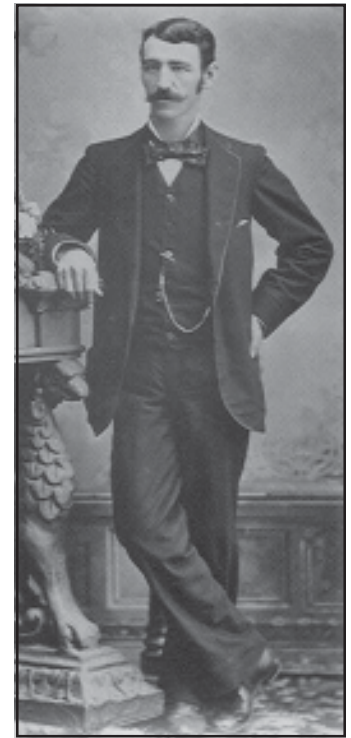
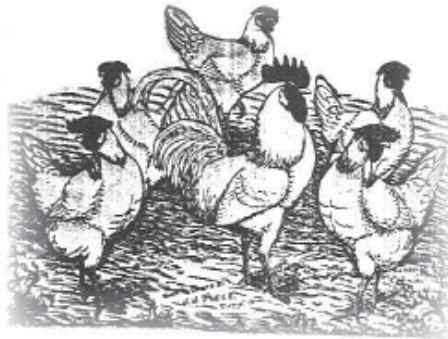


Flecks of Color, Hues of Spring

By Joe Terry



Jacob J. Fleck
Photo taken circa 1874-1875

Every spring, people all over the world begin dyeing. No, no; not dying, dyeing. The Christian holiday of Easter actually dates back even farther to pagan traditions of giving colored eggs representing birth and life.

As the centuries have passed, the concept of gift-giving has changed. It has, like so many of our religious and historic holidays, evolved into a commercial opportunity devoid of meaning.

Today we make major purchases of toys, candy, eggs and boxes of pill-shaped dyes. Store shelves are filled with chintzy, garish facsimiles of products from years gone by. I am old enough now to look wistfully back to my childhood days, when my siblings and I dipped eggs until our hands resembled Impressionist paintings. We did it with one brand of dye, the brand our parents used, and their parents used. That brand was Fleck's. But who was Mr. Fleck and how did he come to make a business out of Easter?

His full name was Jacob J. Fleck. Born in Findlay, Ohio to German natives Joseph and Barbara Fleck, he first saw the light of day on May 6, 1853. He attended the local schools, and in off hours helped out around his parents' grocery store. When a teenager, he took an interest in pharmacy, acquiring a job in one of the local drugstores. He was a quick learner, and his mastery of both English and German made him a valuable member of the staff. At age twenty, he had saved enough money to take lessons in his chosen profession.



Haven and Fleck, 305 N. Main St.,
Findlay, Ohio circa 1879

He lived in Philadelphia for over a year, taking classes at that city's School of Pharmacy. He left in 1874 and returned home to Findlay, where he resumed his former position. The store's owner, William Haven, was ecstatic to have him back. In 1877,

William accepted Jacob as a full-fledged partner. There was more than enough business for them, but Jacob was not satisfied. He invested his money in other drugstores, in small area towns like Gilboa, Dunkirk and McComb. He played the role of silent partner in these stores, unable to be in all places at once.

One drugstore could be enough for any one man. Not only were there prescriptions to fill, but shelves needed stock and drugs and chemicals needed to be purchased. Everything from morphine to shaving soap; tobacco, flavoring, pens, remedies, ammonia and aniline dyes — all needed constant attention. Some were constant sellers, others saw more seasonal demand. Despite the strenuous schedule, Jacob was dissatisfied. Being a partner in four stores was, to Jacob, a bit like being a bridesmaid but never the bride.

Thus, in 1883, when an opportunity opened, Jacob was quick to latch onto it. He sold his investments, shook hands with his various partners, particularly Mr. Haven, and boarded a train headed east. It was an uneventful trip — all of nearly thirty miles of it. He embarked the next county over, in the city of Tiffin. Not far from the station was the imposing brownstone edifice known as the Shawhan Hotel. A stop at the desk inside the well-appointed lobby obtained a room overlooking the intersection of Washington and Perry streets. There, on a corner across the street, sat a store emblazoned with "Ullrich and Son." In a few days, it would be his.

The late summer heat was oppressive, but fans kept the hotel dining room cool. Jacob met up with Lewis Ullrich, the owner. In no time at all, the deal was hammered out. Lewis gave up pharmacy for horticulture, and Jacob owned his own store. He knew a great deal about the business, and set about cleaning out old stock and updating the store from its decade-old accumulation of goods. He spent 12 hours a day there, taking his meals and sleeping nights

M. G. WITSCHNER & CO.
Successor to J. J. FLECK,
DRUGGISTS AND PHARMACISTS,
OPP. SHAWHAN HOUSE, TIFFIN, O.
Trusses, Supporters, Shoulder Braces, Perfumes, Hair, Cloth and Tooth Brush-
es. Fine line of Cigars. Best line of Posters' Sponges in the city.
Physician's Prescriptions a Specialty.

Mr. Witschner took over in 1890,
but his ownership was short lived. He died in 1900.

at the Shawhan. In the process, he met another local druggist, the eccentric Isaac L. St. John. The two spent many an evening discussing the town, business and the economy. It was from Isaac that Jacob learned that there was more money to be made in making your own medicines than in compounding prescriptions.

Jacob took over the store with little pomp and ceremony. He changed signs, but kept the existing staff. Many of the medicines lining the shelves were removed, as Jacob knew they had little or no curative properties. Instead, he began manufacturing a few under his own name. These at first were those medications most often asked for by his clientele. As trust in his name grew, so too did his business.

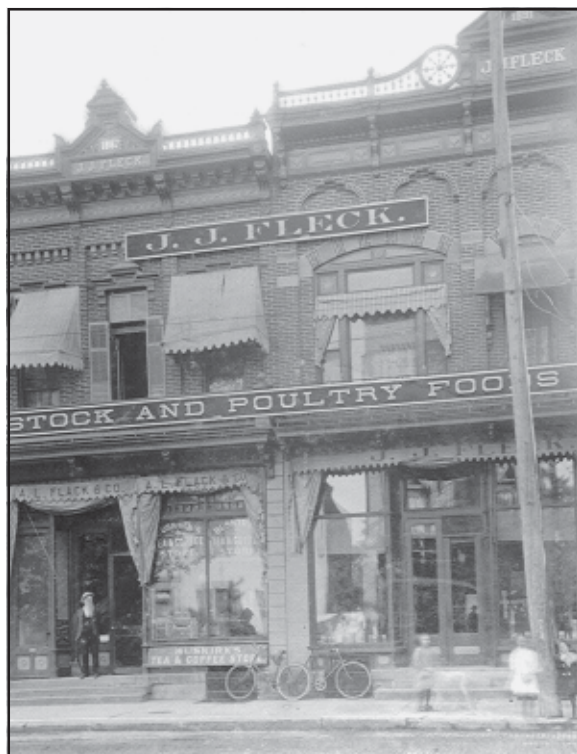
All this while Jacob remained a bachelor. He was not unattractive, but spared little time for a social life. It wasn't until he was in Pennsylvania a few years later, visiting old friends in Philadelphia, that a lady caught his eye. Her name was Clara Houck, part of a successful manufacturing family. They owned a large factory that manufactured paper (cardboard) boxes. The couple married in 1888, first living on Ohio Avenue, and later moving to a custom-built residence on Sycamore Street.

Jacob poured his heart and soul into both his business and his marriage. The drugstore was doing well, especially since the hiring of a promising young man named

Martin. Jacob spent a great deal of time mixing and compounding his remedies, particularly his own brand of veterinary medicines. He could not manufacture them fast enough, as they left the shelves just as quickly as they were stocked. Realizing that he was on the edge of a financial windfall, Mr. Fleck opted to turn almost exclusively to his fledgling business. In 1890, he sold his drugstore to his up and coming clerk, Martin G. Witschner. The 24-year-old was thrilled to have the store, though Jacob remained as a partner until the young man earned enough to purchase all of the interest.

Mr. Fleck moved up the street, to 5 S. Washington, overlooking the Sandusky River. From here, he had much more room and fewer responsibilities, and so manufacturing was greatly increased. He listed himself variously as a wholesale druggist and a medicine manufacturer. A dozen men were eventually hired, mixing powders, filling boxes and buckets, labeling, packing and shipping Fleck's remedies all over the country. Gall powders, condition powders, stock food, lice exterminators, heave remedies and others comprised the basis for a booming business. So well did they sell, and so proud of them was Jacob, that he even had a display of them photographed for posterity.

A few years into his successful



J.J. Fleck's store and manufactory at 187-189 S. Washington Street. Photo circa 1900. Note the left hand store belongs to A.L. Flack, not J.J. Fleck.

operations, the business building he had moved to no longer was sufficient for effective manufacture. Up the street, approaching the German Catholic Church, were two buildings side by side with suitable space available. Jacob moved into 161 S. Washington Street, next door to a grocer named A.L. Flack. Jacob eventually bought out his neighbor, taking over both locations. In 1913, due to the destruction caused by that year's great flood, street numbers were shifted, changing Fleck's to 187-189 S. Washington. This remained unchanged until the end.

Animal medicines provided a steady income, but they were not the only products bearing the Fleck name. Jacob marketed laundry bluing, witch hazel ointment and chewing gum. Chewing gum had been around for years, but had seen a surge in popularity in the 1890s. While many frowned on it as uncouth, the rest enjoyed the many brands and flavors flooding the market. Aficionados were delighted with his



Jacob's first store in Tiffin, at 51 S. Washington Street, across from the Shawhan Hotel, which was later sold to his drug clerk. Note the banner flapping in the breeze for H.G.O. Cary's remedies from Zanesville, Ohio.



Woodcuts from "Fleck's Facts," a turn of the century veterinary guide for farmers, teamsters, horse and cattle owners and poultry raisers. Jacob himself was a poultry fancier and the chickens illustrated on the title page were some of his prize winners.



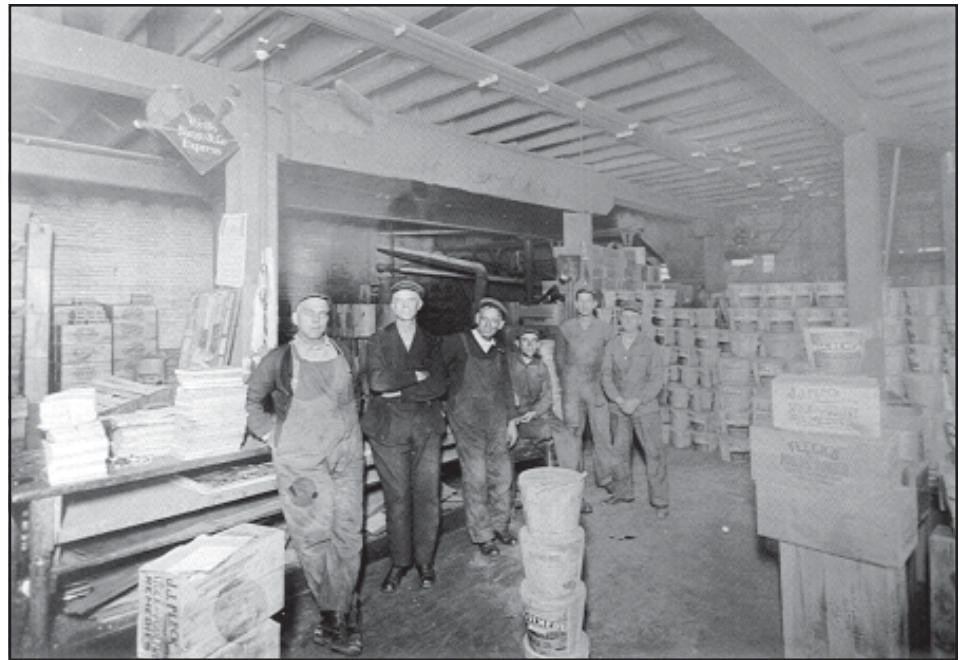
Rightfully proud? Not everyone had photographs taken of their products.

gum, but perhaps over-indulgence led to his toothache gum, a product made for and sold to dentists up into the 1960s.

As the business expanded, so too did the Fleck family. Clara was some 13 years Jacob's junior. The couple's first child, Walter, was born in 1891, followed by Philip, Lila, Genevieve, Charles, Vincent and lastly twins Beatrice and Hildegard. The youngsters became fixtures at the store,



If the gum wasn't a mouthful, the name certainly was - *Fleck's Wild Cherry Phosphate Chewing Gum.*



Workmen upstairs at Fleck's, packing up various products. Note the wooden buckets full of powders.

to the delight of customers and workers alike. As they got older, some of them were given jobs at the store; cleaning, selling, packing and office work.

Going into the Roaring Twenties, business was good. But the decade was to pose problems heretofore not dealt with by the Fleck family. In March of 1920, fire destroyed a warehouse, reducing to ash the building and its contents. The loss amounted to several thousand dollars. Within that decade two family members died. In 1926, Charles, Vincent and a neighbor boy were enjoying an autumn boat ride on the Sandusky River. The motor on their craft quit running, and Vincent jumped out to try to tow the boat to shore. It got away from him, and the remaining two stayed in hopes of restarting the engine. But the boat went over the dam and both drowned. Vincent suffered nothing more than pneumonia. However, this weakened his health and in 1929 he died in Colorado while under treatment for tuberculosis.

These hardships were just a preparation for the upcoming

1930s, with the devastating Great Depression. Still, overall, the Flecks did not suffer as did many. Jacob was a shrewd businessman, and always kept plenty of money saved in case of emergencies. His products were still popular, as many customers had found them to be worth the money paid for them, even one whose name contained a bit of off-color humor.

Back in the mid 1890s, Jacob compounded a treatment for corns. It was nothing special, just a recipe from a druggist's formulary. It was the same thing he would have made if someone had asked him personally for a remedy. What he



Jim Crow, a derogatory name for southern Negroes, had been around for decades before Jacob decided to play off of the name. Perhaps inspired by his egg dyes, Jacob sold Jim Crow in bright yellow tins trimmed in black. Here you can see Martin G. Witschner's drug store window filled with nearly a hundred Jim Crow advertisements.

needed for it to sell was a gimmick. The one he chose was risky, as it was already a well known term. He called his concoction Jim Crow Corn Salve. This being “the North” and all, the term didn’t generate the negative sentiment it would have in the South. It also helped that Jacob used a black crow on the tin instead of the stereotypical slave depiction. Turning a racial slur into a marketing success was unlikely, but it worked. Jim Crow, in its 10-cent tin, was an immediate hit. Martin Witschner, from his new store at 25 S. Washington Street, promoted his mentor’s product with unabashed brown-nosing. He filled the front windows with hundreds of ad cards, pamphlets and tins. Impressed, Jacob had the display immortalized by a local photographer.

Equally popular was his seasonal specialty of Easter Egg Dyes. While they had originally cost only five cents, the passage of time had raised them to a whopping dime. But they almost came to a complete halt. For years, the dyes had come from Germany. Problems with importing them during World War I had shown the troubles with an unsteady supply, but World War II proved it outright. Nothing came into this country, and materials and supplies were desperately needed for the war effort, diverting dye production to other uses. At Easter, many were left using onion skins, red beet juice, and other natural dyes for their eggs. After the war, dyes were once again available for the springtime holiday. Jacob bought large batches of the dyes and in the confines of his Washington Street buildings, workers would scoop tiny portions of them into small wax paper envelopes. As the years went by, the old aniline dyes were deemed unsafe for culinary use, and the Food and Drug Administration forbid their utilization as egg dyes. Thus began a new series of headaches for the Flecks: keeping up with federal regulations concerning the agents they used.

Jacob had no worries in these matters. During the height of World War II, he succumbed to old age. He died on April 13, 1942. As a business leader, his obituary made front page news, but the Nazis stole his glory. In years gone by, his obituary would have been several columns in length. But on that date, a few hurried lines about his life was all that could be spared. His beloved Clara followed him to the grave two years later, leaving the firm in the hands of the second generation.

The development of antibiotics during the war lessened the need for veterinary preventatives and remedies. These were discontinued, and more effort was made to promote the Easter egg dyes. Making a sole business out of egg dyes was no easy project. It was a niche market, and seasonal to boot. The number one brand was Paas, the brainchild of an East Coast druggist. The second slot was filled by Chick Chick brand, sold by Fred Fear and Company of New York. Both of these dealers had location and size to their advantage. How many people even knew where Tiffin, Ohio was? Well, actually, quite a few folks did. It was known for its college, its glass and the rest of its manufacturing interests. There was a grind wheel factory, a pottery, an art metal shop – so why not an egg dye manufacturer?

Into the 1950s, Fleck’s could be found on store shelves all over the country. It was in particular the Midwest brand of choice. Still, Fleck’s remained No. 3, unable to challenge its competitors. That is, until 1971. Unexpectedly, the Chick Chick brand was placed on the market. In a stroke of luck, and with a bit of money, the No. 3 dye maker became No. 2. New boxes carried a combination of the name - “Fleck’s Chick Chick” for the duration of their existence. They never made it to No. 1 in sales, but they were first in other categories. In 1956, the federal government loosened restrictions on the sale of 700 products to “Red nations.” Fleck’s were the first to export egg dyes to China, and maintained

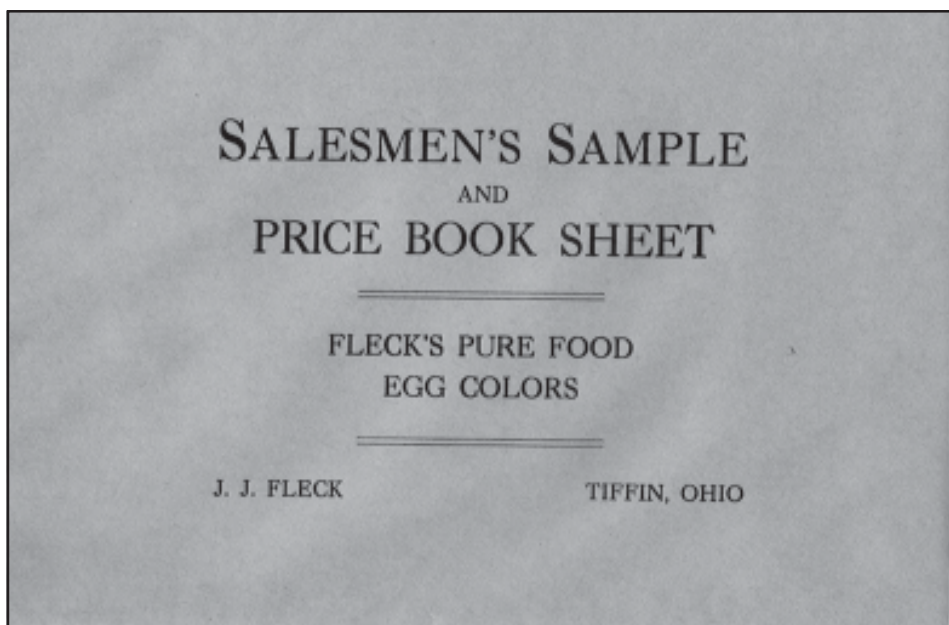
a friendly relationship with the communist country for several decades. Sadly, today most egg dyes are made there, and imported to America.

For decades, the business was headed by Hildegard “Becky” Fleck, the youngest daughter of the originator. The author was lucky enough to be granted an interview with this remarkable lady in 1981. She was a bright, witty woman, quick with an answer, even if it was “I don’t know!” The photographs shown here were courtesy of her. She even gave me several of her father’s pharmaceutical books, which I still have.

One of her favorite stories was how the late winter snow that accumulated around the store would be tinted a rainbow of colors from powder escaping out of open windows. The workers, too, would often go home bearing evidence of the profession. This didn’t deter their loyalty, for some employees, mostly women, stayed on 30 years or more.

When the company closed in 1997, its effects were sold at auction. I was not aware of this until after the sale. I do not feel that I am the loser for it. I have Becky’s stories, copies of the photographs, a few mementoes, and by and large, a happy childhood, thanks to Fleck’s. Yet there is an emptiness, an unfulfilled longing; a mournful shade of blue. Fleck’s is no more.

Becky died a year after the sale, succumbing to old age on February 21, 1998.



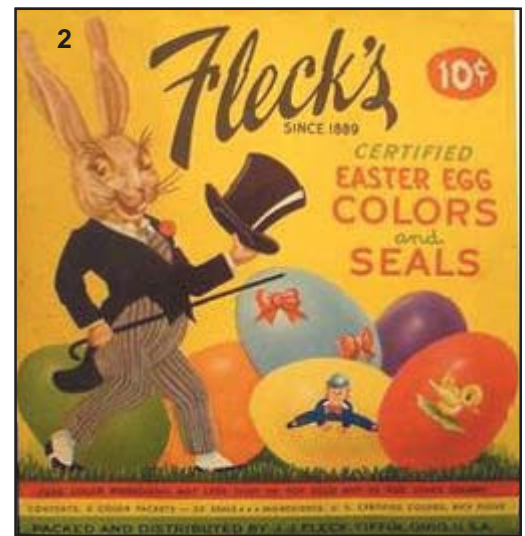
Salesman’s price book sheet from the 1930s.



Left: More color to please the eye, a multi-hued cardboard container for Fleck's Heave Remedy. All of Fleck's veterinary remedies came in such eye-catching colors. While the costs of such packaging was more expensive, the difference was made up in increased sales. Above: Fleck's Toothache Gum was sold to dentists. This one was a gift from my dentist back in the 1970s (and yes, it was old even then!). Right: Jim Crow Corn Salve tin.



A timeline of Fleck's dyes (clockwise from top): Number 1 is from the 1930s. Numbers 2 and 3 marked solely as "Fleck's" are from the 1950s and 1960s. The Chick Chick box (number 4) is also from the 1950s, made by the Fred Fear and Company. The Fleck's Chick Chick box (number 5) is one of many styles used from 1971 to 1996. Some were "Psyco-colors," others proclaimed "space fun with astro easter eggs." The kit shown may be one of the last, as the others in the author's collection are price-marked with 79-cents, 89-cents and 98-cents. Those with no price left it up to the retailer.



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