

## Collecting on a Shoestring –

### Abbott Labs 1950s Pentothal Ad Postcards from Nordic Countries

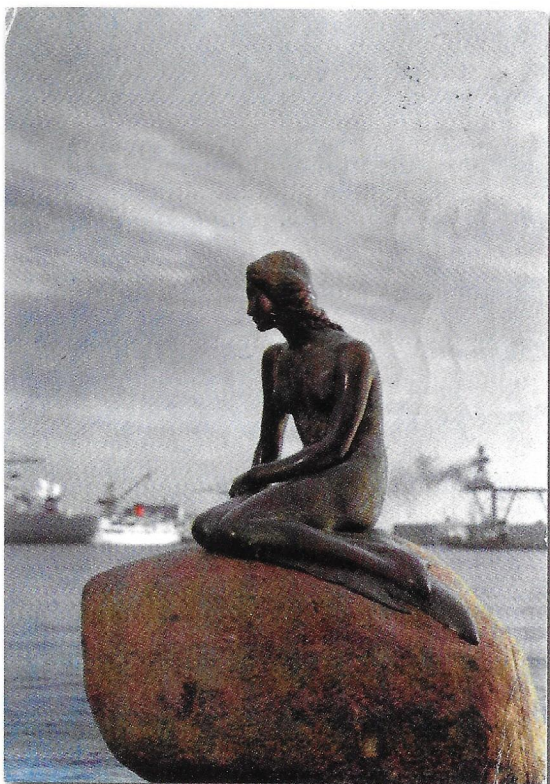
by Roger Cichorz

*Abbott Laboratories of North Chicago, Illinois had a prolonged, massive advertising campaign for its anesthetic drug Sodium Pentothal® that occurred from 1956 into 1968. This campaign consisted of printing messages that extolled the virtues of Pentothal on the address sides of (primarily colored, Continental-sized 4" x 6") postcards that pictured scenery or art of the USA and many other countries around the globe. The cards would then be posted from their countries of origin to anesthesiologists and nurse anesthetists primarily in the US and Canada, but also to physicians in other foreign countries.*

The ad messages were primarily in English in simulated handwritten text (most common) or simulated typewritten text (infrequent). Before 1966, cards addressed to nurse anesthetists were identical to cards posted to M.D.s but lacked the “Dear Doctor” salutation. The “Dear Nurse Anesthetist” salutation was finally added to cards posted to nurse anesthetists during 1966–1968.

Huge quantities of the Abbott Pentothal cards were posted during the 1950s and early 1960s, and these still frequently turn up in dealers’ bargain cover boxes or in their sorted cover stocks priced in the \$3 to \$10 range. In total, there are some 182 face-different Abbott Pentothal cards recorded. Pentothal cards were posted to 34 different countries and territories, but primarily they were mailed to addresses in the US and Canada. Some cards, but not all, were mailed to foreign addresses and are known to have texts in nine languages other than English — Arabic, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish.

Interestingly, the Pentothal cards posted to French-surnamed doctors in Quebec Province are French-text cards, but cards mailed to other parts of Canada are in English text. Also, because of the political climate of the Cold War years when these cards were being distributed, not unexpectedly, none were of nor mailed from any Eastern European and Soviet Bloc countries.



*The Little Mermaid on a postcard sent 2 April 1957 from Copenhagen to an M.D. in Indianapolis, USA.*

As this ad campaign was winding down in the mid to late 1960s, fewer and fewer of each of the later face-different cards were distributed, and some of the later cards today are rarities (less than five recorded) and command high prices when they infrequently are offered for sale. However, since my “Collecting on a Shoestring” articles feature items that cost \$10 or less, the subject this time will be common Abbott Pentothal postcards from Denmark, Finland, Greenland, and Sweden posted from 1956 to 1960 that routinely can be found in cover dealer’s holdings or routinely offered on eBay and Delcampe at prices of \$5 or less.

An informative Website titled “The ‘Dear Doctor’ Postcard Collector Page” (<http://www.deardoctorpostcards.com>) is maintained by my friend Tom Fortunato. He lists all 182 of the known face-different Abbott Pentothal cards alphabetically





by country of origin (and chronologically if more than one card exists from a given country) and assigns identification numbers to each, ranging from #1 Andorra ("Andorre La Vieille – Maison du Parlement" posted 1956) to #182 Wallis & Futuna (Islands' View posted 1965). Furthermore, Tom includes census listings of how many of each of the cards have been reported, their "variants" (i.e., what foreign texts have been reported and to which countries and territories they were mailed), and the stamp frankings and places and dates of postmarks.

During Abbott's ad campaign in the 1950s, the costs of postcards, printing, foreign postcard-postage rates, and labor involved in processing and mailing the cards were relatively inexpensive, so thousands of each card could be distributed for a few hundred dollars, much less cost than say a 30-second spot advertisement on a TV network. Additionally, these

cards would be directed to a targeted audience, specifically individuals in the medical profession who were most likely to be utilizing an anesthetic drug in their practices. No doubt many of these cards upon receipt were immediately discarded as "junk mail" into trash bins by their recipients, but, judging from how many of the 1950s and early 1960s cards still exist today, large numbers of them must have been saved, perhaps because of their eye-catching pictorial nature and postage-stamp frankings from the countries of origin.

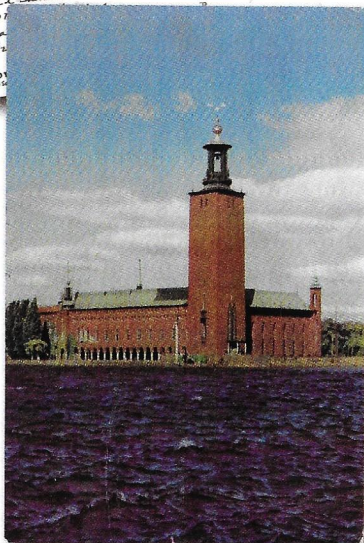
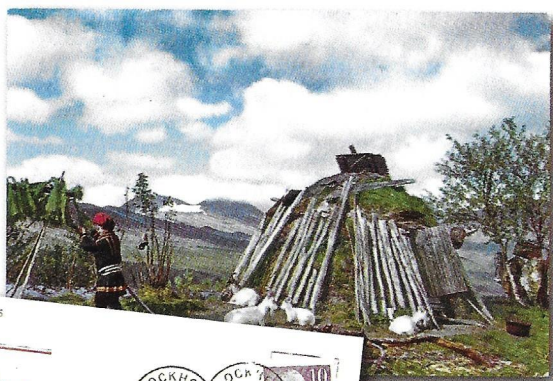
Abbott Pentothal ad cards are widely collected today and make nice additions to "modern postal history" collections as they represent commercial advertising mail of the 1950 and 1960s. Each face-different card has a different ad message uniquely related to the card's country of origin and each is properly franked at the destination-appropriate



Laplandish folk and spring living quarters, Tarradalen, Jokkmokk.  
(the Valley of Torre), Jokkmokk.

Dear Doctor:  
Even here in Helsinki,  
Sweden, on the Arctic  
circle, PENTOTHAL is a  
familiar and valued  
agent of choice. In  
fact, there's hardly a  
city or country in the  
civilized world that  
doesn't know and use  
PENTOTHAL  
repose.

REEVES GAMBLE HOSPITAL,  
317 EAST MAIN ST.,  
LINDOLN, N.C.,  
U.S.A.



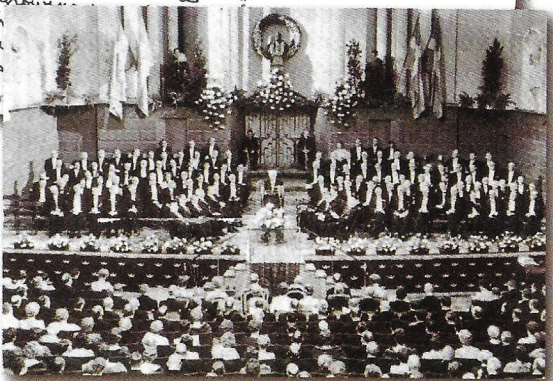
STOCKHOLM'S STADSHUS  
Sett from Malaren

Dear Doctor,  
In Stockholm, as wherever,  
surgery is practiced.  
Sodium continues  
in favor for intravenous  
use. A solid background  
than 2,300 artists  
in the world who  
admire Pentothal  
for its quick help,  
its moment and  
painless induction  
and, swift release.

Abbott

Drottningholm Kon. Nobelfestspel  
Stockholm Konserthuset den 19 December 1959  
Presentation of Nobel Prize for 1959.

Dear Doctor:  
The awarding of the  
Nobel Prizes in Stockholm  
is indeed an impressive  
ceremony. Impressive,  
too, is PENTOTHAL's record  
of safety and versatility,  
which makes it a  
crucial



foreign-postcard rate and postmarked from a city or town in its country of origin — characteristics appealing to some modern postal history collectors and country specialists. So, without further ado, here follows a list of the English-text Pentothal advertisement cards that can be obtained on a shoestring budget, identified by their "Dear Doctor" Website ID#, title, and place postmark and dates:

- Denmark #39: Copenhagen, "The Little Mermaid", all franked 15ø with 2 Apr 1957 København wavy lines cds.
- Finland #42: "Helsinki, The Children's Castle", all franked 10p with 1 Oct 1958 Helsinki cds.
- Greenland #67: "Native sealers from Greenland", all franked 15ø with 11 Mar 1959 Godthåb cds.
- Sweden #160: "Stockholm's Stadshus", all franked 10ö with 2 Jun to 14 Jul 1956 Stockholm cds.
- Sweden #161: "Bohusläns fjordveckade kust...", all franked 15ö with 9 Feb 1957 Göteborg cds.
- Sweden #162: "Laplandish living quarters, Tarradalen", all franked 15ö with 5 Mar 1958 Polcirkeln cds.
- Sweden #163: "1959 Nobel prize presentation", all franked 15ö with 16 Feb 1960 Stockholm cds.

If you want to further specialize in these cards and spend more than (and in some cases well in excess of) a shoestring-budget amount to purchase them, there is a sole #131 Norwegian card ("Night view of the North Cape") posted 1966 and a #164 Swedish card ("Klara sjö och Stadshuset / The City Hall") posted 1967 and 1968, both of which present acquisition challenges. Also, all of the seven 1956–1960 Nordic cards listed above exist as (nurse) variants lacking the "Dear Doctor" salutations, and these generally do not sell at a premium. Also, several of these seven cards exist with foreign-language texts, some of which can be found from time to time offered on the Delcampe site at prices well within the shoestring budget. So, happy hunting!