

What Did They Do About Sex?

What every bottle collector should now know

By Steve Ketcham

Just how much do we know about the sex lives of our ancestors? And what options did they have when outcomes were less than desirable? Let's see if we can learn a little bit about our forebears intimate lives by checking out some of the artifacts they left behind. A wide variety of commercial products were once available to help deal with sex-related issues. These items may not have been sitting around on the kitchen or bathroom counter, nor were they openly discussed, but at least some folks who lived 100-150 years ago were certainly familiar with them. The historic commercial containers are still around, and they provide some clues to how our ancestors dealt with it all.

Don't be shy, take a look!

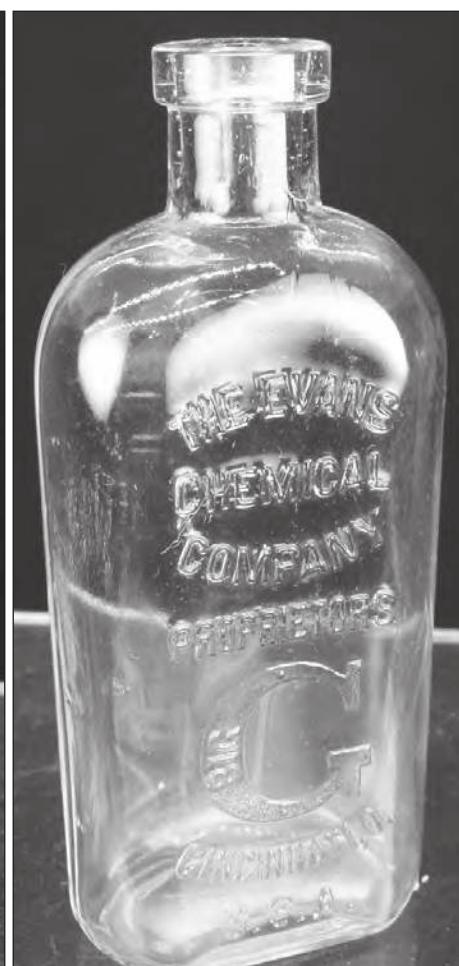
Sexually Transmitted Diseases

If prostitution is the oldest profession, then products offered for sale to cure the possible aftermath of one's indiscretions may well be among the oldest medicines. During the second half of the 19th century and early in the 20th century, such products were often discreetly offered for sale by the local druggist. This would have been well before the discovery of penicillin, so the efficacy of these dubious products is questionable, but that never stopped the charlatans of the day from offering them. Nor did it stop the desperate from using them. The treatments were often bottled, and some examples are shared here together with some advertising signs which were likely hung on the wall above the urinals in the men's room.



"For Gonorrhoea or Gleet Use Banc Koko For Sale By All Druggists" bottle.

For Gonorrhoea or Gleet Use Banc Koko For Sale By All Druggists. This early STD remedy bottle was dug from a circa 1890s Minneapolis privy hole by the author forty years ago. Gleet is a word once used to describe the watery discharge associated with gonorrhea. This product must have been short lived — very few of the bottles still exist. Author's collection.



"The Evans Chemical Company Proprietors Big G Cincinnati, O. U. S. A." bottle.

The Evans Chemical Company Proprietors Big G Cincinnati, O. U.S.A. According to Fike's *The Bottle Book*, the label for this product read: "Big G, Compound of Borated Golden Seal, to remedy Catarrh, Hay Fever, Irritations, Inflammation, Ulceration of Mucous Membranes on Linings of the Nose, Throat, Stomach and Urinary



TOP LEFT: Baker's Great American Specific / R. H. Hurd, Proprietor / N. Berwick, Maine U. S. A.

TOP RIGHT: The Specific A No. 1 A Self Cure.

BOTTOM: Pabst's Okay Specific, Pabst Chemical Company, Chicago, Ill. labeled bottle and carton.

Organs. Cure for Social Diseases." Notice how that final little sentence was slipped in at the last moment. This product bottle is fairly common, suggesting that the diseases it promised to cure were also common. Circa 1910. Author's collection.

Baker's Great American Specific / R. H. Hurd, Proprietor / N. Berwick, Maine U. S. A. Fike's *The Bottle Book* reports an 1860 ad which reads: DR. BAKER'S SPECIFIC will cure Gonorrhea, Gleet, Stricture, Seminal Weakness and All Diseases of the Genital Organs. Reader, have you a private disease? Do not neglect it. Delay is dangerous...."

Dr. Baker was much more direct in his advertising when compared to the Evans Chemical Co. He also chose to emboss the bottle with an image of Uncle Sam holding the product. A proud American symbol on a venereal disease cure? Say it ain't so, Uncle Sam! Author's collection.

The Specific A No. 1 A Self Cure. Here was a product that at once used subtlety and bravado in its name. While not letting on that the product was a treatment for venereal disease, it still told the buyer that it was a top of the line product, being A No. 1. The 1971 publication, *19th Century Medicine in Glass* by Bill and Betty Wilson lists this product as a cure for gonorrhea and gleet first sold in 1884 by Augustus Schoenheit of San Jose, Calif. Author's collection.

Pabst's Okay Specific, Pabst Chemical Company, Chicago, Ill. This was a product with a long shelf life. It survived the various American Pure Food and Drug laws, the first of which was enacted in 1906. While the bottle pictured here dates to circa 1900-1910, the match box holder also pictured bears a 1934 calendar indicating the potion somehow flew under the Pure Food and Drug radar for another 28 years. Again, notice that the bottle label does not mention exactly what the product is supposed to treat. No relation to the Pabst Brewing Co. of Milwaukee. Author's collection.

Troy Compound Buchu. With 47 percent of this product being alcohol, it may have just as easily been sold across the bar in a saloon as over the druggist counter. The box advises that the compound was to be “Employed in the Treatment of Diseases of Urinary and Genital Organs.” While not explicit, the suggestion is clearly made that this was a product for the treatment of STDs. Our search found no newspaper ads for Troy Compound Buchu nor for the manufacturer, Troy Pharmacy Co. of San Francisco.

However, the February 20, 1909, issue of the *San Francisco Call* did carry a short story regarding one Alice Barnes who died of an overdose of headache powders containing acetanilid, a deadly poison once marketed as a headache cure. The powders found in Miss Barnes’ home were manufactured by Troy Pharmacy Co., suggesting that the company was not shy about vending goods of questionable merit. Author’s collection.

Black Caps and Kuragon signs. These two tin signs most likely spent time on the wall in the men’s room. They may also have been used in the ladies’ room. Both promised that the product advertised would end all troubles brought on by gonorrhea and gleet. Author’s collection.

Swift’s Syphilitic Specific. While most of the STD products of the past were sold in small, unassuming bottles, Swift’s Syphilitic Specific, a somewhat earlier product than most of the bottles shown here, used a large and eye-catching cobalt blue vessel to contain its quackery. An ad appearing in the 1882 Morrison, Plummer & Co. *The Druggists’ Ready Reference* brags that “Swift’s Syphilitic Specific Is No Humbug!” and claims that the potion “Cures That Most Loathsome Disease Syphilis...” Morrison, Plummer & Co. of Chicago was a drug wholesaler. Swift’s was based in Atlanta, Georgia. The version of the bottle shown here dates to circa 1860-1870. Author’s collection.



LEFT: Troy Compound Buchu.

ABOVE: Black Caps sign.



LEFT: Swift’s Syphilitic Specific ad appearing in the 1882 Morrison, Plummer & Co. *The Druggists’ Ready Reference*.

ABOVE: Kuragon sign.



The eye-catching cobalt blue Swift's Syphilitic Specific bottle.



Tins of Make Man Tablets.



No-To-Bac tins.



Spanish Nerve Grains tins.

Erectile Dysfunction

Here's another topic which in the past was seldom discussed in polite company. However, impotence presented another opportunity for mountebanks to peddle all manner of products designed to pry dollars from the pockets of the gullible public.

No-To-Bac. The number of No-To-Bac tins found today suggests this was a relatively popular product. Early on, the tin was lithographed with a dramatic image of the No-To-Bac warrior defeating Nicotine. But wait! Not only does the tin carry the promise of ending the tobacco habit, but it also brags: "Makes Weak Men Strong, Impotent Men Gain Weight, Manly Vigor and The Old Man Feels Young Again." Without directly stating it, here was a promise to bring back manhood. Author's collection.

Make Man Tablets. By its name alone, this product makes a promise to restore manhood. The carefully worded text, found on both sides of the tin, elaborates upon the many virtues of the product. Most telling is a sentence on the reverse side of the tin informing the user that the pills are "nature's greatest aid to repair the nervous system giving power of endurance and capacity to enjoy every pleasure." Subtle but direct. Author's collection.

Spanish Nerve Grains. Here was a product that didn't mince words. It declared itself "The Greatest Known Nerve Restorer." It goes on to list an amazing number of ailments which it promises to treat, beginning with "Weak Memory" and ending with "Loss of Sexual Power and All Affections of the Generative Organs in Either Sex." Author's collection.

P. Cantharis. This cobalt blue, label-under-glass apothecary jar, its product name written in Latin, once held Spanish Fly. An actual beetle, it was for centuries dried and powdered for various medical and amorous uses. The powder was dangerous and even lethal but was nevertheless ingested, sometimes unknowingly, to stimulate

and inflame various body parts. Because it caused such reactions, it was believed to be an aphrodisiac and was used to treat impotence. It was also used to stimulate a miscarriage. The long-term effects were often very unhealthy and included renal damage. We cannot speculate upon how the contents of this jar might have been used; we can only imagine. Author's collection.

Pennyroyal and the Unwanted Pregnancy

As may be expected, engaging in sex often led to pregnancy, and sometimes that pregnancy was not supposed to happen. In that event, ladies of the past would sometimes turn to pennyroyal, a medicinal herb of the mint family. Much like Spanish Fly, pennyroyal has a checkered past. Even today it is sometimes used as a topical to treat various ailments such as gout. However, ingestion is dangerous and not recommended. Quack medicine companies of the past still quietly offered it for sale to either induce miscarriage (in large doses) or stimulate menstruation (in smaller doses).

Chi-Ches-Ters Pills. This product was once supposed to contain pennyroyal, but its formula and labeling were changed once the Pure Food and Drug Laws of 1906 were enacted. Earlier packaging did use the word "Pennyroyal." While the product's purpose is nowhere to be found on the packaging shown here, the phrase "reliable female pill" is included in the text. Two-and-one-half pages are dedicated to Chi-Ches-Ters Pills in Volume One of *Nostrums and Quackery* (published by the American Medical Association in 1911). The verdict offered in the text is that "no drug or combination of drugs which, taken by the mouth, will with certainty produce" the desired effect. The doctors writing about Chi-Ches-Ters Pills in *Nostrums and Quackery* go on to say: "The use of this nostrum is pernicious and in the interest of public health and public morals, its sale, and the sale of similar nostrums, should be prohibited." Author's collection.



P. Cantharis bottle.

Dr. Prince's Pennyroyal Pills. This small tin puts it out there; it contains pennyroyal. However, the closest it comes to any kind of statement regarding its purpose is that it is "Safe. Sure. Effective." After that, it is up to the consumer to figure it out. Author's collection.

Princes Brand Tablets. Perhaps an attempt to confuse the consumer is found here as the product name is very similar to Dr. Prince's Pennyroyal Pills. Again, there are no overt statements regarding the product's purpose. Even the directions, also pictured here, are vague and understated. The user is to "take one pill every two hours, until the desired effect is produced." Author's collection.



PHOTOS (from top):

Tin of Chi-Ches-Ters Pills.

Tin of Dr. Prince's Pennyroyal Pills.

Princes Brand Tablets tin.

Directions for taking Princes Brand Tablets.