

POISON LAND

by Mike Dickman
Photographs by John Gregory and Mary Riffin

In our first article, we surveyed briefly the history and use of poisonous substances, and their spread from pharmacies into the households of ordinary folks to be used as medicines, disinfectants and poisons for killing vermin. We saw how, during a time when most consumers were illiterate and interior lighting was dim, distinctively-shaped poison bottles began to be manufactured as a way to warn people about lethal contents. Thus was born the era of the "classic" poison bottle: bottles whose shape, color and embossing constituted an intrinsic warning of unusualness, and danger. We saw how the era began in the 1860s and continued through the 1930s, when external safety closures came into widespread use. By then, too, authorities suspected that these bottles might be doing more harm than good, by attracting curious children. For these reasons, the last new distinctively-shaped poison bottle apparently was patented in the United States in 1936.

Although we are unaware of any proof, we suspect there were collectors of these unique, colorful bottles right from the start. I once met an elderly gentleman from a

small New Mexico town who told me that as a pharmacist working prior to WW II, he had amassed a substantial collection of poison bottles which, unfortunately, he had lost track of decades ago. (Darn!) He had accumulated them from his own stock of goods and from pharmaceutical salesmen, and for the same reason most of us do: the bottles were interesting, colorful and a bit macabre. (Author Roy Morgan's term is "weird and wonderful.") Significantly, the retired pharmacist said that during the years he had collected poison bottles, he had not met a single other person who also collected them. And, of course, there were no reference books on the subject. In the year 2003, we can only imagine how much less enjoyable the hobby would be without books and magazines about bottles, bottle shows, clubs, etc.

Reference books in particular are the lifeblood of the modern hobby. The McKearins categorized historic flasks in the early 1950s and other persons categorized bitters and other types of bottles soon thereafter, but the first attempt to organize poison bottles in a comprehensive, methodical fashion did not occur until fairly recently.

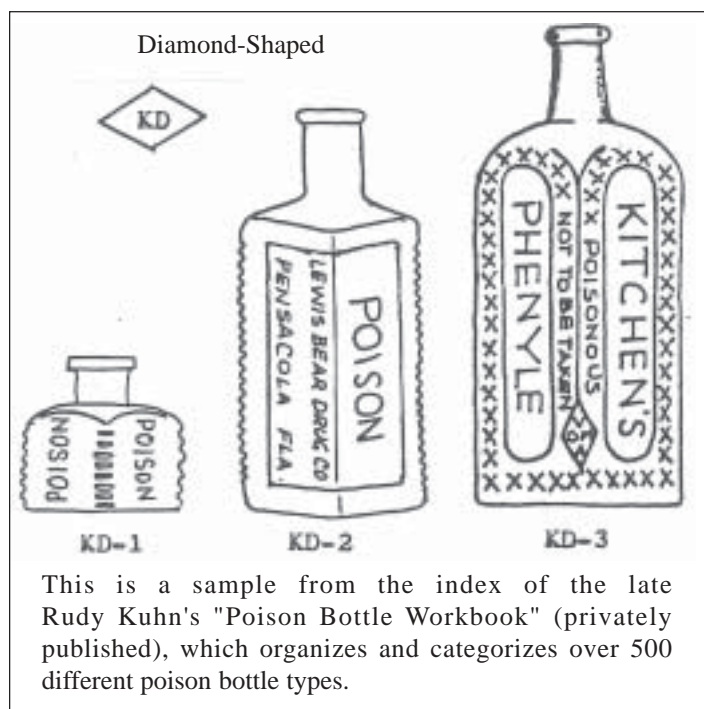
Some early efforts were by Roger Durflinger in 1975 and Roy Morgan in 1978, the latter focusing on British poison bottles. It's truly a daunting task: there are literally hundreds of basic types of poison bottles (some extremely rare) and many, many hundreds of variations in size, shape and/or embossing. But in 1991, culminating a true labor of love, the late Rudy Kuhn published what

remains as the "bible" of poison bottles: his "Poison Bottle Workbook" (Volume I) which he followed in 1993 with Volume II. Interestingly, Rudy's second volume was based primarily on the huge mass of additional information sent to him by fellow collectors after he had published, and they had read, his first volume. In a sense, we as a fraternity of poison bottle collectors have moved 180-degrees from the days of the retired New Mexico pharmacist, who collected alone in complete hobby isolation.

In his privately-published, spiral-bound tomes, Rudy Kuhn divided all poison bottles into one of fifteen categories based on general shape, and then assigned a unique number to every "type" of bottle within these categories. (A "type" is a particular kind of bottle, as opposed to "variety," which is some discernible difference within the same type such as size or color.) Thus, there are categories such as KD (translation = "Kuhn System, "Diamond-shaped"), KH ("Hexagonal-shaped"), etc. For every type of bottle within each category (i.e., KD-1, KD-2, KD-3, etc.), Rudy provided a detailed line drawing. He was an engineer by trade and his drawings are very accurate. He also provided for each type a written description, a list of the known colors and sizes, his estimate of rarity and the approximate range of retail prices at the time. In Volumes I and II, Rudy Kuhn listed over 500 different types of poison bottles. (By contrast, Roger Durflinger listed 81 different types.) Rudy's untimely death a few years ago halted work on his third volume, but his reference books (including partially-completed Volume III) remain available for sale at a modest cost. Please see the footnotes for details.

Rudy Kuhn made the following comment in his Introduction to Volume I: "The great thing about collecting poison bottles is not only their beauty and unique characteristics, but that there is no known end. Continually there are new finds which have not been seen, or even known of, before. That is the excitement of collecting this category of bottle."

Rudy's statement certainly has proven true. In recent years, as the fraternity of poison bottle collectors has grown and shared more and more information with each other and the world at large, previously unknown bottles have continued to come to light. Most of the new discoveries are simply different sizes





This is the ultra-rare KR-79 poison bottle, of which only two specimens are known to exist, although there are rumors of the existence of several others.

or colors of previously categorized types, but some have been brand-new types. Let's end this article by looking at two such bottles: **KC-114** and **KR-79**. Knowing Rudy Kuhn's classification system, by the way, instantly tells us that the former is cylinder-shaped and the latter is rectangular-shaped.

Both **KC-114** and **KR-79** are spectacular, interesting poison bottles which were not widely known. In fact, Rudy Kuhn did not assign "K" Numbers to either of these two bottles until his unpublished third volume. The photographs accompanying this article really speak a thousand words about these rare types. There are two known varieties of **KC-114**, both of which are BIM and blown in clear glass: 5 1/4" high (which Rudy mistakenly listed as 7" high, apparently counting the ground-glass stopper) and 4 1/8" high. There is only one specimen of the taller bottle known to exist but there are at least four known specimens of the smaller version. Two of the known **KC-114** were purchased at a

flea market in the East several years ago. (Lucky, lucky collector!) All of the **KC-114s** bear a base embossing, "Patd June 8, 1875" and all have the ground stopper.

The **KR-79** also is BIM and blown in clear glass, with a tooled lip and a height of 4 inches, and there are only two known examples of this bottle (although there are unconfirmed rumors in the poison-bottle world of several other specimens). The bottle is illustrated without comment in William C. Ketchum's lovely 1975 book entitled "A Treasury of American Bottles" but that photograph, for some reason, flew under the radar of most poison-bottle collectors. The example used in Ketchum's book was owned by the late bottle dealer Jim Wetzel, who resided in Ardsley, New York. Wetzel apparently purchased the bottle at an auction in the early to mid 1970s, paying in the range of \$700 and later complaining to Jim Hagenbuch about having overpaid. (Does that sound familiar to anyone else out there?) Apparently, the bottle stayed in Wetzel's personal bottle collection and passed with his estate after he died in 1980, and its current ownership is unknown (at least to me). The respective country of origin and

manufacturer of the **KC-114** and **KR-79** are unknown at this time.

I sometimes dream about what unique treasures might be in the retired New Mexico pharmacist's long-lost poison bottle collection!

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References:

Durflinger, Roger L., "Poison Bottles, A Collectors Guide" (Maverick Publications 1975).

Ketchum, William C., Jr., "A Treasury of American Bottles" (Bob Merrill Co. 1975) p. 187.

Kuhn, Rudy, "Poison Bottle Workbook" Volumes I and II (privately published) and unpublished Volume III. The first two volumes are available from Rudy's widow, Terry Kuhn, 3954 Perie Lane, San Jose, CA 95132; (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 quarterly Poison Bottle Newsletter. Contact Joan Cabaniss, Secretary/Editor, 312 Summer Lane, Huddleston, VA 24104.

Morgan, Roy, "The Benign Blue Coffin" (Kollectarama, England 1978).



Shown is the close-up side view and front view of another ultra-rare poison bottle (KC-114), which was patented in 1875, according to its base embossing. It comes in two different sizes. All of the half-dozen or so known specimens have ground-glass stoppers.