

PATENT MEDICINE SCULPTURES

by Cecil Munsey
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Tragically typical, there lies buried in the “stacks” of the University of Southern California library, among hundreds of others, a work of significant value to those interested in patent medicine history and ceramics. The document to which I refer is a master’s degree thesis slightly more than 100 pages in length and unpretentiously bound in simulated red leather. Beneath the irreverent accumulation of dust, in gold-stamped lettering, the vague title *Stoneware Forms Derived from Influences of the Early Twentieth Century* can be read.

The title page, according to tradition, explains that Rurik Leif Kallis [Figure 1] submitted the effort in 1965 – four decades ago – to the faculty of the graduate school as part of the requirements for a Master of Fine Arts degree in ceramics.

I cannot claim credit for rediscovering this intensive and scholarly paper because “Rick” Kallis is a personal friend and, through this relationship, I have long known the existence of his work. I can and do, however, share the guilt for allowing this information to remain so long unnoticed.

The purpose of the Kallis effort was to create new stoneware ceramic forms based on the endeavors of early 20th century architects and patent (or proprietary) medicine vendors. The portion of the study devoted to architecture is well done and important but regional in interest; therefore, it will not be considered in this article. The stoneware forms inspired by the activities of those involved in the patent medicine industry, on the other hand, are national in interest and, as will be shown, are quite unique.

Kallis was among the first of the thousands of Americans who have taken an active interest in the history and bottles of a turn-of-the-century America. Rick has spent literally over 50 years researching – mostly at the primary-source level – bottles and their creators. (He started digging bottles from old dumps at age 14, several years before we graduated from Helix High School in La Mesa, California.) He feels that, “*Perhaps the most common of the utilitarian objects of the early 20th century to be almost totally thrown away*

and forgotten are bottles and, in particular, patent medicine bottles.” We share this opinion and I would submit, in addition, that it is primarily because of this that thousands of Americans today spend so much of their spare energy treasure hunting for bottles.

It is well known that self-doctoring was a necessity in early America because of the severe lack of physicians and the poor state of medical knowledge. Because people needed remedies to apply to the sick, they readily accepted the claims of those people marketing proprietary medicines and purchased what amounted to liquid, powdered, and pill hope. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were truly times of extravagant advertising, extolling the medicines and cure-alls by posters,

trade cards, and medicine shows which traveled to all parts of the country.

In Kallis’s own words, the “. . . *sculptured forms inspired by these [patent medicine] bottles are humorous, authentic, and historical images of the patent medicine and the old ‘Wunderdoktor’ himself. In some cases it was a trustworthy and sadly sweet woman who concocted the remedies guaranteed to cure whatever ailed one.*”

Dr. J. Hostetter’s Stomach Bitters

Dr. J. Hostetter’s Stomach Bitters originated in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Dr. Jacob Hostetter invented the concoction and used it in his practice until his retirement in 1853. Upon retiring he gave his son, David, the formula. David, after an unsuccessful business venture in San Francisco, returned to Pennsylvania and went into a patent medicine partnership with long-time friend, George W. Smith. Smith provided the \$4,000 needed to produce the

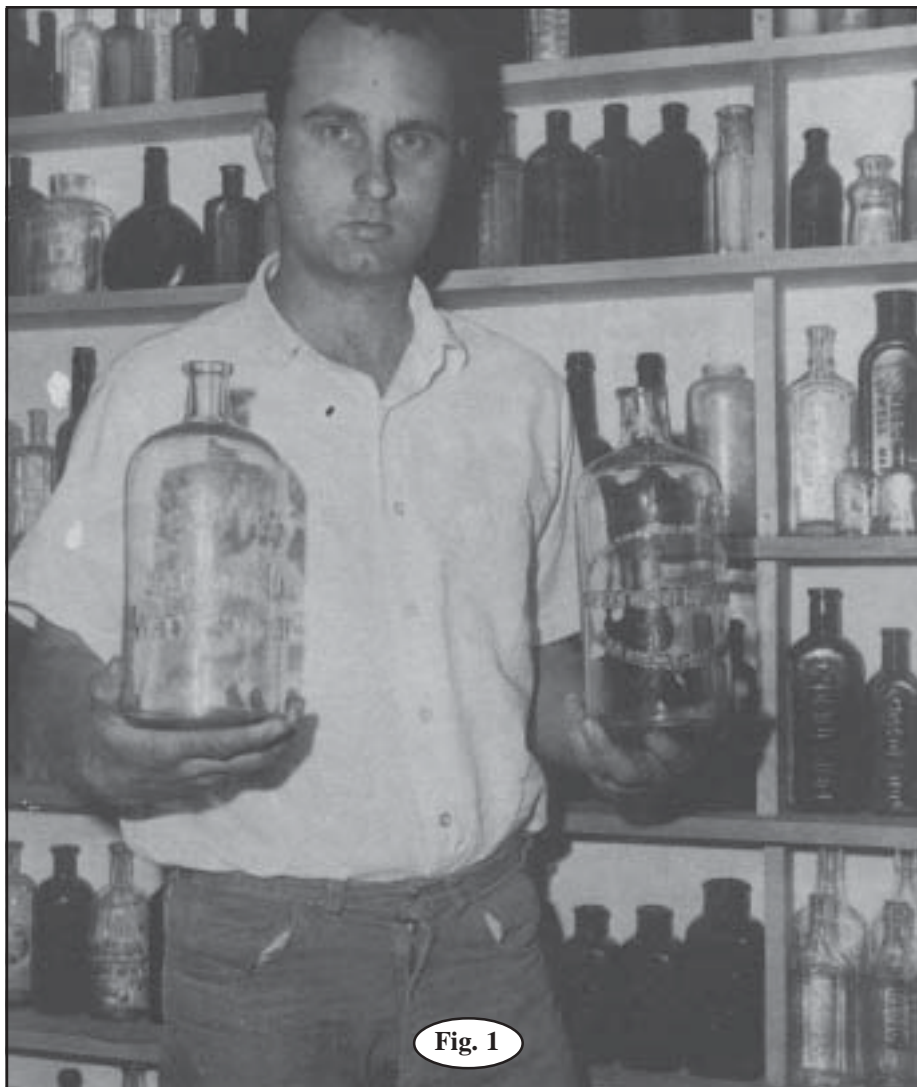


Fig. 1

first batches of Dr. J. Hostetter's Stomach Bitters, and otherwise get the business started.

The firm was successful and advertised widely – or most likely it was the other way around. The Civil War further ensured success for the product when the Union army began to order the bitters by boxcar load. The army, no doubt, found the product useful in encouraging soldiers before a battle – Hostetter's Bitters was 47 per cent (94-proof) alcohol.

The ceramic sculpture inspired by the historic product is basically in the shape of a traditional Hostetter bottle [Figure 2]. The basic shape of the square bottle was recreated with clay slab construction [Figure 3 and 4]. A thrown sphere was added to form the head which is very much a likeness of David Hostetter, as determined from an early private-die proprietary medicine revenue stamp portrait.

The embossed portions of the sculpture were achieved by adding thin slabs of clay and then cutting away the negative areas. It is interesting to note that cutting a section from a thrown bowl and attaching it to the head formed the beard. On the reverse [Figure 4] is a partial facsimile of a label complete with slogan and the Hostetter trademark, which was St. George



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

slaying a dragon.

Summarizing this effort, Kallis explained that “from an aesthetic standpoint, the waxy brown glaze gave the appearance or feeling of the earthy brown

roots and herbs supposedly used to concoct the bitters.” He also maintained that the base gave the effect of Victorian elegance and that the soft stony orange unglazed finish of the head realistically contrasted the shiny waxy glaze.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Munyon's Homeopathic Home Remedy

Munyon's Homeopathic Home Remedy is another firm that has been immortalized in a Kallis sculpture [Figures 5 and 6]. Ex-editor, book agent, musician, song writer, teacher, lawyer and preacher, James M. Munyon, a man who finally found his calling in the manufacture and promotion of patent medicines, ironically sold his nostrums by the extensive use of slogans such as “No punishment is too severe for him [sic] who deceives the sick.” History recalls Munyon as a man always dressed in black, sporting a pompadour, and wearing a stern countenance. The less formal side of the man can, perhaps, be seen somewhat in the fact that he had four wives.

Even though Munyon was found guilty of fraud and fined several times by the government, because his remedies consisted chiefly of sugar and alcohol, he continued in business and was worth several million dollars at the time of his death.

A bottle embossed “Dr. Munyon’s Cure for Asthma, Catarrh, Colds, and all Throat and Lung Diseases inspired the sculpture” and the image of Munyon put forth in his advertising. The sculpture shows not only the black clothing and stern face but also Munyon pointing upward. The latter idea was drawn from the many slogans. The slogan in particular is: *“If the Sign of the Cross were to be Destroyed, the Next Best Sign Would be the Index Finger Pointing Heavenward.”* Probably, however, the most famous of the Munyon slogans is the one found on the obverse of the Kallis sculpture, *“There is Hope! There’s a Munyon Pill for Every Ill.”* In addition to the bottle-shaped body, the sculpture features the head of “Dr.” Munyon as pictured in his many advertisements.

Rick points out for his professors that the piece was made in two parts – the legs and feet were attached separately after the initial firing. He further explains that “. . . the black glaze gave the overall piece a warm, lifelike quality.” He goes on in summary that, “The Gesture of the upraised arm, the facial expression, and Dr. Munyon’s sayings . . . gave to this sculpture further implications of the fraud he lived and sold.”

Dr. Kilmer’s Swamp-Root, Kidney, Liver and Bladder Cure

Dr. Kilmer’s Swamp-Root, Kidney, Liver and Bladder Cure is another of the classics of the patent medicine industry to be treated in sculpture by bottle collecting ceramist Rick Kallis. S. Andral Kilmer, M.D., and his salesman-brother, Jonas M. Kilmer, originated the product in 1879. The combined talents of doctor and business acumen made their firm an immediate and lasting success – some of their products are still sold today.

While the brothers were successful in business, they could not tolerate each other personally. In 1890 Jonas bought out S. Andral and took in as a partner his son, Willis Sharpe Kilmer. Together they developed the business at a fantastic rate. In 1902, an eight-story building of cast concrete, in Binghamton, New York, was constructed to house the giant firm.

Again, the resulting sculpture [Figures 7 and 8] was inspired by bottles and advertising literature. The body is made in replication of a Swamp-Root bottle. The head is a realistic rendering of Dr. Kilmer as he was pictured on labels and so forth. The folded arms represent small vials used



by the firm to contain Parilla Liver Pills and samples of Swamp-Root. The base is quite symbolic in that it represents mangrove roots growing in the water of a swamp.

Dr. Miles' Restorative Nervine

The Dr. Miles' Laboratories of Elkhart, Indiana, made Dr. Miles' Restorative Nervine. This historic firm began in the 1870s and still sells proprietary products today. Some of the firm's most popular products include New Heart Cure, Anti Pain Pill, Little Pills, and, of course, Restorative Nervine, their most popular item.

The Kallis sculpture inspired by Dr. Miles and his products is illustrated in **Figures 9** and **10**. This particular piece, as will be noted, is two-faced. One face [**Figure 9**], in pain, displays exposed nerves and is obviously symbolic of a person before taking Dr. Miles' Restorative Nervine. The other face [**Figure 10**] symbolizes a person who has gained relief through the use of Nervine. The postures portrayed are also significant: **Figure 9** features the beseeching outstretched arms of a man in pain; and **Figure 10** shows the folded arms of contentment and/or relief.

As in the other sculptures discussed, the body is a replica of the firm's most popular bottle and the head is a lifelike rendering of Dr. Miles. Also, the arms in **Figure 10** represent vials sold by Dr. Miles' Laboratories. This sculpture is also of two-piece construction.

The Mother's Friend

Bradfield Regulator Company of Atlanta, Georgia, was also one of the giant patent medicine firms of turn-of-the-century America. Their main product was The Mother's Friend; and like the others selected by Kallis, it was a truly national item.

From the advertising slogans one can easily imagine the purpose of this particular medicine. One slogan was, "Shortens the duration of labor:" another was, "Causes an unusually easy and quick delivery." One wonders about the effectiveness of this nostrum; government chemists found that the medicine consisted of oil, soap, and 20 percent alcohol (40 proof).

Here again the bottle provided Kallis with the basic inspiration for the Sculpture [**Figures 11** and **12**]. The head,

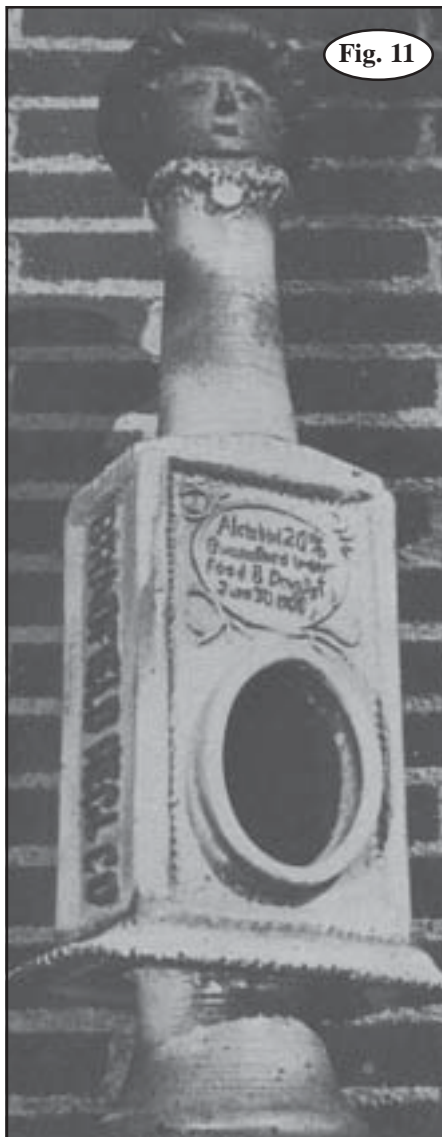


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

instead of resembling any one specific person, was designed mostly to show a woman's hairstyle of the period. Possibly the most striking feature of this piece is the hole in the front [**Figure 11**]; it provides a peek into this very symbolic orifice revealing the figure of a baby.

Kallis's own conclusions about the results of this creation are well taken: "This particular sculpture struck a note of pathos, of tenderness, and sorrow, and even worry to the observer. It appealed to, and stirred the emotions with, apprehension, and yet, with the fervent hope that some of the claims for the remedy as advertised could be true."

Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound

Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, perhaps the most famous of all patent medicines, is the subject of the last of the Kallis sculptures to be shown

and discussed here. Although Lydia Pinkham was born in 1819, it was not until 1875 that the family began to commercially produce and promote Lydia's vegetable compound. They went into business as a last attempt to rebuild the family fortune.

Though the first few years were a struggle, they finally began to profit from their efforts. Advertising, as is most always the case, was the chief reason for success. Lydia herself died in 1883, but the Pinkham Company kept her alive in the consumer's eyes by urging women to write to Lydia concerning their personal female problems and by wording their literature to make it appear that Lydia was still active in the business. Literally millions of dollars have been spent (40 or so) over the years to keep Lydia's face before the public. Such practices made Lydia the most famous and familiar female face of the 19th century.

The oval bottle easily dominates the sculpture inspired by Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound [Figure 13]; this is especially true since there are no arms on this piece. The head is a rather abstract and again a symbolic reproduction of Lydia as she was so often pictured.

While Rurik Kallis has produced more of the stoneware ceramic forms than were presented here, the ones shown are truly representative of his skill, not only as a ceramist but also as a student of history. With the exception of the Lydia E. Pinkham sculpture, which is about 18 inches in height and weighs about 10 pounds, the other pieces are about two feet tall and weigh from 20 to 25 pounds.

I think the appreciative reader can now better understand more my opening remarks and share my concern about allowing Mr. Kallis's artistic and scholarly work to continue to remain buried in the archives of the University of Southern California. His study and the resulting sculptures are truly worthy of notice and praise by those of us interested in ceramics as an art form.

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