

# Variations of an Early "Dear Doctor" Postcard

By Roger Cichorz

I recently purchased a "Dear Doctor" advertising postcard originating from the Burlingame Chemical Co. of Los Angeles, California. It was posted November 28, 1908, addressed to Dr. U. S. Boone in St. Louis, Missouri, and had a printed advertising message for Pepso-Laxatone, a "digestant and tonic laxative" made by the Burlingame Chemical Co.

A month or so later I found (and bought) another Burlingame Chemical Co "Dear Doctor" card on eBay. Turns out that this second card was mailed about 20-days earlier (Nov 9) to the same Dr. U. S. Boone in St. Louis, Missouri.

Back in the mid-1950's, doctors in the United States began receiving colorful postcards from exotic locations around the world advertising a popular anesthetic drug made by Abbott Laboratories, of Illinois, known as Sodium Pentothal. Abbott developed a scheme to mail a postcard every couple of weeks to hundreds of thousands of doctors and health facilities on its giant mailing list, first to US addresses and then others abroad.

Each card starts with the salutation, "Dear Doctor," hence the nickname of these collectibles sometimes referred to as "Dear Doctor" cards, followed by a message regarding the virtues of Pentothal.

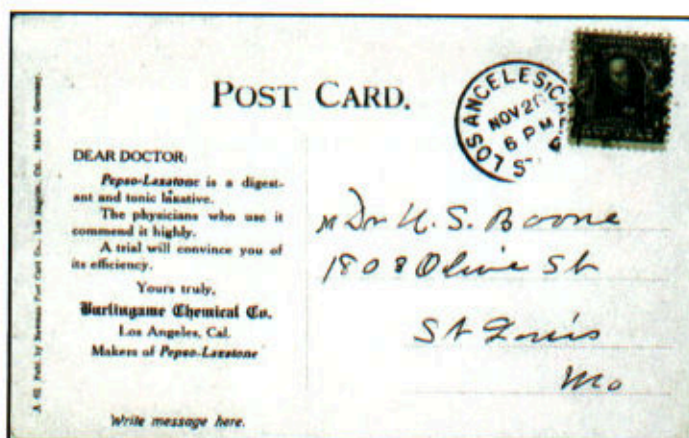
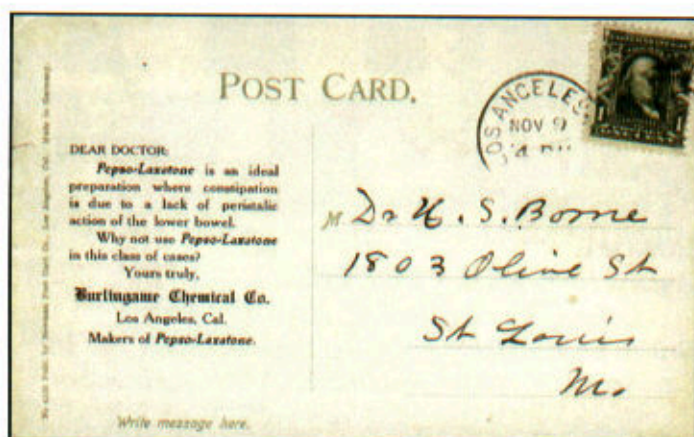
Until recently it was thought that the French drug company Fournier was the first to issue a "Dear Doctor" series of cards. Between 1911-1917 Fournier issued a series of cards sent to doctors in Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay. All start with the familiar salutation, "Dear Doctor," and mailed from Paris.

These two cards, mailed about three weeks apart to the same person, are different in a number of ways.

A. Different Card Number (No. 4556 and A 61)

B. Different message.

C. Color photos on reverse are different.



No. 4556 Publ. by Newman Post Card Co., Los Angeles, Cal.  
Made in Germany. (Nov 9, 4 PM)

DEAR DOCTOR

*Pepso-Laxatone* is an ideal preparation where constipation is due to a lack of peristaltic action of the lower bowel.

Why not use *Pepso-Laxatone* in this class of cases?

The numbers on the cards, manufactured by the Newman Post Card Company and printed in Germany, no doubt, correspond to the color photos on the reverse which are regular scenic views of the Los Angeles area. The Burlingame Chemical Co., simply overprinted these cards with their message in the message area.

**BUT, what was Pepso-Laxatone and what was the Burlingame Chemical Co.?**  
That story continues next issue.

DEAR DOCTOR

*Pepso-Laxatone* is a digestant and tonic laxative.

The physicians who use it commend it highly.

A trial will convince you of its efficiency.



## Variations of an Early "Dear Doctor" Postcard - Part 2

By Roger Cichorz

Last issue I showed "Dear Doctor" advertising postcards originating from the Burlingame Chemical Co. of Los Angeles. (Figures 1 & 2) They were posted in November, 1908, addressed to Dr. U. S. Boone in St. Louis, Missouri, and had a printed advertising message for Pepso-Laxatone, a "digestant and tonic laxative" made by the Burlingame Chemical Co.

Now just what was Pepso-Laxatone and what is the story behind it. Since 1908 was during the heyday of patent medicines, I decided to see what I could find out about Pepso-Laxatone. It only took me a few minutes of Internet searching to find enough information to write the following.

According to Wikipedia, "patent medicine" refers to medical compounds of questionable effectiveness sold under a variety of names and labels. The term "patent medicine" is somewhat of a misnomer because, in most cases, although many of the products were trademarked, they were never patented. In fact, most avoided the patent process in order not to reveal the often hazardous and questionable ingredients of the products. In ancient times, such medicine was called *nostrum remedium*, Latin for "our remedy"!

The promotion of patent medicines was one of the first major products highlighted by the advertising industry, and many advertising and sales techniques were pioneered by patent-medicine promoters. Patent medicine advertising often talked up exotic ingredients, even if their actual effects came from more prosaic drugs.

In 1905, Samuel Hopkins Adams published an exposé titled *The Great American Fraud* in Collier's Weekly that led to the passage of the first Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906. This statute did not ban the alcohol, narcotics, and stimulants in the medicines, but it required them to be labeled as such, and curbed some of the more misleading, overstated, or fraudulent claims that appeared on labels.

In 1936 the statute was revised to ban them, and the United States entered a long period of ever more drastic reductions in the medications available unmediated by physicians and prescriptions. Morris Fishbein, editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), who was active in the first half of the 20th century, based much of his career on exposing quacks and driving them out of business.

Returning to the story of Burlington Chemical Co., what information did I find about Pepso-Laxatone? Simply stated, it qualified as a classic example of patent medicine – in fact, one whose claims of ingredients and efficiency as a digestive aid and laxative were exposed in 1920 by Federal chemical testing to be declared false and fraudulent. At that time a Mr. Hawley was president of the Burlingame Chemical Co. and he was also the owner-operator of two "Hawley Pharmacies" in Los Angeles.

The Pepso-Laxatone label at that time, required by the Pure Food and Drug Act to reveal its ingredients, was illustrated in JAMA, Vol. 76, Jan.-June 1921, page 327 (see Figure 3).

What follows is the verbatim report cited in JAMA, one that no doubt gave Editor Fishbein great satisfaction in his ever diligent efforts to expose quackery in medicine: *The Burlingame Chemical Co., Los Angeles, California, shipped in September, 1919, a quantity of Pepso-Laxatone which was adulterated and misbranded. When analyzed by the Bureau of Chemistry, it was found to consist essentially of alcohol, water, sugar, pepsin, and a laxative plant drug (presumably cascara sagrada).*

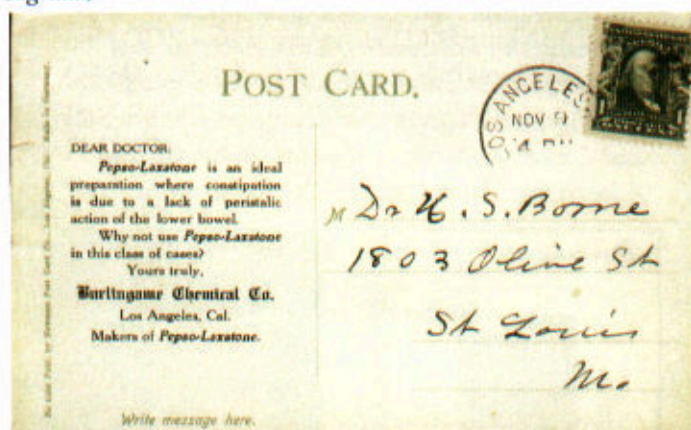


Figure 1



Figure 2

The label declared that Pepso-Laxatone contained pepsin (a digestive enzyme in gastric juice that breaks down protein to peptides), diastase (a soluble enzyme that converts starch and dextrin into sugar), and pancreatin (extract from the pancreas of animals that contains pancreatic enzymes). It contained neither diastase nor pancreatin and this claim was, therefore, declared false and misleading. Further, the product was claimed to be "an efficient combination of agents for the permanent relief of Gastric Disorders and Indigestion": this claim was declared false and fraudulent.

In February, 1920, judgment of condemnation and forfeiture was entered and the court ordered that the product be destroyed.

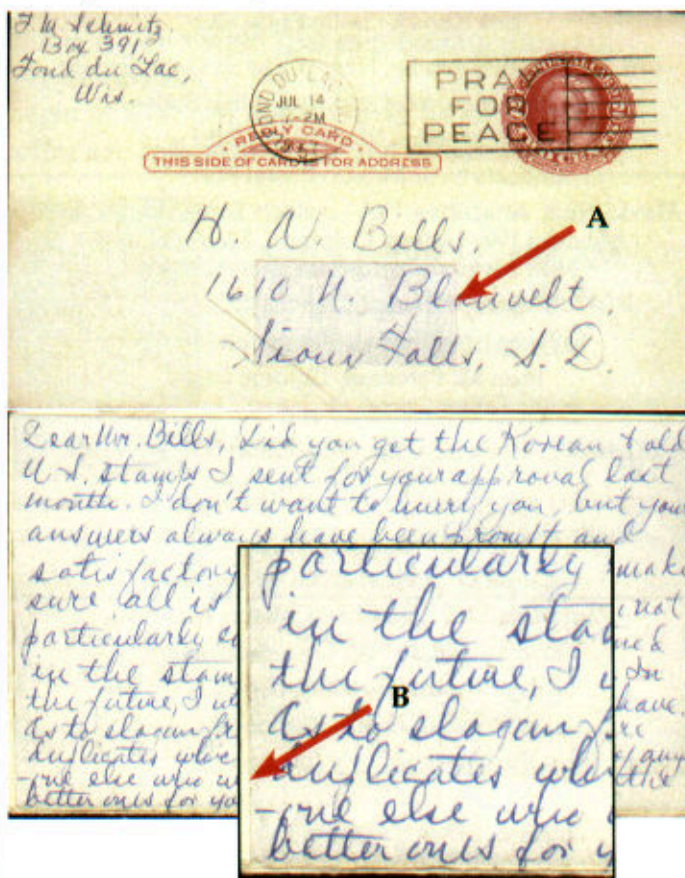


A simple advertising message on a 1908 postcard for a commercially available digestive aid leads to a tale of a false and misleading (not to mention potentially harmful) nostrum shut down a dozen years later by the FDA. Ironically, the FDA took another 82 years to ban its principal medicinal substance, *cascara sagrada*. I wonder how many other patent medicines around the turn of the century were advertised via "Dear Doctor" postcards and had similar, or possibly even entirely different, stories to tell?

## A DIGESTIVE LAXATIVE

Pepsin	8 grs.
Pancreatin	4 grs.
Diastase	½ gr.
Hydrochloric Acid C.P.	8 mgrms.
Lactic Acid C.P.	3 mgrms.
Cascara Sagrada	50 grs.

Editor's Note: This item was found in an old file of short items intended for Scribbings. I was told that it was submitted by RMPL member and founder, the late Bill Dunn, but never used.



So in order to save 2 cents, this stamp dealer did just that - he pasted over the address (A) on the front, and pasted over the message (B) on the back with paper, then wrote a new message and sent the card on it's way. Seems like a lot of work to me for 2 cents!