



A NEW SERIES BY  
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## BLOWING SMOKE ON THE IDEAL VICTORIAN LADY

### “SMOKIN’ HOT WOMEN”

The 1890s was a decade squarely focused on ideal form and fashion—women with hourglass shapes, perfect complexions, and smoldering Gibson Girl looks, expertly coiffed and always wearing the latest fashions. No one felt the strain of presenting properly for public appearance more than the Victorian woman. She was told by men and media to be stylish, beautiful, and a lady. There was more pressure on a woman to be ideal than there was on her body from the corset she wore, and just like the corset, she was expected to maintain proper form all day long. It was considered undeniable that she was “the weaker sex,” physically and intellectually inferior to men, dependent upon and subservient to her husband, and designed for beauty, virginal modesty, domestic duty, and motherhood. Any behaviors breaching this mold were viewed as morally, socially, and physically dangerous and signs of an unvirtuous and fallen woman—certainly no lady.

A perfect example of this physical and behavioral confinement of women was the rigid social construct that a gentleman could freely smoke, but a lady never should. A New York physician’s statement on the matter was copied in many newspapers as if it was a public service health announcement:

*Ladies—take the use of cigarettes to their very great detriment—men are [not] often injured by the moderate use of tobacco in*



Sweet Sixteen Cigarettes illustration — courtesy of Barbara Rusch

*smoking. But the female body is no more adapted to the use of tobacco than the female mind is to mathematics. It causes neuralgia, headache, dyspepsia, palpitation of the heart, and, worse than all, ruins the complexion and disorders the teeth—all will agree that the stale odor of tobacco coming from a woman’s mouth is worse than the same smell exhaled by a man—men’s nervous systems are not so impressionable as women’s, and hence a man can do many things with impunity, or even benefit, which would be impossible for a woman to do without great risk. Beauty is the smallest gift a woman can have, for it not only means aesthetic enjoyment for all who look at her, but it means a healthy mind and a healthy body. Poor frail, fragile creatures, the doctor*

insisted, clearly the weaker sex.

Despite laws and social mores, women and adolescents were smoking those “obnoxious and injurious cigarettes,” and men and boys were spitting out tobacco juice at or across the path of oncoming members of the fairer sex for amusement or out of sheer meanness. Tobacco use was becoming ubiquitous, and its smokey seduction was settling over men, women, and children across the country like a London fog. On January 1st, 1891, a newspaper squib read, “A good many New Year anti-tobacco resolutions will end up in smoke.”

Some companies quickly recognized the growing interest of young women to explore the cigarette experience by sneaking smokes, so they tried to pitch the social acceptability of allegedly medicinal cigarettes to alleviate symptoms of colds, allergies and asthma (pretty much all conditions falling under the catch-all term, catarrh). A few of these products, like Perrin's and Marshall's, offered cigarettes made from cubebs, a tropical bush of the pepper family with a very pungent taste and aroma that was often difficult for the smoker and bystanders to enjoy. But hey, it's medicine, and strong, off-putting aromas and flavors were considered signs of its medicinal qualities and benefits: if it was yucky, it must be good medicine.

The two companies were producing the same type of medicated cigarettes, using the dried-up, ground berries of the cubeb plant, but their approach to advertising was very different.

Dr. Perrin's advertising trade card showed their cubeb cigarettes being used by the whole family: Grampa and Gramma are in the lower corners, both looking old and weary; the son in this family is wearing knickers and has schoolbooks tucked under his arm and his sister is in the other corner (with a short skirt that emphasized her youth rather than suggesting her to be a fallen woman); and in the center was mom, relaxing in her comfy stuffed chair, her feet up on the hassock, a book in one hand and her Dr. Perrin's cigarette in the other. The message was clear: cubeb cigarette smoking is okay—"every-



Marshall's Prepared Cubeb Cigarette box label — collection of the author.

What I find especially interesting about the Marshall's advertising matter shown here is the manufacturer's effort to show that the trademark woman smoking their cubeb cigarette is still the Victorian ideal of a beautiful, genteel lady. But if that was the intention, it just doesn't work. It seems highly unlikely that those who frowned on females smoking could have their opinions changed by this image. She looks like a tough, hardened woman

with smoke rising from her cigarette and her lips; she's not even trying to exhale discreetly to the side. She looks completely relaxed, not at all worried about being caught in a guilty pleasure—and she is purposely blowing billowing plumes of smoke like a factory smokestack, not to mention that she is demonstrating a skill at creative smoking—not just

making smoke rings, but a full advertising message: "Marshall's Prep'd" ("Prepared," emphasizing they were ready-made, so ladies didn't have to futz around with rolling the ground cubebs into cigarette papers like the men were constantly doing to make



Dr. Perrin's Medicated Cubeb Cigarettes for Catarrh advertising.



Marshall's Cubeb Cigarettes package.

their tobacco cigarettes). So, by skywriting in smoke, she had “skills,” I guess, but she still looks more like a saloon floozie than a Victorian lady.

Then again, that may be exactly the type of woman Marshall was going for—not a floozie, but a young woman who was ready and willing to break barriers, listen to her own desires, and blow smoke in the face of stodgy, controlling husbands, crusty clergy, and prim society women who still weren’t willing to make waves—or clouds of smoke.

UPDATE: My dear friend, Barbara Rusch, offered me the use of the “Sweet Sixteen Cigarettes” image from her collection as an appropriate addition to this post on the Victorian cultivation of young women as smokers. She called it my article on “Smokin’ Hot Women”—indeed, a better title for this topic than I had given to this blog. Given the manufacturer’s use of this young model to promote Sweet Sixteen cigarettes (not “medicinal” cubeb but actual tobacco cigarettes), this advertisement is clearly designed not only to sell this brand of cigarettes but to encourage the sexualization of young women and immodest behavior. Then, as of now, some things never change.



## Weaponized Bottles

### Fighting Witches & Demons in Colonial America

#### Houston 24 Seminar #1

Andrew Rapoza, historian and author of *Promising Cures*, a four-volume, three-century history of health in a New England community, will present the little-known evidence of colonists using counter-magic including “witch bottles” to fight witchcraft in the decades before and after the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692.

**E**vil—the colonists felt surrounded by it. As they settled in the wilds of the New England and Mid-Atlantic colonies, their faith was constantly tested and their fears often seemed overwhelming—with good reason. They were assaulted by life-threatening challenges: droughts, crop failures, sudden death of farm animals, bread that wouldn’t rise, family members who fell sick from strange, unrecognized sickness, and much more. They were convinced the Devil was using witches to destroy them. Many tried to protect their families by carving magical symbols into their houses and hiding magical objects under floors and behind walls—the most powerful of these were bottles they packed with special objects designed to kill witches. Ministers warned that they were falling under Satan’s power by doing these things. But they were desperate...



Friday, 02 August 2024,  
9:00 am  
Hotel ZaZa | Room with a View