

# POISON LAND

by Mike Dickman  
Photographs by John Gregory

In the last article (Spring, 2004), I discussed the use by glass makers of the skull-and-crossbones symbol (also called the Death's Head) on poison bottles, as a non-verbal way to warn about lethal contents. Now, I will examine the coffin. As everybody knows, "coffin" is defined as "a case or box to put a dead person into for burial."

The reason for using the Death's Head is obvious. By the time glasshouses began embossing it onto bottles, it was a well-known symbol of danger. Underscoring its recognizability, the American Pharmaceutical Association had suggested in the mid-1850s that bottles for poisonous substances contain the word "poison" or a Death's Head. But...a coffin? Although coffins are associated with death, isn't the symbolism of a coffin-shaped bottle a bit obscure?

Apparently not, or at least some drug companies and glassblowers didn't think so. Exactly how coffin-shaped poison bottles were conceived is lost in the mists of time, but the first such bottle apparently was made in England. According to Roy Morgan's research, the U.K. Patent Office issued a patent in 1871 to G.F. Langford for a bottle

"in the shape of a coffin." Today, there are six known examples of that quintessential British coffin bottle, all of which are dark cobalt. The late Rudy Kuhn assigned it Number KU-36 in his classification system, and a photograph of it adorns the cover of Mr. Morgan's book. The esteemed British auction firm BBR auctioned one example at the U.K. Summer National Show on July 8, 2001, which drew spirited bidding and ultimately brought a hammer price of £8,700 (approximately \$14,000 including the buyer's fee). Gee, wouldn't you like to dig a couple of those babies!

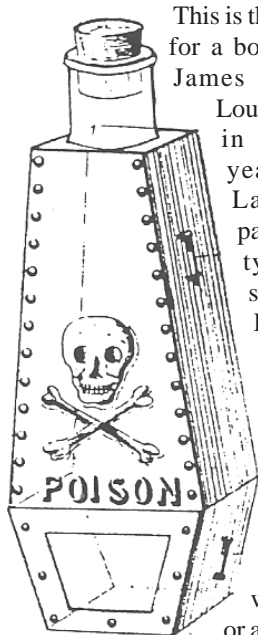
By the way, it isn't just a fantasy to dig a KU-36 coffin. BBR's KU-36 auctioned in 2001 actually was dug some twenty or more years earlier. The story is interesting: when the digger grew up and got married, his new wife ordered him to "throw all those old bottles." But he didn't obey (good for him!) and instead secretly packed them into boxes and stored the boxes in his attic, eventually to be forgotten until his older brother called in early 2001. The older brother, who had seen a picture of the KU-36 coffin in a used price guide and recognized it as one of his brother's long-discarded bottles, called the kid brother to taunt him over his lost fortune.

But, of course, little brother had the last laugh! And I suspect that wife forgave husband, too.

Another KU-36 (the sixth known) was dug in England in 2003.

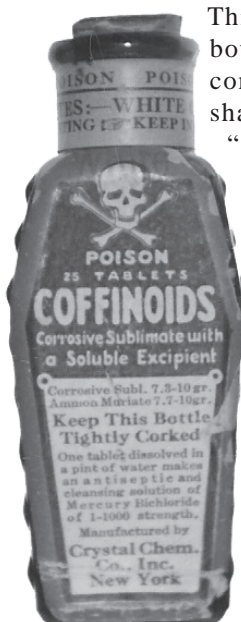
Returning to the 19th century: we Americans were not too far behind our British cousins with respect to coffin-shaped poison bottles. Griffenhagen and Bogard state that, "In 1876, James W. Bowles of Louisville, Kentucky, obtained a patent for a poison bottle in the shape of a coffin." I have reproduced a drawing of what may be Bowles's design from the archives of the U.S. Patent Office, but unfortunately for collectors, this particular bottle was never manufactured (as far as we know...but might one be awaiting discovery?)

Eventually, American glass houses did manufacture coffins. In addition to the KU-36 (which Rudy Kuhn erroneously believed to be unique at the time he wrote his workbook), I am aware of six other types of coffin-shaped poison bottles, and all of them were made in the United States. All of them were classified by Rudy as "KU's" which stands for "Unusual or Odd Shaped" and all are considered scarce to extremely rare. The known American coffin-shaped poison bottles are the so-far-unique bisque pottery KU-1 (which was dug many years ago in a Civil War site in North Carolina and also has a Death's Head embossed on it); the amber "F.A. Thompson & Co. - Detroit" (classified as KU-4) which has the word "poison" embossed on both of its two sides; the cobalt (and at least one known small amber) D.P. Company KU-8 in



This is the patent drawing for a bottle designed by James W. Bowles of Louisville, Kentucky, in 1876, just five years after G. F. Langford had patented a different type of coffin-shaped bottle in England.

Although no examples of this striking early-American coffin-shaped bottle are known to exist, perhaps one may be waiting in a privy or attic somewhere!



This coffin-shaped bottle (KU-16) contains coffin-shaped pills called "coffinoids." Evidently, the Crystal Chemical Company considered the symbolism of a coffin to be effective in warning of danger and toxicity.



This D. P. Company's bottle (KU-8) were made in several sizes and are extremely rare and desirable. Even without warning labels, the KU-8 bottle clearly makes its point: do not drink!

several sizes, which also has the word "poison" embossed on both sides as well as a fearsome-looking Death's Head on its front; a striking lime green KU-9 coffin, about which little is known; the Norwich/Crystal KU-18s sold by companies located in New York City, known in both cobalt and amber and in several sizes; and the cobalt and milk-glass Dr. Oreste Sinanide's bottle (classified by Rudy as KU-22) also from New York City. According to the KU-22's elaborate embossing, "A youthful appearance is a social necessity not a luxury," and the good doctor's product was supposed to "prolong or restore youthfulness," which makes his choice of a coffin seem somewhat odd from a public-relations point-of-view. This last bottle comes with a ground-glass stopper and is scarce but available from time to time. Glass Works Auctions, in fact, had a milk glass example of the KU-22 in its September 2004 auction, which auction had not yet taken place when I wrote this article (August 2004).

"Coffin Madness" reached its peak with the KU-18s. The same basic bottle, with different base embossing, was used by both the Norwich Pharmaceutical Company and the Crystal Chemical Company, both of New York City. Not only were the bottles coffin-shaped, but the little pills (bichloride of mercury) were coffin-shaped as well. Norwich's label bragged, "25 Tablets/

COFFIN SHAPE/Pat. Applied For" with a drawing of the very realistic-looking coffin-shaped pill, while Crystal's label proudly named its product, "COFFINOIDS."

British collectors call the common irregular hexagon KI-10s (the so-called "Lewis and Towers Practical Poison Bottle" patented in England in 1899) "coffins" but I'm not sure why, since they really are not coffin-shaped. Some types of whiskey bottles, too, are called "coffins" by collectors but the bottles probably were not meant to be actual coffins, for obvious reasons.

As a general rule, true coffin-shaped poison bottles are not cheap and, as the BBR auction of KU-36 demonstrates, some are exceedingly expensive. The most available and reasonably priced are the smallest-sized (3½") cobalt KU-18s, which seem to sell in the neighborhood of \$100 to \$125 in mint condition. I saw several nice ones for sale at the 2004 EXPO in Memphis, including one with complete label, full contents and its original, sealed cork.

I'll end this article with author William Ketchum's colorful description of the purpose for making poison bottles in the shape of a coffin: "its form [was] gloomily predictive of the fate awaiting one who fails to heed its warning."

#### References:

The late Rudy Kuhn's numbering system of poison bottles was explained in an earlier

Poisonland column (*Bottles and Extras*, Vol. 14, No. 3). Volumes I and II of "Poison Bottle Workbook" are available from Rudy's widow, Terry Kuhn, 3954 Perie Lane, San Jose, CA 95132; Ph: (408) 259-7564; cost is \$20 per volume plus \$5 shipping. The 60 or so pages from unpublished Volume III are available for the cost of copying plus postage from the Antique Poison Bottle Collectors Association, which publishes the informative quarterly *Poison Bottle Newsletter*. Contact Joan Cabaniss, Secretary/Editor, 312 Summer Lane, Huddleston, VA 24104.

Blakeman, Alan, "British Bottle Review" No. 88 (January-March 2001), p. 11, for the amusing story of the history of the British KU-36 auctioned by BBR.

Griffenhagen, G. and Bogard, M., "History of Drug Containers and Their Labels" (American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, Madison, WI 1999), p. 94-95.

Ketchum, William C., Jr., "A Treasury of American Bottles" (Bobb-Merrill Co. 1975) p. 185.

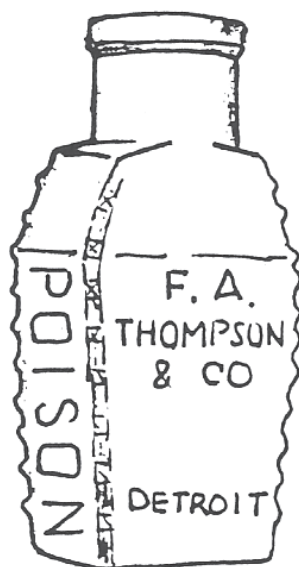
Morgan, Roy, "The Benign Blue Coffin" (*Kollektarama*, England 1978) pp. 7, 40.

Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition, p. 284

Mike Dickman, 120 Solana Dr., Sante Fe, MN 87501 - 770-657-1021



Another variation of the D.P. Company's bottle.



The F. A. Thompson bottle (KU-4) was blown in honey amber glass and is popular among collectors for its color, embossed city name and pronounced coffin shape.

