

LETTER FROM POISONLAND

BY

MIKE DICKMAN

The focus of this first letter is a classic American poison bottle, the United Drug Company triangle. Like Rodney Dangerfield, this bottle sometimes gets no respect since some of its variations are quite common and fairly inexpensive. But other variations are less well known and rare, or even unique...and correspondingly expensive! They are the kind of poison bottle we love: every collector can acquire a few pristine examples of this blown-in-mold bottle for a small sum of money, but acquisition of every size in every color variation would be a lifetime's work, and perhaps an impossible goal to achieve. Just ask Joan Cabaniss!

The bottle was blown for the United Drug Company of Boston and St. Louis, a business that later was acquired by Rexall. The bottles often but not always bear a variety of different maker's marks on the bases and, although we have no irrefutable evidence, we believe that they were blown by Woodbury Glass Works of Woodbury, NJ, the Hazel and Atlas Glass Company of Wheeling, WV and the Maryland Glass Company of Baltimore. Based on the labels we've seen, the bottle primarily was used to hold Mercury Bichloride tablets, a compound also called Mercuric Chloride and Corrosive Sublimate. This substance, dissolved into water, was widely used in former days as an external antiseptic and scrub in hospitals and sickrooms. It is highly poisonous and corrosive when taken internally. (Later, the medical establishment also realized that mercury was able to pass into the human body through skin contact...uh oh!)

The bottles are "classic" poison bottles: they are triangular in shape and embossed with the word "POISON" in large capital letters inside raised cross-hatching with sharp points, features designed to warn of their lethal contents by writing, sight and touch. As you can see in the accompanying photographs, the paper labels bore additional written warnings. There are two basic varieties: KT-2 (also known as D-33) has two of its three panels embossed while the KT-4 has only one embossed side. There are a variety of sizes and colors: cobalt is the most common color, with variations ranging from light cornflower blue to deep purplish cobalt. The KT-4 is known in two sizes (2½" and 3¼") but the KT-2 is known in nine or ten sizes ranging from 2½" to a massive 10⅝" holding forty-four ounces. This latter bottle (called "Big Blue" by its proud owner) is unique to date and probably was used as a pharmacy stock bottle to fill smaller bottles for retail sales. An even larger 11¼" size is rumored to exist but we consider this size to be unconfirmed. Amber versions of KT-4 are known to exist in 2½" and 3¼" but are rare, and at least one size of clear glass is known (KT-2, 5¼") but scarce. As with any of the poisons, additional sizes and/or colors may be waiting to be discovered by a lucky collector.

As a rule, these bottles are well-blown with sharp, deep embossing. Prices of course vary widely; we've seen the relatively common cobalt KT-4 (3¼") sell for \$30-\$45 on eBay, and a clear KT-2 (5¼") with full labels and contents just sold on eBay on, for \$225. Mike recently acquired an amber KT-4 (3¼") from a Taos antique shop for \$100, which made him quite happy: Glass Works Auctions sold an example in 1994 for \$715!



REXALL DRUG COMPANY
25723 Los Angeles - Boston - St. Louis, U.S.A.
501434

UNITED DRUG COMPANY
BOSTON, U.S.A.
MADE IN U.S.A.

 **POISON** 

KT-2 and KT-4