey favored. Even had the timing been right, you would not have found me among their ranks. For reasons I can’t fathom, some people actually *like* selling, and Heisey was fortunate to have Rodney C. Irwin among its salesmen. Fastidious, energetic, and creative, Rod would eventually become Heisey’s sales manager, a position that may have been created for him. In that role he worked closely with design and advertising, as well as field sales.

It seems Rod would have picked (c) on that flower pot question. Or would he?

In 1928, Rod was still a salesman for Heisey, working out of his native Kansas City and traveling up and down the entire middle swath of the nation. It was about then that he designed a distinctive ash tray for Heisey, one of the few smoking items in the Heisey line of production that was actually patented. Judging from his ash tray’s popularity now, he must have had a flair for design. (And indeed he did, since a few years later he also designed one of my favorite patterns, 4044 New Era.) That ash tray, of course, is 361 Irwin. As was usually the case then, Heisey did not name the piece, but some sharp researcher honored the designer after the fact.

The shape of 361 Irwin is unlike any other piece of smoking gear ever produced by Heisey. I am not aware of anything from other companies that resembles the Irwin ash tray, either, although I’d be glad to hear about it if you know of one.

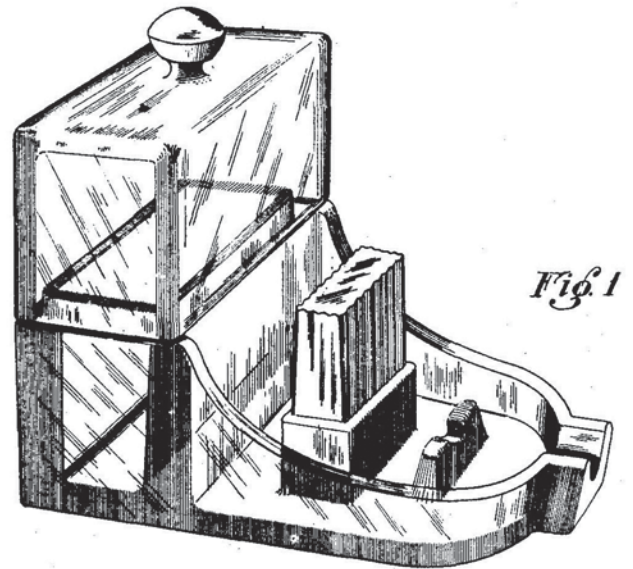
Here we have an ash tray intended for one lit cigarette. (It wasn’t billed as an “individual” ash tray, even though it clearly was.) After all my complaints and observations in the past about ash trays with no cigarette rest at all, Irwin provides, and how! This time we have an ash tray that lines up not one, but two rests, shotgun style, so that the lit cigarette is supported at both ends. The second rest is smaller, sitting right in the middle of the ash tray. No other Heisey ash tray takes cigarette support so seriously.

Just beyond that additional cigarette rest, the sides of the ash tray rise up to meet the top of the upright, rectangular, lidded box that is the container for regular-length cigarettes. The lid, really the removable upper part of the box, has a prominent, easy-to-hold knob-style handle. The whole lid fits over an inset lip, so that the lid is flush with the body of the cigarette holder.

Heisey tended to call covered cigarette containers “boxes” and open ones “holders”—not always, but most of the time. It didn’t seem to matter whether the container was round or square, upright or horizontal, alone or in combination with an ash tray. So what does the catalog call 361 Irwin? An “ash tray and cigarette container,” that’s what. Not “box,” as you might have expected. When it was patented, ah, that’s when they got it straight, right? No, now it became a “combination ash tray and cigarette holder.” Another of those frustrating inconsistencies. When you’re compulsive about getting the name right, it’s hard to know what to be compulsive *about*. The gist of this story—call it what you please and don’t fret the details, because A. H. Heisey & Co. certainly didn’t.

We’ve looked at examples of combination smoking pieces before. Several that I’ve written about were ash trays that also held matches; cigarettes had to find a home elsewhere. Still to come are at least a couple of combination cigarette holders and ash trays (no place for matches, though). Only one Heisey ash tray, 411 Tudor, also provided space for both cigarettes and matches. It used the ash tray as a cover for the cigarette holder, and getting out a fresh cigarette while holding a full ash tray may have challenged unsteady hands. (By the way, the 411 Tudor cigarette holder was called a “jar.” Sigh.) I’ll deal with Tudor more fully another time. One of Rod Irwin’s insights was to imagine a piece that did it all, holding cigarettes, matches, and ashes, and doing it stylishly and safely. So that’s how he designed and patented the Irwin ash tray.

"But wait," I hear you cry. "Where is the match holder in the Irwin ash tray?" Where, indeed? I've included one of the patent drawings for Irwin. There it is, right in front of the cigarette box, a box match stand. When Sandra Stout was putting together her book, *Heisey on Parade*, published in 1985, she took the drawing literally and stated as a matter of fact that the ash tray was manufactured both with and without the match stand, even speculating that the one with match stand was for commercial purposes and the one without was for home use. I have never seen 361 Irwin with a match stand, and I doubt that it ever was made with one. There does seem to be room where the actual specimens have just open space. My guess is that the match stand would have made the entire piece difficult to remove from the mould, or perhaps even difficult to design the mould that would permit leaving the match stand in place. If anyone has seen such a piece, please let's hear about it.



You can learn a lot looking at the patents. One thing you soon learn is that you can't rely on the patents to tell you what an actual piece looked like. Patents represent ideas, not necessarily physical reality. Somewhere between patent and production, 361 Irwin was modified and the match stand was removed. Notice another minor change—Rod's design is harder edged than the real thing. The rounded edges made production easier and discouraged chipping, a blessing to picky collectors everywhere.

Looking through Heisey's patents (made so much easier now thanks to the Heisey Collectors Club of Michigan's nice, new two-volume set, reasonably priced and available in the Gift Shop—no compensation or other inducements were given for this shameless promotion) you can find many examples of design patents that look different from the actual production pieces, but are still unmistakably designs that Heisey used. Irwin was just one of them.



The Irwin ash tray was made until 1935. That's a fair run of around seven years, so it isn't actually that rare. But it is in demand, so expect to pay a bit more for it. You can find it in the usual colors of the period: Moongleam, Flamingo, Sahara, and Marigold. Flamingo seems to be the most common color, and Marigold the least. 361 Irwin was made in crystal, too, of course. As with many ash trays, decorations are not common. Irwin is seen now and then with simple cuttings, but none of the ones I have seen appear to be from the factory. I have also seen a few pieces with gold or silver. I've never seen an etched piece, but there's no reason they couldn't exist.

Look on the bottom of the ash tray for the mark. It will be right beneath the front side of the cigarette box. If that doesn't sell you on it, I don't know what will.

### Vital Statistics

361 Irwin ash tray and cigarette container—Width, 3"; length including cigarette rest, 5 1/4"; height of ash tray at front, 7/8"; height of cigarette container to top of knop, 4 3/8"; horizontal dimensions of cigarette container, 3 1/8" X 2". Marked below front container wall.

*Would you rather (a) buy Heisey at a bargain price, (b) sell Heisey at a big profit, or (c) trade Heisey with your friends? Some choices aren't so easy, are they? But it's an easy choice to drop me a line, at [heisey@embarqmail.com](mailto:heisey@embarqmail.com).*

Eric Tankesley-Clarke