

“Often a bridesmaid but never a bride” LISTERINE®

Copyright © 2006 By Cecil Munsey

Not many bottle diggers can say they have been messing around in a middle-aged dump and have not discovered a LISTERINE bottle. For sure I can't say that! I frequently said something to the effect of "... another #%*&# Listerine bottle!"

Those bottles never did and still don't have much monetary value. But like so many other common bottles we take for granted, they have at least historical value. I guess that is one reason why we named our national organization the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors. The common Listerine bottle and the product it contained are steeped in historic value and are, therefore, of a good deal of interest.

Listerine® is a brand name for antiseptic mouthwash [Figure 1]. It was named after Dr. Joseph Lister (1827-1912) – father of modern antiseptics [Figure 2] – who,

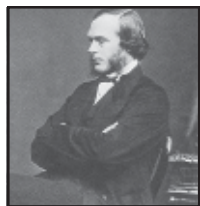


Figure 2

in 1865, performed the first ever antiseptic surgery. 1879 – The original amber-colored Listerine Antiseptic was formulated by Dr. Joseph Lawrence and Jordan Wheat Lambert. But it wasn't designed as a mouthwash; it was actually intended to be a disinfectant for surgical procedures. It was also sold during its early years as a floor cleaner and a cure for gonorrhea – good luck with that latter claim.

1881 – Listerine® Antiseptic was licensed by Jordan Wheat Lambert and registered as a trademark of his newly formed Lambert and Co.

1895 – While the product was first used as a multi-purpose antiseptic, soon it was discovered to be excellent for killing germs commonly found in the mouth. So, the Lambert Company marketed Listerine® to the dental profession as a "... new powerful antiseptic for the mouth."

As a mouthwash it wasn't a runaway

success until the 1920s, when it was pitched as a solution for "chronic halitosis." As the advertising scholar James Twitchell wrote about the coining of the word halitosis by the Lambert Company, "Listerine did not make mouthwash as much as it made halitosis." In just seven years, because of its supposed "triumph" over bad breath, the company's revenues rose from \$115,000 to more than \$8 million.

1914 – Prescription Listerine® Antiseptic was so effective and popular it became one of the first prescription products [Figure 3] to be made available over-the-counter, thereby founding the mouthwash category.

Advertising has a long history in the U.S., but professional "ad agencies" didn't appear till the late nineteenth century. The first agencies concentrated heavily on patent medicines, an unregulated field before the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Legislation, where manufacturers made elaborate claims. Listerine was no exception.

Besides capitalizing on worries about health, ad agencies early on recognized that people were anxious about social status – about appearing prosperous or comfortable, wealthy, and "up-to-date."

1921 – It was Gerard Lambert, one of the two sons of founder Jordan Wheat Lambert (? – 1917), who coined the term "Halitosis" for what we now call bad breath. It's a derivative of the Latin word Halitus meaning "breath" and the Greek ending "osis" often used to describe a medical condition.

[Records mentioning bad breath have been discovered that date to more than 3,000 years ago – all the way back to 1550 B.C.]

The 1920s were years advertising agents most focused their attention on identifying – often inventing – personal anxieties that could be resolved by the purchase of specific products. Listerine used their coined word, halitosis. The Lambert Brothers launched an ad campaign that played heavily on fears

about how others would react to a halitosis sufferer. The most famous of their ads concerned the "pathetic" case of "Edna" who was "often a bridesmaid but never a bride" – [Figure 4]. She was approaching the "tragic" thirtieth birthday unmarried because she suffered from halitosis – "a disorder you, yourself, rarely know when you have it. And even your closest friends won't tell you."



Figure 4



Figure 3



Figure 5

The answer to halitosis was supposedly Listerine® mouthwash, an amber liquid packaged in a glass bottle [Figure 5]. The bottles were packed inside a paper-wrapped, disposable cardboard tube for 80 years (1912-1992). The ad pictured indicates how the product looked in 1925 with its art deco design by the famous graphic designer Maximilian Fyscher. And it points out that Lambert Pharmacal Company of St. Louis had offices in Toronto, London, Melbourne, Paris, Madrid, and Mexico City. Plastic bottles were introduced in 1994 and glass bottles were retired.

Bottle collectors mostly find clear glass bottles [Figure 6] embossed LISTERINE



Figure 6

around the shoulder and LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY around the base [Figure 7]. Between the two embossments a paper label like the one shown as Figure 8 was placed. The circa 1900 bottles pictured are examples of the first bottles to contain Listerine. They were made by the Obear-Nester Glass Company, as



Fig. 7



Fig. 9

indicated on the bottle's bottom [Figure 9], of East St. Louis, Illinois. The bottles pictured as Figure 6 are from left to right are 6 7/8," 5 1/2," and 4 1/4" tall.

The active ingredients of Listerine® are menthol, thymol, methyl salicylate, and eucalyptol. Perhaps of more interest, ethanol or grain alcohol is present in concentrations between 21 and 26 percent – 42° and 52° (proof) and "... serves to dissolve the active ingredients and to facilitate the penetration of the active ingredients into dental plaque." (That's probably more honest than turn-of-the-twentieth-century patent medicine vendors



Figure 8

who claimed their highly alcoholic nostrums contained lots of alcohol "... to preserve the active ingredients.)

William R. Warner & Company, manufacturer of various sugar-coated pill-making equipment, acquired many companies over the years. In 1956 Warner purchased Lambert Pharmacal [sic] Company (and Listerine®). The new firm became Warner-Lambert. Pfizer purchased Warner-Lambert in 2000 and in 2001 the Pfizer Consumer Healthcare division – its mouthwash division – saw a 4 percent increase in sales to \$2.4 billion. Listerine is its largest product line. In 2006 Pfizer was sold (with Listerine®) to Johnson & Johnson.

Regarding advertising slogans, by 1983 the term "halitosis" had been somewhat sidelined by "Listerine fights plaque." In 1970, the ad agencies were promoting Listerine® with, "The taste you hate twice a day." Today, Listerine "Kills germs that cause bad breath."

All in all for bottle collectors the history of Listerine and its bottles, it is suggested, leaves a good taste in your mouth (pun intended).

References

Books:

Fox, Stephen. *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators*. New York: Random House, 1984.

Lears, Jackson. *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*. New York: Harper Collins, 1995.

Marchand, Roland. *Advertising The American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Levitt, Steven D. and Dubner, Stephen J. *FREAKONOMICS A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*. New York: William Morrow, 2005.

Munsey, Cecil. *The Illustrated Guide to COLLECTING BOTTLES*. New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1970.

Twitchell, James B. *Twenty Ads That Shook the World*. New York: Random House, Inc. 2001.

Periodicals:

Elmore, J. G. and Horowitz, R. I. "Oral Cancer and Mouthwash Use: Evaluation of the epidemiologic evidence." *Otolaryngol Head Neck Surgery*, 1995;1(113):253-261.

Mashburg et al. "A Study of the relationship between mouthwash use and oral and pharyngeal cancer." *Journal of the American Dental Association (JADA)*. 1985.

Internet:

<http://www.pfizer.com>

<http://chnm.edu/exploring/20thcentury/understaqndingadvertising>

<http://www.nzgirl.co.nz/articles/2052>