

Photographic Proof

Charlie Harris, Ooltewah, TN 37363

There are over 1500 different glass baby bottles made in the United States alone and who knows how many there are in all those other countries. Many are common, some are quite rare and all but unobtainable. You would think that with all of these glass baby bottles around that there would be no need for substitutes, but that is not the case at all. My mother-in-law remembers putting a rubber nipple on an old green Coca-Cola bottle to feed my wife when she was an infant and that was in the prosperous 1940s after WWII. They were a small farm family in southeast Tennessee and had to make do with what they had on hand.

Up until the 1920s the breast was the preferred method of feeding babies. In fact, it is known that many fathers paid little or no attention to their children till they were about 6 or 7 years old because the childhood death rate was so high that they didn't feel secure in becoming close to their child, only to lose it to disease. If the child made it to that age their continued survival rate was considered to be well above average.

If the mother was unable to feed her young, there always seemed to be some

"wet-nurses" available for the task — those women who had weaned themselves from their small child or those that even had birthed a child just for the purpose of hiring themselves out as a "wet-nurse," as the pay for that profession was quite good for a woman at that time. Surprisingly, some of the women that birthed a child just for this purpose often relegated their own child out to an orphanage for adoption. Sounds desperate, doesn't it?

Yes, I know that we are always hearing old stories that are handed down to us from relatives and friends and many of them are to be taken with a grain of salt. "Oh, well, yes, that sounds interesting." "You got any proof to substantiate that story?" "That's what my grand-pappy told me so it's gotta be true, isn't it?"

When Teresa and I started collecting these old baby bottles, nothing thrilled us more than occasionally locating in an antique store these old photographs of babies actually using the bottles that we were collecting. You cannot ask for any better documentation than that of a photo taken over 100 years ago.

The first ones that really excited us were those of babies actually using the "Murder" bottles. "Murder" bottles you say? Yes. These were the ones that had a cork with a hole through it that stuck down in the neck of the baby bottle. On the inside of the bottle was a tiny glass straw fixed into the end of a rubber hose running through the cork and on up to a ivory or bone disc, topped by a nipple through which the infant sucked the milk. The reason that these bottles were referred to as "Murder" bottles was that the hose apparatus couldn't be cleaned very well and the doctors didn't yet know what bacteria were. The bacteria that was left to grow inside the under-cleaned hose were the real killers. The TV series of "Doctor Quinn, Medicine Woman" did a wonderful show on just this incident a few years ago.

Then we started finding an occasional photograph of an infant drinking from a "murder-type" bottle that we could not identify as any known or catalogued baby bottle. Then I remembered my wife's mother telling the story about using the old green Coca-Cola bottle as a baby bottle and things began to come into focus.

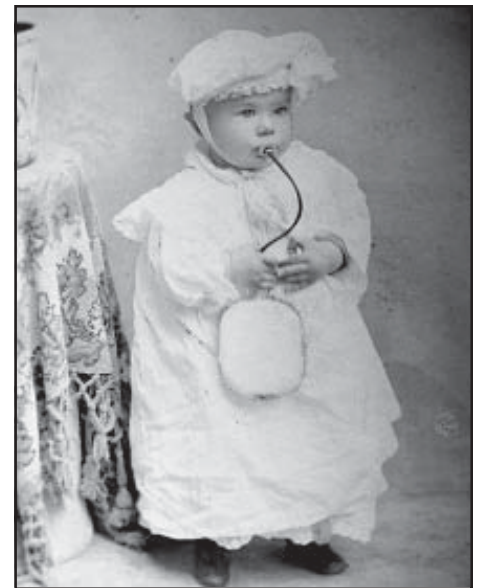
We were obtaining photographic proof of the use of different whiskey and old patent medicine bottles being used as baby



A little girl on the front porch of her home holding a Patent Medicine bottle with a huge nipple on it. Note the hob-nailed boots that she is wearing. This photo was most likely taken by a traveling photographer, of which there were many roaming the countryside. The photo probably dates to about 1900.



A wonderful studio shot of a little girl with her rectangular Patent Medicine bottle with the nipple in her mouth. This photo was taken about 1860.



This beautiful little girl is holding one of the murder bottles with its uncleanable hose and nipple. But this is not a baby bottle. It is a nice Pumpkin Seed whiskey bottle having been transformed for that double duty after Daddy finished using it for his purposes. The Pumpkin Seed bottle was one of the more commonly used whiskey bottles for feeding infants.

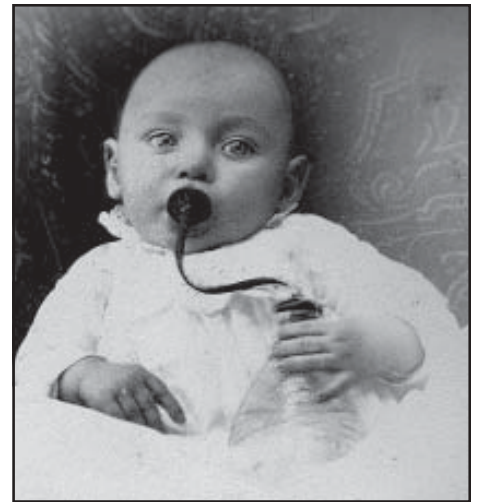
feeding bottles. Things were rough in many parts of the country, especially in the Deep South after the Civil War, when almost nothing could be obtained, even if you did have the money to buy it with. Quite often in poorer communities a hard working, or sometimes deadbeat, dad could always obtain a bottle of booze to relax his overworked body and brain, to the detriment of his wife and kids. After he finished it, Mama could confiscate it and use the bottle to feed her youngster.

As you will notice from these photos, that have substitute baby bottles in them, that they are not always studio shots, but just taken on the front porch of their abode by a traveling photographer, of which there were many. The better known baby bottles are usually spotted in the studio shots of families who were affluent enough to have their portraits taken in such posh places.

Do you have some favorite photos of babies with their Feeding Bottles? Please make some good scans and send them in to us for future use in articles for *Bottles and Extras* or for the ACIF's "Keeping Abreast."



This baby is sucking its milk from the very scarce La Forme's Nursing Bottle which was patented in 1859. I firmly believe that some of this type baby bottle may actually be residing in someone's collection of Ink Wells. The photo probably dates not much later than the 1880s.



This baby is sucking out of The Little Papoose baby bottle. This bottle was actually made in Great Britain for the American Market. It was patented in 1864 and is the first baby bottle known to have been imported into the United States. The bottle is hard to see but it is a turtle with the entire top surface to look like an Indian child strapped in its cradle backboard. Notice the hose has been sucked flat — I'm surprised that the eyes aren't popping out if its eye sockets. This photo also dates to the 1870-80s.



This is one of my favorites. It is Grandpa with two little ones on his lap. Both are using the Murder Bottles with the nipple ends in their mouths. On the left you can also see the ivory disc that prevents the swallowing of the nipple. The left child is using the scarce Coffin (murder??) bottle while the younger one on the right is using a standard half-pint whiskey bottle. This photo dates about 1900-1910.



This photo appears to be twins, both sucking out of murder bottles. The bottle on the left is mostly hidden, but the one on the right is very readable as to the maker. It is embossed "PERFECT CRADLE NURSER." They appear to be very happy suckers.



This happy little boy has just finished his meal from the Betsy Brown Nursing Flask. The nipple is huge, for this is only an 8-ounce bottle. It is easily identified by the aluminum collar that is screwed down over the nipple, keeping it from being pulled off.

Charles S. Harris
 6808 Benwood Drive
 Ooltewah, TN 37363
 relicnut@bellsouth.net