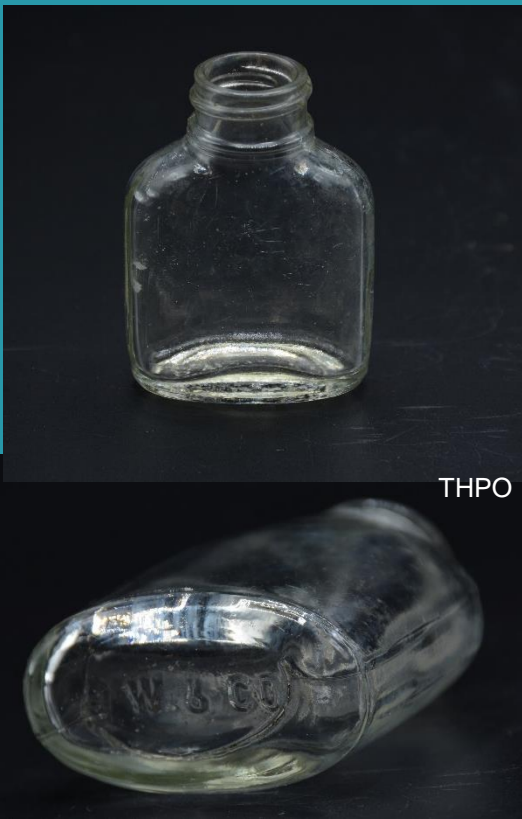


ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

April 2023



This month we are highlighting an artifact that originated in London and found its way onto the Brighton Reservation. At first glance, the plain clear glass might have been overlooked at a campsite or in someone's medicine cabinet. The vintage shape and the letters that are embossed on the bottom indicate that it was manufactured by the Burroughs Wellcome & Co. in the 1940s. This was not just any ordinary company; it was known for conducting groundbreaking research and for shaping the pharmaceutical industry during the Gilded Age.

Utilizing a machine originally manufactured to crush graphite

into finely powdered lead for pencils, Silas M. Burroughs was able to crush and compress medication into standardized dosages in pill form. Burroughs and Sir Henry Wellcome went into business in London and by 1912 the company expanded into Tuckahoe, New York. The duo manufactured a machine that worked faster and was able to produce 600 pills a minute, giving Burroughs Wellcome and Co. an edge over its competitors.

The bottle, manufactured by the company contained Empirin which was mainly used for pain management, fevers, and headaches.

Empirin's active ingredients were caffeine, aspirin, and phenacetin. Phenacetin, a common analgesic, was removed in the early 1980s when it was found to have negative side effects and replaced with acetaminophen. This historic bottle held pills that were created using the phenacetin ingredient. Other pharmaceuticals that needed to be reformulated included Excedrin and Anacin. One notable death caused by the ingredient was of the aviator Howard Hughes who suffered from kidney failure that was attributed to his excessive use of phenacetin ([Wayback Machine \(archive.org\)](https://www.waybackmachine.org)) He died in 1976, just a few years before the FDA banned the ingredient.

References:

Cohn, Victor. "FDA to Ban a Widely Used Painkiller." *Washington Post*. August 9, 1980.

Larson, Frances. *An Infinity of Things: How Sir Henry Wellcome Collected the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

The ad is from 1939 in London and the vintage Empirin label is from a bottle manufactured and filled in Tuckahoe, NY.

