

POISON LAND

by Mike Dickman
Photographs by John Gregory

Recently, I had occasion to enjoy a bottle of imported Belgium beer brewed by Trappist monks. The beer came packaged in a large, champagne-style green bottle topped with a cork. Later, I wandered into my bottle room and started musing about -- what else? -- bottles. It struck me how the basic shape of the Belgium bottle had not changed over hundreds of years. Also, its cork seemed archaic. As I perused my beloved bottles, I began thinking about the entire subject of corks and their modern replacements, metal or plastic screw-top closures. And I noticed how few poison bottles were made to take screw tops.

Corks are an ancient product. They are made from bark of a particular variety of oak tree that grows in the Mediterranean region. Workers strip off the bark in large plates every 12-15 years in a way that allows the tree to continue producing its bark. The ancient Greeks and Romans used corks as closures for their pottery and glass containers, and cork-making became an important industry in Europe during the middle ages. Cork is inexpensive, light in weight, highly impenetrable to water and gas, and flexible. Its flexibility made it an ideal closure for handmade bottles, which of course tend to vary in the width of their mouths.

But screw-top closures are not new, and their invention certainly predates poison bottles. The first U.S. patent for a screw-cap to be used on a bottle was granted to J.K. Chase in 1857 and was licensed for use on Mason fruit jars. In 1871, the internal screw stopper was patented and used on some whiskey and other types of bottles. By 1880, the familiar external metal screw cap was offered for sale by Whitall, Tatum & Co. in the same catalog that offered "deep cobalt blue" poison bottles whose "surface is covered with sharp, diamond-shaped points, tastefully arranged" (the famous KC-1). The KC-1 bottle was offered for sale in different sizes and also was offered in flint, amber or green glass by special order. But regardless of size or color, the only closures offered by Whitall, Tatum to fit their poison bottles

were either plain corks or the faceted glass stoppers that were screwed into corks.

(By the way, wouldn't you like to be able to buy the KC-1 at 1880 prices? A full gross (144 bottles) of new 1/2-ounce KC-1s was priced at \$3.75 (2 1/2 cents per bottle), and a gross of the 16-ounce KC-1s with matching stoppers cost \$40.00. Today, a single cobalt 1/2-ounce KC-1 sells for \$100+ and the amber 1/2-ounce for \$1500+.)

Screw-top closures require more effort to open than do corks, and thus seem to be more appropriate for poison bottles than do cork closures, which can be easily pulled out. After all, the harder and more time it takes to open, the more likely a consumer would realize, "Oh wait, this is poison!" So, why not screw tops? One can only speculate, of course, but here's my speculation: pharmacists, inventors and



The Salt Shaker (KE-1) is an eight-sided poison bottle sporting dozens of warning bumps, a ground lip and a zinc screw-top cap.

bottle makers were focused on the notion that the bottle itself would warn about its lethal contents intrinsically by its odd shape, color and embossing. The 1880 Whitall, Tatum catalog, for example, touted its KC-1 as a bottle "which shall protect patients from danger of mistake both night and day, by the touch as well as by sight." The firm said nothing about difficult-to-open screw-top closures, even though such devices were offered for sale elsewhere in the same catalog. By the time the Owens bottle machine made screw-topped bottles ubiquitous in the 1930s, the era of classic, strangely-shaped poison bottles largely had ended.

Although the vast majority of American and foreign poison bottles are corks, there are some wonderful screw©toppers, too. The KE-1, the so-called Salt Shaker, features a ground lip that was made to take a zinc screw-top closure. Rudy Kuhn designated the bottle as scarce and it sometimes is found with its original lid (although often corroded). The KT-14 is the well-known and popular McCormick & Company Bee Brand Bottle, a cobalt bottle embossed with a bee that exists in both cork-top and screw-top versions. There also are two different embossings, one with "Patent Applied For" and the other with "Patented July 8th 1902" which reflects the approximate age of the bottle. A turn-of-the-century magazine advertisement for the KT-14 shows a cork-topped bottle and reveals that the product being sold was laudanum (a solution of opium in alcohol). The ad notes that the bottle's cobalt color and triangular shape "eliminates all danger of getting hold of the wrong bottle." Again, the goal was to warn of danger by bottle color and shape, not by difficult-to-open tops.

Perhaps the King of the Screw-Top Poison Bottles is the KO-2, a bottle made for Davis & Geck, Inc. of Brooklyn, New York. The KO-2 is a very rare cobalt poison bottle covered with round bumps that was manufactured in both cork top and screw-top varieties. Each variety is equally rare and equally pricey: in today's market, about \$1,000 to \$1,500. However, the screw-top example shown in the photographs (which sports a complete and perfect label) was purchased for just \$12 at a small California bottle show just a few years ago. Although the author was not the purchaser, dreams of those kinds of discoveries -- along with the occasional glass of beer -- keep the author going!



Although sold in the same 1880 catalog that offered metal screw-top closures for sale, the Whitall, Tatum version of the poison bottle (KC-1) was not available with screw-tops, even by special order, and there are no known examples of the KC-1 with screw-tops.

References:

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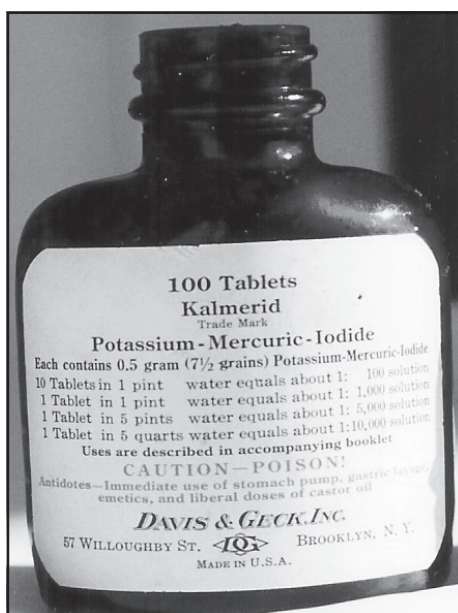
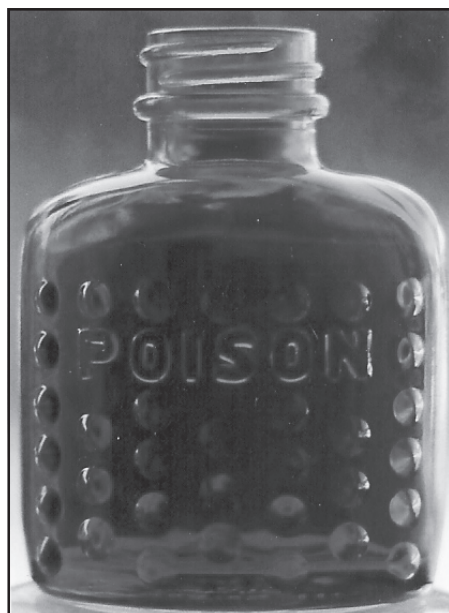
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The late Rudy Kuhn's numbering system of poison bottles was explained in an earlier Poisonland column (*Bottles and Extras*, Vol. 14, No. 3). Volumes I and II of "Poison Bottle Workbook" are available from Rudy's widow, Terry Kuhn, 3954 Perie Lane, San Jose, CA 95132; 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. The newly-published, full color American Poison Bottle Guide also is available from Ms. Cabaniss.



This example of the rare Davis & Geck poison bottle (KO-2) has a 100% complete label and was purchased a few years ago for just \$12.

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