

# The Medical Postal History of Buffalo *and a renewed philatelic spirit*

By Peter Jablonski



I can remember it like it was yesterday. My father would take me to the Fr. Justin Rosary Hour Office at the Maximilian Kolbe Center of Corpus Christi Church in the heart of Buffalo's Polonia District ("Little Poland" comprised of a large Polish immigrant population). They would let me take home a large box of cancelled stamps, many with large topical stamps from Poland to sort. I fondly recall the sleepless nights before my father's Polish Philatelic Society Ampolex annual stamp bourse where my sister, Cynthia, and I manned the first day cover table selling cachets with Polish themes like "Casimir Pulaski Revolutionary War Hero" (who led the cavalry), or "Pope John Paul II the First Polish Pope." We also had the chance to buy stamps from dealers.

Fast forward 45 years, and I had outgrown my philatelist interests, that passion being replaced by antique bottle collecting. I love to dig privies for bottles and relics of the past, such as clay smoking pipes, marbles, chamber pots, china, tokens, railroad baggage tags, pot lids and coins. Perhaps even more exciting has become the thrill of researching these tangible pieces of history that I traced

using what information I could glean from the raised embossing on the bottles. What was the intended use of the bottle's contents? Where was the business located? What were their years of operation? What ephemera related to this company exist today? Thus began my new collection of bottle go-withs, or ephemera, and, unexpectedly, a renewed philatelic spirit.

It started when, while researching a Dr. Cumming's Vegetine medicine bottle we dug, I came across a proprietary Vegetine tax stamp. I came to learn that tax stamps were used to help support the war efforts. For every \$10 paid in taxes, the proprietary medicine company would receive \$11 in stamps, and the stamps helped to advertise the product as well. I quickly became addicted and visited the local stamp store to find that some tax stamps were very affordable at \$1 or \$2 while others went into the hundreds of dollars.

I soon thereafter discovered the bible of proprietary medicine stamps, *Henry Holcombe's Patent Medicine Tax Stamps*. The cost of the book is hefty at \$250 to \$288, but I was thrilled to find one on eBay for \$75. Through this reference I discovered cachets advertising medical products and discovered this type of collecting was called "postal history." Unfortunately, not every medicine had a tax stamp, but the reasons remain unclear. Did the medicine

**IMAGE 1:** Father Maximilian Kolbe, a martyr who stood up to the Nazis at Auschwitz.

**IMAGE 2:** A 1982 stamp issued by Poland (PL 2540) honoring St. Maximilian Kolbe.





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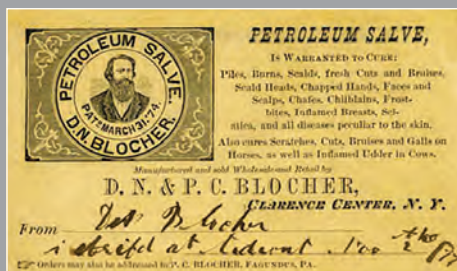
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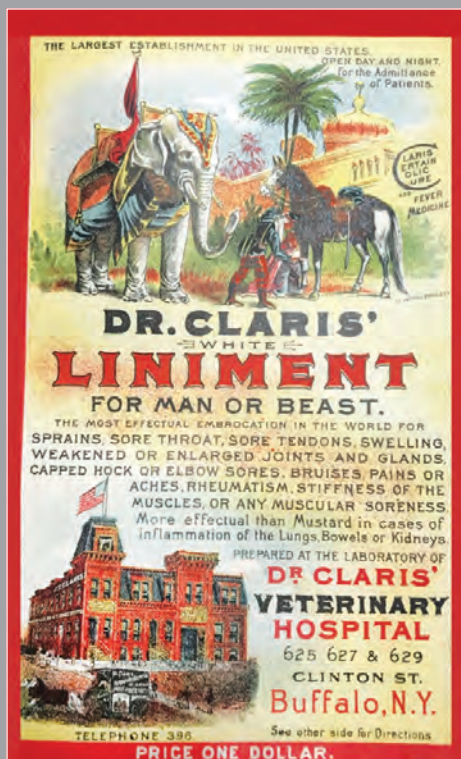
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company have to exceed a certain monetary sales level before they were taxed? Or was it based on amount of product sold? Perhaps some medicine companies were not in existence during these tax periods while others managed to escape the grip of Uncle Sam.

Medicine companies were the largest users of these private die stamps, using Scott numbers RS1 through RS315 and RS320 through RS395. There are 350 design color varieties utilizing multiple paper options, including experimental silk paper, ultra-color ink, and watermarks. During the Spanish American War, thirteen companies used war tax stamps, and 169 companies used stamps during the Civil War. There are now reproduction sheets of the proprietary patent die stamps being sold on eBay, so "caveat emptor."

The fun of collecting is researching the story behind the advertising cover. For example, I never heard of Daniel Blocher's Salve until I found the advertising cover

**IMAGE 3:** My favorite First Day Cover from Polish Philatelic Society celebrating 1000 Years of Poland's birth. 1966 was the year of my birth. U.S. Scotts #1313. 5¢ Polish Millennium. Issue Date: July 30, 1966. City: Washington, DC. Quantity: 128,475,000. Printed by: Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Printing Method: Rotary press. Perforations: 10 ½ by 11. Color: Red.

**IMAGE 4:** Bottles found while digging in old privy sites.

**IMAGE 5:** Display of Merchants Bottles at Genesee Valley Bottle Collectors Association Show, April 2019. (Photo courtesy of John Pastor, American Glass Gallery)

**IMAGE 6:** Advertising Cover for Blocher's Salve 1874. Clarence Center, N.Y., is a suburb of Buffalo. Notice stamps affixed upside down.

**IMAGE 7:** There is nothing related to the skin that Blocher's Salve can't cure.

**IMAGE 8:** Colorful Dr. Claris Veterinary Label featuring same picture as on cachet and image of foreign mosque to entice the consumer.

**IMAGE 9:** 1907 Dr. Claris Veterinary Hospital East, Buffalo, N.Y., advertising. Notice horse skeleton in upper left window.

**IMAGE 10:** This rare photo depicts a branch of Dr. Claris' hospital that was located on Newell Street in Buffalo, in the heart of the Stockyard district and one of the largest horse markets in the East and only a block from my childhood home. (Courtesy of Dr. Michael Smith D.V.M.)



on eBay. I was very familiar with a John Blocher, who owned a shoe factory and supplied boots for the Union Army during the Civil War. When I researched the family, I saw they both came from Clarence, N.Y., so I assume they are related. Daniel moved to Michigan in 1851 and farmed for some years in Genesee County. He bought land in the township of Millington in 1855, but did not begin farming it until 1859. He was also a lumberman, ran a shingle mill from 1864-65, and held the offices of Justice of the Peace for 20 years, supervisor, treasurer, county superintendent of the poor, and postmaster of Millington from 1861-66, and again in 1883.

He ventured into the selling of medicines as a senior member of the firm Blocher & Rathbun, druggists, etc. In January of 1874, David Blocher applied for a patent in Warren County, Pa., for an improved healing salve, with much detail on how the salve was made from crude petroleum using steam. The notice cachet is addressed to Warren, Pa. Researching on findagrave.com I found a picture of his tomb in Clarence Center, N.Y., but there is also a Daniel N. Blocher buried in Michigan. Without full genealogic records and no information on the company, it's difficult to discern the correct resting place.

One of my favorite covers is from Dr. Claris East Side Veterinary Hospital, as I have a Dr. Claris Medicine cabinet and jugs that go along with it. John Claris was born in London, Canada, in 1862, but his family moved to Buffalo, N.Y., where he resided his entire life. He attended public school in Buffalo and then went on to study at the Toronto Veterinary College, graduating with his degree as a veterinary surgeon in 1882 at the age of 20. Upon his graduation, he returned to Buffalo and immediately became involved in government and private veterinary practice. Dr. Claris became the federal inspector for the port of Buffalo, a post he held for eight

years. He also opened his Buffalo East Side Horse Infirmary on Clinton Street. His products had labels that were very colorful and attractive to the consumer. On the cachet image I noticed a horse skeleton in the upper window of the building depicted on the stamp and later read that Dr. Claris owned a museum of taxidermy animals and skeletons.

One of my other small collections involves a business in Lockport, N.Y., called Merchant's Gargling Oils "for man or beast." Though called a gargling oil, it was initially a topical liniment used to treat sore mules and donkeys hauling canal boats along the Erie Canal. Dr. Merchant started out in "Lower Town" and moved to "Upper Town" in 1836. The company ownership changed hands at least three or four times in the 19th century, but the product had a long, continuous sales history up until 1928 when the factory finally burned down. Cachets from Merchants are rather common with the advertising on the reverse, while the return address on front cachet advertises another company. He most likely gave these envelopes to companies for free in order to promote his company.

The Merchant's Gargling Oils company, like most quack medicine dealers of the day, heavily promoted its products through advertising trade cards as well as almanacs or "songsters" for Merchants products. In 1869, John Hodge, owner of Merchant's Gargling Oil, came to realize the benefit that could be obtained from using a private die stamp, which

**IMAGE 11:** Author Peter Jablonski proudly displays a freshly dug, circa 1865, Merchant's green blown glass from Lockport, N.Y. Glassworks.

**IMAGE 12:** Open-pontiled, circa 1850, Merchant's dug from a Lockport, N.Y., privy.

**IMAGE 13:** Front of Merchant's cover advertising Frank Howd, dealer in drugs and medicines in Mohawk, N.Y.

**IMAGE 14:** Reverse of Merchant's Gargling cachet advertising *For Man and Beast*.







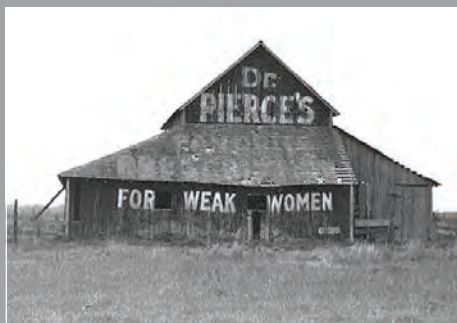
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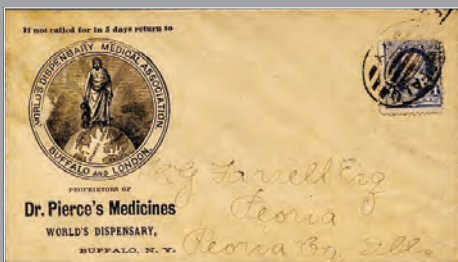
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not only produced great advertising but would tend to discourage anyone trying to imitate Merchant's Gargling Oil. The private die stamps were placed over the facsimile cork seal signature of original proprietor George W. Merchant. It was presumed the stamps would be destroyed when the bottle was opened and thus they were not canceled. Who had the foresight to soak the stamps off the products for future philatelists? Over 14 years, Merchants used 6,584,037 stamps with a face value of \$90,811.51, meaning they did more than \$2,270,287 in business.

One of the most famous of the patent medicine hucksters was Dr. Ray Vaughn Pierce and his World's Dispensary. After graduating medical school, Dr. Pierce saw the need for home remedies in rural areas, and from 1867 to 1880, he made almost half a million dollars per year. Pierce established the Invalids' Hotel and Surgical Institute in Buffalo, as well as a manufacturing business producing "Doctor Pierce's Favorite Prescription," which he followed with other medicines, including "Smart Weed," one million bottles of which shipped annually. Other of Pierce's medicines addressed women's diseases, such as fatigue, headache, "female weakness," tumors, nervous diseases, and menstruation. Dr. Pierce

**IMAGE 15:** Color lithograph advertising sign for Merchant's Gargling Oil (photo courtesy of John Pastor American Glass Gallery).

**IMAGE 16:** Lockport, N.Y.: Merchant's Gargling Oil Proprietary Tax Stamp (1869-1883) on all papers (RS178 a,b,c,d,e; RS179 a,b,c,d,e) Most are common except 178e (12), 179c (20), and 179e (8).

**IMAGE 17:** Merchant even advertised on the *Maid of the Mist*, the boat that rides below Niagara Falls.

**IMAGE 18:** Barn-painted advertising for Pierce's female medicines.

**IMAGE 19:** Advertising cachet for Dr. Pierce's World's Dispensary.

**IMAGE 20:** Snake Oil salesman's car advertising Dr. Pierce's products.

**IMAGE 21:** 1,506,624 of the one-cent and 3,121,970 of the two-cent stamps were printed, all on watermarked paper.

**IMAGE 22:** 2,227,350 of the one-cent blue stamps were issued on old paper and 1,804,030 on silk paper.



worked hard to make sure the government kept away from regulating the industry's products, and forcefully fought off doctors who questioned the claims made by the cure-alls and tonics advertised in newspapers and sold by mail. Many of Pierce's medicines, promoted through his book, *The People's Common Sense Medical Advisor*, contained opium until the mid-1890s. Pierce's book was in its 11th edition by 1907 and had sold more than two million copies.

Dr. David Ransom began his practice in Buffalo in 1846, producing Dr. D. Ransom's King of the Blood that claimed to cure cancer "without the surgeon's knife," as well as scrofula and consumption. Ransom's two private die stamps were from July of 1865 through August of 1875. The name of the company was changed to Dr. Ransom, Son & Co. around 1872. When Dr. David Ransom died, his son and Sullivan Meredith took over. The new company used the predecessor's stamp until 1875 when the National Bank Note Co. took over the contract and likely insisted on the update. The new corporate name appeared on stamps starting in 1876 and were last delivered in 1883.

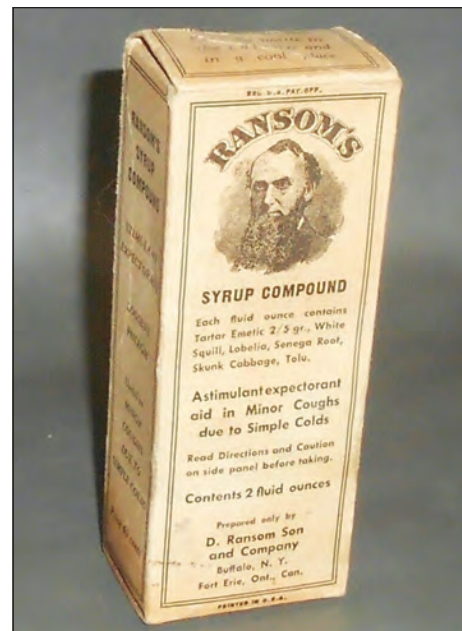
One of the better-known stamp inspiration stories surrounds the seven Sutherland sisters, who grew up as poor turkey farmers in Cambria, N.Y. As a hair treatment for her daughters' long hair, their mother used a rather stinky ointment that appalled the girls' classmates. Their mother died at a young age, leaving their father, Fletcher Sutherland, the idea of selling this tonic to make money. In addition to the marvel of their extremely long hair, the sisters were musically talented and gave performances in which they sang and played instruments as well. From the early 1880s to the early 1900s they toured with the Barnum and Bailey Circus as one of the "Seven Wonders of the World." Despite the millions they made selling their patent medicine hair products the sisters squandered their wealth and died in poverty.

Research and the thrill of discovering new information, and discovery of ephemera from the past make philately come alive. There's clearly no better exhibit at a stamp show than one that connects the stamps to their past and takes the viewer into a virtual time machine by displaying go-withs along with their exhibit. My adventures in digging in privies has reawakened my childhood love of stamp collecting, and I intend to keep researching, writing, sharing and inspiring the future stamp collectors.

The inspiration to write this article was my dad, the late Fred Jablonski, president of the Buffalo Polish Philatelic Society, who instilled in me a fire to learn about our past. Thanks also to Rick Barret, who recently presented a lecture at Lewiston on his book, *The Buffalo Cinderellas*, a story about the Pan American Cinderella stamps of 1901 and the two men who made them, one a honest businessman and the other a rogue who did time in prison for removing cancellations on used stamps and then selling them as stamps for postage. Lastly, thanks to my wife, Heather, who supports my collecting addictions.

## ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

- 1) Father Kolbe achieved sainthood for giving up his life so a married man with children could live at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Poland.
- 2) Terry Blum, U.S. Private Die Patent Medicine Stamps. June 9. Accessed June 20, 2019. [http://www.stampinsider.org/other\\_pages/presentations/blum%20proprietary/U%20S%20Private%20Die%20Proprietary%20Stamps.pdf](http://www.stampinsider.org/other_pages/presentations/blum%20proprietary/U%20S%20Private%20Die%20Proprietary%20Stamps.pdf)
- 3) V.S., Dr. John Claris, 1905. *The Horse*. Buffalo, N.Y.
- 4) V, Ferdinand Meyer. 2012. *Peachridge Glass*. Aug. 18. Accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.peachridgeglass.com/2012/08/merchants-gargling-oil-good-for-man-and-beast/>.
- 5) Henry W. Holcombe, *Patent Medicine Tax Stamps*. Lawrence, Mass.: Quarterman Publications, 1979.
- 6) Charles LaChuisa, Buffalo, As An Architectural Museum, 2003. Accessed June 20, 2019. <https://buffaloah.com/a/main/651/index.html>.
- 7) Ibid.
- 8) Bob Hohertz, rdhinstl's Page. Accessed June 20, 2019. <http://www.rdhinstl.com/mm/rs194.htm>.
- 9) Lisa Hix, *Collectors Weekly*. Sept. 6, 2013. Accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/the-seven-sutherland-sisters-and-their-37-feet-of-hair/>.



**IMAGE 24:** Original box of Dr. Ransom's Syrup Compound Notice office in Fort Erie, Ontario, as well as Buffalo.

**IMAGE 25:** Rare advertising cover for the Seven Sutherland Sisters who toured with Barnum & Bailey Circus as one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

**IMAGE 26:** Photo of the Seven Sisters.

**IMAGE 27:** 7 Sutherland Hair Bottle with original box and contents.