POISONLAND

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Welcome to a new series of articles about the subject of poison bottles (as you may have guessed from the title). Both the author and the photographer are avid collectors: John, who lives in southern California, collects only American embossed poisons, while Mike hails from Santa Fe, New Mexico and collects every kind of poison bottle under the sun.

Our first few articles will focus on the basics, with apologies to those of you who have more advanced knowledge of these matters.

From the dawn of time, human beings likely have known about the existence and deadly effects of poisonous substances. It is easy to imagine the quick learning curve of our early ancestors as they tentatively tasted various roots, berries and other substances or observed animals doing so.

The obvious and first use of poisons, not surprisingly, would have been to murder, secretly and without detection, and many ancient texts make reference to the methodology and use of poisons. In fact, intentional homicide by poisoning became a standard political tool of the Roman Empire and Renaissance Italy.

The Roman Empress Livia is believed to have poisoned several of her own kin to pave the way for the accession to the throne of her son Tiberius, who reigned during the Ministry and Crucifixion of Jesus.

Arsenic is one poison that has been so used for centuries and may have been used by Livia.

As a colorless, odorless and tasteless powder, it is perfectly suited for nefarious purposes, and history abounds with its deadly use.

Pope Clement VII, who excommunicated Henry VIII of England, was poisoned when somebody apparently blended arsenic into the wax of a candle which he carried in a religious procession, causing him to inhale its deadly fumes.

The trial of Madeleine Smith in Scotland in 1857, reported around the world as a 19th century "O.J. Simpson" event, featured the stunningly beautiful Miss Smith's alleged placement of arsenic into her estranged lover's cup of hot cocoa...using a dose large enough to have killed fifty men, according to the testimony.

But, despite strong circumstantial evidence including incriminating letters in her own handwriting and her multiple purchases of huge quantities of arsenic, the jury (all male) acquitted her of the murder.

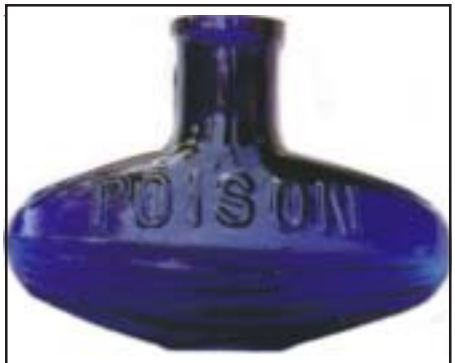
Thereafter, the indomitable lady emigrated to America andlived to the ripe old age of 92.

As time passed, the Human Race had learned that some poisons possessed medicinal or beneficial properties. Nux Vomica (literally "Vomit Nut" in Latin) is made from the ground-up seed of an Asiatic tree; it contains Strychnine, one of the deadliest and most violent poisons known, but in minute amounts was prescribed for thousands of years as a medical stimulant.

Indeed, Nux Vomica apparently was used as an ingredient in some of the bitters of the nineteenth century!

Another such poison is Mercury (also called Quicksilver), which can be toxic, but has a long history of medical use as a laxative, antiseptic and treatment for syphilis and body lice, the last use continuing through the Second World War in the form of an external salve called Blue Ointment.

The soldiers had a famous ditty about Blue Ointment: "One night with Venus, an eternity with Mercury."



Poison bottle collectors love to nickname the bottles. For obvious reasons, this British bottle is called a "Submarine". It was registered in 1899, and is known in three different sizes, all cobalt. The bottle is denominated as KU-6 in Rudy Kuhn's classification system, which will be discussed in a future article.

These rare Coffins were blown in the US for the Drug Products Company.

A modern example is Fluoride, which may be ingested safely in tiny quantities in order to harden tooth enamel (and in fact is used for that purpose in most modern American water systems) but which, in a dose as small as a heaping teaspoonful, will cause death.

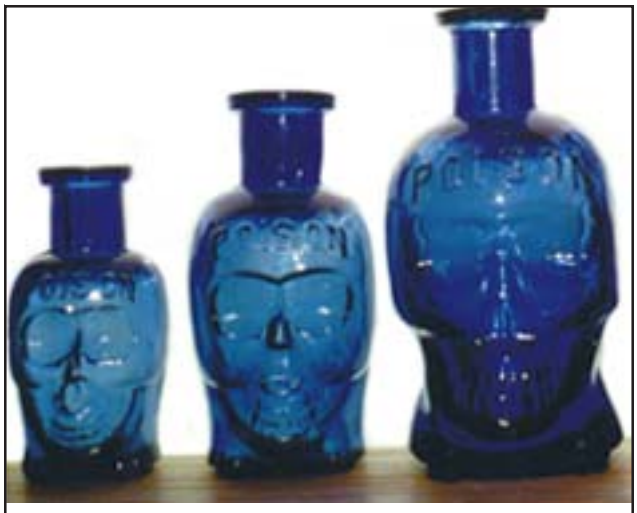
From the earliest days, chemists and pharmacists kept poisonous substances apart from other kinds of substances, for obvious reasons.

Often, they were stored in separate locked cabinets, and the individual containers were usually marked in order to identify them as toxic.

But as the Industrial Revolution caused living standards to rise and consumerism to take hold, more and more poisons were distributed to ordinary people, either for medicinal purposes (such as Laudanum, a solution of opium and alcohol which can be lethal if overused), household use (such as Carbolic Acid, a popular disinfectant) or as poison for killing vermin such as rats, lice and bedbugs.

During a period when most people were unable to read, and interior lighting from fireplaces, candles and gas lamps was dim at best, it became necessary to have an effective way of identifying poisonous substances.

By the early 1800's, accidental poisoning was a significant problem in both the United States and Great Britain, and there was a constant stream of legislative attempts, often unsuccessful, to require pharmacists and manufacturers to use widely-known identifying marks such as the Death's Head (the skull-and-



These are the three sizes of the Figural Skull (KU-10), which Carlton H. Lee of Boston patented in the US in 1894, and which also was used in Great Britain. The base of the bottle is embossed with crossed bones, upon which the skull sits.

crossbones), or to make the bottle itself distinctive so as to warn users of its dangerous contents.

Interestingly, poisoning is still the third most common cause of accidental death to children in the United States, notwithstanding our prolific use of "child proof" caps.

In 1847-48, and again in 1863, the British Parliament debated, but did not enact, such laws, including one which would have required the use of hexagonal-shaped bottles for poisonous substances.

In the United States, the American Pharmaceutical Association adopted a resolution in 1853 mandating that pharmacists use poison bottles "distinctly labeled" with the word "Poison" or a Death's Head, and over thirty state legislatures followed suit in the ensuing years.

Although these laws typically focused on labels, many American glass manufacturers began to emboss warnings, distinct stars and ridges and/or skull-and-crossbones directly onto the glass itself, and to make their poison bottles in distinctive cobalt, amber and green colors so as to call attention to themselves.

In 1908, Parliament finally enacted a law that all poisons must be sold in "bottles or other containers distinguishable by touch from ordinary bottles." As is often the case, however, the lawmakers were behind the curve.

Starting in the 1850s, British inventors, pharmacists and glassmakers had begun to register and patent designs for distinctively-shaped poison bottles.

In 1859, for example, two London pharmacists designed a poison bottle in which "the outer part...may be formed of six, eight or more sides and fluted vertically, horizontally, or diagonally, or may be embossed or otherwise raised on the outer surface...so that a person taking hold of it either in the dark or thoughtlessly must immediately find that the bottle is unusually strange to the feel of the hand."

Thus was born the "classic" poison bottle (although archetypical might be a better word) - a bottle designed to warn of its lethal contents intrinsically by its shape, color and embossing, in addition to and apart from whatever written words might be printed on the labels.

Between 1860 and the 1930s, inventors, glass manufacturers and pharmaceutical companies on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (and to a lesser extent in Australia, New Zealand, Germany, France and Hungary) brought forth an enormous number of distinctive-looking poison bottles.

The United States and British Patent Offices issued literally hundreds of patents and design registrations during those years, some for truly bizarre bottles.

Many of the most astonishing or ludicrous designs were never made (as far as we know) but others were, and were actually used by pharmacists.

Today, they are sought after and cherished by the fraternity of poison bottle collectors.

We'll be looking at many of these unusual poison bottles in future articles.

The era of "classic" poison bottles petered out during the Great Depression, when the focus of safety turned from the shape and color of the bottle to external screw caps and other closures.

From what we know, it appears that the last of these classic poison bottles was patented on January 1, 1936: a small amber iodine bottle with a rounded back, five vertical sides on the front and an embossed grimacing Death's Head molded into the glass to warn users about the deadly consequences of drinking the contents.

In his book "The Benign Blue Coffin", Roy Morgan speculates that the use of the "weird and wonderful poison bottles" actually may have increased the death rate, because "such bottles were a novelty and appealed to the eye" and thus they may have "defeated their purpose and attracted many an unsuspecting youngster into an early grave."

We'll never know for sure whether these bottles ultimately did more harm than good, but we know one thing for sure: we as collectors love them.

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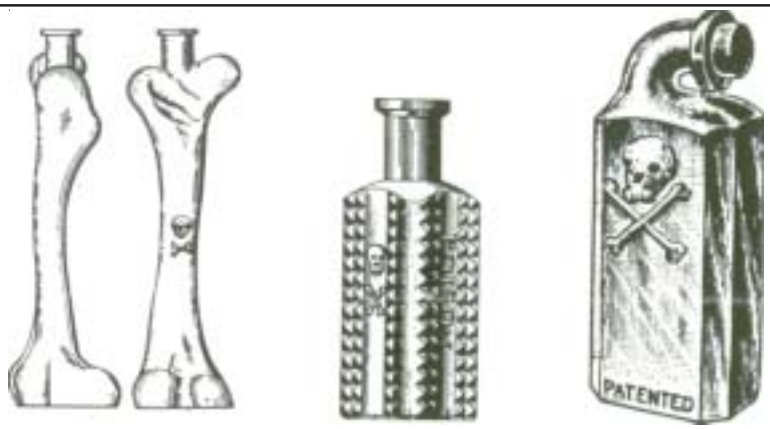
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN GREGORY



The US Patent Office archives contains sketches of strange poison bottle designs which, unfortunately, were never manufactured. Many were ingenious, but utterly impratical. From left to right: 1893 patent granted to Edward M. Cone of Newark, New Jersey; 1895 patent granted to James H. Valentine of Chatham, New Jersey; and 1897 patent granted to Henry Lemmermann of Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey. One may wonder: why New Jersey? (Courtesy of George B. Griffenhagen, Journal of the American Pharmaceutical Association, reprinted in Collecting Bottles, by Cecil Munsey, p. 163.)

7) Extract two-ring, no owl
8) Extract one-ring, no owl
9) Bay Rum Cylinder
  a) one-wing
  b) one-wing (GWL)
  c) two-wing
  d) two-wing screw-top
10) Hair tonic, various styles
11) Florida Water
12) Jamaica Ginger
13) Peroxide amber Tool Top
14) Olive oil
15) Ointment jars
16) Miscellaneous jars
17) Coldcream rounds
18) Whiskey tops
19) Citrate (Soda)
  a) blob top
  b) crown top
20) Dose glasses
21) Perfume
22) Pill
23) Cardboard rounds
24) Cardboard boxes
25) Tins
26) Plaques
27) Paper Items
28) Photographs
29) Advertising
30) Miscellaneous
31) Owl Copycat items***

*Dr Ira Baker was the first official physician on the Owl Drug Company staff

**GWL, there has been some argument as to whether the mold maker inadvertently used a letter G rather than the letter O, however, paper letterheads are to be found with this configuration.

***Other companies tried to take advantage of the Owl Drug Company logo and fame. They produced bottles and items of their own using the Owl to market their products. These are very collectible as a side collection of the Owl Drug Company. Many different states have embossed Owl Drug bottles.

Some of the more rare and expensive Owl Drug Store bottles in no specific order are:

1) Green Whiskey Top
2) Large Salt Cobalt with Grandpappy bird
3) Small Salt Cobalt with Grandpappy
4) Any Script
5) 5 inch Cobalt poison with Grandpappy bird
6) 7¼" Cobalt poison
7) Reversed Owl on 11¾ inch Whiskey Top Clear
8) Milkglass ointment jars
9) Amber Pharmacy (larger sizes)
10) Citrate with large Sarah bird.

You should look for the cobalt, green, and amber bottles along with powder blue, rose milkglass, light green jars and coldcream rounds.

The cylinder citrates (sodas) are reportedly found in nine different colors or shades. The colored bottles are sought after as more collectible.

The 7-inch bottles in any prescription series are harder to find. Some collectors prefer labeled bottles only; other collectors prefer non-labels to better show colors.

When collecting the Owl, try to find a prime strike also, as the mold was used to produce bottles it tended to wear down, although some probably were bad engravings to begin with.

One-wing birds are generally older than two-wing. Always check your selection for dings, cracks, repairs and other imperfections.

Let the buyer beware.

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