

Antique Toothpaste Pot Lids



Something to Smile About

By Bruce R Pynn

As towns and cities rapidly expanded in the 1800s, manufacturers and retailers had to develop new methods for packaging and transporting the large number of household commodities required for domestic use or consumption.

One of the most common food items requiring a better method of transport was fish. In response, fish mongers developed a vinegar-based anchovy and bloater (cured fish) paste which proved easy to store and was more transportable in ceramic containers. This packaging not only increased their product's shelf life, it opened up new markets, and the edible paste quickly became a popular food alternative to the expanding Victorian middle class.

These newly developed ceramic containers soon became the standard container of the day, housing everything from bear's grease, cold cream, salves, ointments and cure-alls to edible pastes, shaving cream and toothpaste. Most manufacturers and retailers went one step further, taking the opportunity to print advertising on the lid of the small pottery containers. And just as the containers of today, the pot and lid were eventually consigned to the dustbin and then off to the local dump.

Local druggists, chemists and dentist-surgeons latched onto this new packaging method by marketing their own dental products, including tooth powder, toothache medicines and tinctures for gum disease, and this became common practice among the most respected practitioners of the 18th and early 19th century.

The earliest proprietary tooth powders were packaged in labelled paper bags, wooden containers with revenue stamps, and small ceramic pots covered with parchment or paper, which was tied with a string to protect the contents. Prior to the invention of the transfer printing process, the brand names of manufactured goods were hand-lettered onto the side of the pot or described by means of a paper label pasted on the lid.

The invention of the transfer printing process allowed a much quicker and economical method of describing the contents, and the lids were frequently decorated in this method. Although still laborious by today's standards, this labelling method also allowed for a greater degree of artistic expression, with the aim of enticing buyers by the aesthetic appeal of the package.

This process was distinctively English, originating in Liverpool in the second half of the 18th century. Although not in general use for packaging until the 1840s, transfer printing was used for domestic porcelain and pottery in the intervening period. Orders for transfer-decorated pots made by Staffordshire potters were received from many countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, France, Canada, Italy and India.



RIGHT: Three varieties of toothpaste from Breidenbach & Co., including the rarer sample size ca. 1890-1910.

TOP OF PAGE: Sealed toothpaste pots with original contents.

The method of printing on a pot lid was a multi-staged, time-consuming process. The transfer was lifted on tissue-thin paper from an engraved copper plate that previously had been inked or coloured. It was then transferred to the lid after the first baking (the bisque stage) and rubbed until the print firmly adhered to the pottery. The paper was then carefully removed, usually by washing or floating it off in water and the lid glazed and fired to fix the design as an integral part of the pottery. The pots were used until the First World War, when more economical packaging techniques evolved, such as collapsible toothpaste tubes, tins and cardboard boxes or glass containers.

Because of the high production cost of multi-coloured advertising pot lids, single coloured or monochrome lids dominated the market. Most every dentist of this era produced toothpaste, toothpowder or tooth soap in a monochrome lid, which they sold from their own dental parlour. Gold bands were sometimes added around the border of the container to give the product a high-class appearance.

The shape of the pot and lid also evolved. For the first 30 years of the use of printed pot-lids, most were round in shape. From the late 1870s and 1880s, rectangular and square lids became popular. Oval-shaped pots and lids were also manufactured, with far less acceptance, because these were difficult to pack and store. The toothpaste pots came in various sizes from a small sample size of less than an inch in diameter to five inches for economy size. Occasionally, dentists produced specialty toothpaste containers.

While some manufacturers secured the contents by means of a paper label around the base and lid, others employed the 'Toogood' patent, whereby grooves were provided on opposite sides of the lid and base, through which string was passed to secure the two parts and contents within.

Victorian advertising yields fascinating insights into the early days of mass marketing. The majority of lids advertised the dental practitioner's location, degrees and contents, as well as proclaiming its superiority in maintaining the health of the gums and teeth while imparting freshness to the breath. Many of the lids were printed with elaborate designs and bright colours which made them stand out among the majority of the monochromatic lids.

Several themes dominated the pictorials on these lids. The first theme revolved around dental images that clearly identify the purpose of the product such as toothbrushes and animated teeth. Another theme was the inclusion of pictures of attractive girls and aristocratic gentlemen, conveying the message that "you too could look this good." Farmland scenes, beehives, horse & carts presented a message of natural wholesome products; famous architectural structures sent a message of solid, dependability and longevity; and unusual locations and exotic animals such as palm trees, temples and camels attempted to allure the consumer with rare, expensive and mysterious ingredients. While all these themes had a following, the most popular was Royalty – everyone was seemingly the dentist or perfumer to the Royal family – sending a message that if it is good for the rich and famous, it was certainly good for the commoner. Princess Alexandra of Denmark, later Queen consort to Edward VII, was the most popular Royal, appearing on 15 known varieties issued by five different toothpaste manufacturers.



Various Royalty pot lids including the rare porcelaneous oval lid. John Gosnell and Co. produced some of these lids, and for more than 60 years marketed them around the world.



Different shape and sizes of lids from UK, USA and France. Specialty toothpowder container from UK dentist, Hayden Coffin, in the shape of Egyptian ushabti ca. 1910.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Alan Blakeman, publisher of the UK's *British Bottle Review*, suggested there could be as many as 5,000 different varieties of pot lids worldwide.
- Lids typically sell from \$5 to \$500, while an exceptionally rare Bear's Grease lid recently sold in the UK for \$10,000.
- A black & white Canadian Lyman cherry toothpaste typically sells for \$250-\$500.



Rare Canadian Lyman pot lids featuring single cherry with leaves as well as a page from 1890's Lyman Sons and Co. trade catalogue.

Queen Victoria was also a big seller, appearing on 10 lids from six companies. In addition, three of Victoria's nine children and one grandchild appear on pot lids, as do Edward VII, Princess Beatrice and Prince Arthur the Duke of Connaught. A particularly rare lid is that sporting the likeness of Princess Patricia, the daughter of the Duke. A somewhat 'homely' Royal, one can only speculate on whether it was Patricia's image, or the use of a more perishable 'above the glaze' manufacturing process, that today accounts for the lid's extreme rarity.

Although flavours of toothpaste came in many varieties such as honeysuckle, rose geranium, orange, tomato, carbolic acid and even odd concoctions like myrrh and borax, the two most popular types of toothpaste were areca nut and cherry. Oddly both were made of the same formula (with areca nut flavouring), but the cherry tooth paste was cherry-coloured by the addition of carmine. Nothing was added to give a cherry flavour, the description "cherry" being applied merely due to the colour of the paste. The addition of Indian areca or betel nut and of the cherry colouring suggested attractive pictorial adornment for the lids. Areca nuts were normally used as a worming agent, though it's unlikely that many consumers realized they were being mildly wormed when they cleaned their teeth.



BELOW: Detailed exotic landscape pictorial pot lids showing pyramids and mosques.

While English pot lids number in the thousands, there are fewer than 300 American pot lids. Pot lids can be found throughout the United States, but are concentrated around the coastal areas such as New York, Philadelphia and San Francisco. Jules Huel, Xavier Bazin and H.P & W.C. Taylor, all of Philadelphia, exhibited their pot lid products at the Great World Fair of 1851, which in turn popularized their usage over the next 50 years.

Canadian pot lids are even rarer, with less than 20 known varieties. These lids were sold in the major cities of the day: Toronto, Halifax and Montreal. In the 1890s, Lyman's Pharmaceuticals of Montreal produced distinctive toothpaste design with a large solo cherry pictorial on the pot lid. This is the most common lid found in Canada.

Although reproductions are uncommon, several varieties have surfaced over the past few years. Fakes are made by gluing a photocopy of a rare transfer to a plain lid, glazing it and firing it at a low temperature, and opening the kiln early whilst still hot to produce artificial age crazing. Generally, forgers often use plain lids which are usually the wrong size and weight compared to the original lid. Unfortunately, they are often difficult to distinguish from an original. 🍁

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR THE COLLECTOR

Reference Books:

The Price Guide to Black and White Pot Lids by Ron Dale (Antique Collectors' Club Suffolk UK 1977)

Collecting Australian Pot Lids by Robert Keil (Self-published, 1981)

American Pot Lids by Sonny & Barbara Jackson (Self-published, 1987)

Pot-Lids and other coloured printed Staffordshire Wares by KV Mortimer (Antique Collectors' Club Suffolk UK 2003)

Websites:

www.deantiques.com • www.onlineBBR.com