

LETTER FROM POISONLAND

BY
MIKE DICKMAN

Hello again. In this third installment of our irregular series of letters, we examine yet another classic American poison bottle, the Whitall, Tatum round (KC-1), which authors Griffenhagen and Bogard call "the widest used poison bottle in the United States."

Like the KI-1s and KI-2s featured in our last letter, the KC-1 was a generic poison bottle which the glass manufacturer sold primarily to local druggists, who typically would affix their own paper labels identifying the product and the druggist's name and address. The bottle was created by the venerable Whitall, Tatum & Company glassworks, which traces its roots to 1806. The precise date of the KC-1's introduction is unclear: Griffenhagen and Bogard say 1872 while Rudy Kuhn suggests 1876. Interestingly, Rudy Kuhn's research showed that the patent for the bottles was issued to James W. Bowles of Louisville, Kentucky on October 10, 1876, while Griffenhagen and Bogard write that "[t]he design for the bottle was apparently never patented, but on 1 July 1884, Charles A. Tatum received a design patent for a special stopper, the top of which was studded on all five faces with pyramidal projections." Regardless of its patent or the exact date of its introduction, Whitall, Tatum's KC-1 clearly was one of the earliest American bottles specifically made to hold poisonous substances.

In the 1880 edition of the Whitall, Tatum & Co. catalog (which was reprinted by the American Historical Catalog Collection in 1971), the manufacturer described its KC-1:

These bottles are specially useful, not for Prescriptions, but for Liniments, and for the various poisonous articles, as Laudanum, Corrosive Sublimate, Oxalic Acid, Oil of Vitriol, &c., which are likely to be kept in the family medicine closet. The frequent accidents in the use of poisons have made a demand from well appointed apothecary stores for a bottle which shall protect patients from danger of mistake both night and day--by the touch, as well as by sight--in the use of poisonous preparations. We have met this demand by a new line of bottles, of a deep cobalt blue color. The surface is also covered with sharp diamond-shaped points, tastefully arranged. It would not be easy to make any mistake with these bottles in use.

The catalog offered the cobalt KC-1 at prices that make our mouths water; for example, a gross of the ½-ounce size bottles sold for \$3.75 without stoppers (to be used with regular corks) or \$11.00 with stoppers, and a gross of 16-ounce bottles for \$22.00 without, \$40.00 with. The company also offered a gross of assorted sizes for \$8.50 without stoppers. Keep in mind that we are talking about 144 pristine brand-new bottles! Oh, if only we owned a time machine!

The 1880 Whitall, Tatum catalog "calls especial attention to the brilliancy of color and exactness of finish of our Blue Glass" but also noted that potential buyers could purchase the bottles in either Flint Glass or Green Glass, by special order. The company did not specify prices for its clear or green versions of the bottles. The catalog offered the KC-1 in eight sizes:

one-half, one, two, three, four, six, eight and sixteen ounces. Rudy Kuhn, however, has cataloged twelve sizes, including a massive one gallon bottle, and notes that the KC-1 also was manufactured by Hagerty Brothers & Co., which was a glass factory located in Brooklyn that was in business until 1900. Does this suggest that Whitall, Tatum in fact did not secure a patent for its bottle? Perhaps, or maybe the original patent simply expired, or possibly Whitall, Tatum licensed its design to other glass manufacturers. Both Whitall, Tatum and Hagerty embossed their respective marks on the base of their KC-1s, although some KC-1s bear no embossment.

The 1880 Whitall, Tatum catalog reveals an interesting insight into early glass making: "But little Glass can be made in Summer, owing to the heat. It is therefore desirable that our customers, in order to procure a stock of Glassware to meet their wants during the Summer, should, so far as practicable, send in their orders by the 1st of 5th month (May) in each year."

Not surprisingly, KC-1s are found today most commonly in cobalt, with variations from light cornflower blue to dark purplish blue. In addition to the normal prescription lips designed to hold a cork or the stopper (which itself was screwed into a cork, and came in two sizes but only in cobalt), the bottle was blown in a wide-mouth version. The bottles exist in several different sizes apparently made for the United States Public Health (or Hospital) Service bearing "U.S.P.H.S." embossed on the base. The Green Glass mentioned in the catalog is described by Rudy Kuhn as teal, and Rudy listed it as "extremely rare." The KC-1 also is known to exist in a deep moss green color, equally rare and equally beautiful. The bottle which Whitall, Tatum described as Flint Glass of course is clear, and was listed by Rudy as "scarce." We have seen these clear KC-1s with original labels for perfume, so apparently at least some druggists and apothecary shops used them for purposes other than poisons. Finally, the KC-1 exists in amber, although such a color is not mentioned in either the Whitall, Tatum catalog or Rudy's book.

As with many poison bottles, prices vary widely depending on color, size and ultimately, on supply coupled with demand. Cobalt KC-1s in the commoner middle sizes generally cost in the \$40-\$75 range without original stoppers, in the \$100+ range with. (Please be aware that plastic reproduction stoppers exist, which are softer than the original glass ones, more purple and less sharply struck.) In 1997, Glass Works Auctions sold a perfect cobalt gallon-sized KC-1 (standing 13 ¼" tall!) for \$1,760.00, and a perfect amber KC-1 (4¾" with original labels) for \$467.50. In July 2000, eight eBay bidders eagerly vied for a mint dark teal green KC-1 (4½"), which sold for \$197.50. By the way, does anybody out there have a time machine to lend us...?

References:

Griffenhagen, G. and Bogard, M., "History of Drug Containers and Their Labels" (American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, Madison, WI 1999), p. 94.

Kuhn, Rudy, "Poison Bottle Workbook" Volume I (privately published).

Toulouse, J.H., "Bottle Makers and Their Marks" (Thomas Nelson Inc. 1971).

Whitall, Tatum & Co. 1880 Catalog, American Historical Catalog Collection (Pyne Press, Princeton, NJ 1971).

