

# **Bromo-Seltzer**

by

**Cecil Munsey**

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Goaded and/or Impelled by

**John Cooper** (Bellevue, WA), **Ron Fowler** (Seattle, WA), **Frank Baxter** (Pueblo, CO),  
**Don Carroll** (Houston, TX) and **Paul Jillson** (Santa Barbara, CA)

At a recent bottle show & sale in Las Vegas I found myself almost getting dizzy from circling the sales floor and not finding any bottle(s) I wanted or could afford to add to my eclectic collection. The approaching dizziness was prevented when I spotted a small bottle, green-to-teal-blue in color and embossed with the familiar markings of the proprietary headache medicine, Bromo-Seltzer. Because of its unusual color I paid the posted price of \$27 and continued circling the sales floor. I imagined visitors to my home asking why I would have such a common bottle in my collection. I would answer that mine was of an unusual color. I decided to illustrate the story I would be telling by acquiring a standard cobalt blue Bromo Seltzer bottle to sit next to the one of unusual color. I purchased a mint specimen for less than \$2.

Later in my hotel room I placed the Bromo-Seltzer bottles on the dresser with a few other purchases for my collection. That's a habit I have developed over the years when attending out-of-town shows. It gives me a chance to convince myself that I needed the bottles, made the best deal possible, and I get to enjoy my new acquisitions each time I enter my hotel room.

Three of the five fellow collector / friends listed above as being responsible for the outburst of history and other information about Bromo-Seltzer to follow, visited my room off and on throughout the weekend. One was conspicuous in his failure to comment on the Bromo-Seltzer bottles and the other two made some amusing remarks to the point and beyond. Later the fourth of the five wrote that he had heard I now collected "BS" bottles and even cartooned the situation. The fifth was truly interested in the history of the bottles and the firm which produced the product and said he would be interested in finding out more.

Well John, Ron, Frank, and Paul, you "asked" for it -- a hoped silk purse made out of a sow's ear, so to speak. The majority of Bromo-Seltzer bottles may be almost more than common, but the associated history is as compelling, exciting, revealing, and worthy of our interest and chronicling as is the history of the most expensive and sought after bottles in our hobby.

## **The Founder**

On January 15, 1889 Isaac Edward Emerson compounded a granular, effervescent salt which he called *Bromo-Seltzer*. He made application for the registration of this name to the U.S. Patent Office and was granted trademark number 16,599 on May 21, 1889.

Emerson was born July 24, 1859 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He was the son of Robert J. and Cornelia Lewis Emerson. Young Emerson graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1879. He derived an interest in chemicals during the year or so he was assistant to the professor of chemistry at that institution.

## **The Beginings of the Product**

In 1880 Emerson opened his first drug store, at Annapolis, Maryland. A year later he moved to Baltimore and in the period 1884-1889 he owned and operated three drug stores in that city. It was during that period he created *Bromo-Seltzer* the soon-to-be-famous, white, headache powder that fizzed impressively in water.

## **The Early Company**

Emerson sold his drug stores and withdrew from retail trade on May 1, 1889. With the financial aid of John F. Waggaman, a wealthy friend from Washington, D.C., he began the manufacture and marketing of *Bromo-Seltzer*. Two years later, the Emerson Drug Company was organized and this newly created firm officially purchased the formula and trademark from the originator. Waggaman served as vice-president of the Emerson Drug Company from about 1890 to 1905 when he sold out to Emerson. Soon after the founding of the new company, a New York sales office was opened at No. 8 Beach Street with T. Mitchell Horner as the manager. Sometime later the office was moved to 256 West 23rd Street where it remained for a number of years.

The firm thrived and by 1900 *Bromo-Seltzer* alone had net annual sales of almost \$7 million. The firm early on had a second product -- "*Emerson's Rheumatic Cure.*"

## **The Bottles**

The familiar cobalt blue bottle was adopted for the product in the beginning, apparently because it was thought light had a deleterious effect on the contents. The smaller of the four sizes was largely for home use. The larger sizes were mostly developed for drug store soda fountains where *Bromo-Seltzer* was individually dispensed.

Hazel Glass Company of Washington, Pennsylvania made the first of the *Bromo-Seltzer* bottles. The Cumberland Glass Company in Bridgeton, New Jersey made most of the bottles until 1907. In 1907 Emerson built his own glassworks, the Maryland Glass Corporation of Baltimore. The plant was built for the Emerson Drug Company by Philip I. Heuisler, who became the president of Maryland Glass Corporation and remained thus until 1936. By specializing in the

blue bottles used for *Bromo-Seltzer* and filling orders for other companies, the Maryland Glass Corporation became the largest producer of cobalt bottles in the world. The Cumberland Glass Company dropped the manufacture of blue glass altogether after they lost the Emerson account because they couldn't compete with Emerson's new glassworks. *Bromo-Seltzer* and other bottles made by the Maryland Glass Corporation until 1916 can be identified by the symbol "M". The symbol "M in a circle" was adopted in 1916 and appears on bottles made after that date. All of the Maryland Glass Corporation bottles produced after 1915 were made by the Owens fully automatic bottle making machines and are what bottles collectors call "machine-made." Cork closures were used on all Bromo-Seltzer bottles until 1920, when screw-caps were adopted.

The bottles used for *Emerson's Rheumatic Cure* were amber and identical in shape to the Bromo-Seltzer bottles. The rheumatic cure was not successful and consequently bottles used for that product are scarce and much more valuable than *Bromo-Seltzer* bottles.

### **The Spanish-American War**

The business thrived and was going strong when the Spanish American War was declared in the spring of 1898.

Isaac Emerson, was a yachtsman, and one of the prime organizers of the Maryland Naval Reserve in 1894. During the Spanish-American War, Emerson actively served in the 5th Light House district with the rank of Captain -- a title he used the rest of his life.

Just after the war began, Congress passed the U.S. Revenue War Bill of 1898, "An Act to Provide Ways and Means to Meet War Expenditures and for Other Purposes." After being signed by President William McKinley, the Act became effective July 1, 1898 and had the same purposes and requirements as "Schedule 'C' of the Revenue Act of 1862," specifying that revenue stamps be affixed to a variety of items including patent and proprietary medicines such as *Bromo-Seltzer*.

The part of both acts that is fascinating to many collectors is that firms were allowed to either purchase standard government revenue stamps or have their own Private-Die Proprietary Revenue Stamps made by the government for their exclusive use. Affixing a stamp to

products denoted the tax had been paid. The denomination of revenue stamp depended on the retail price of the product.

The Emerson Drug Company marketed bottles of Bromo-Seltzer retailing for 10¢, 25¢, 50¢, and \$1.00 so they used revenue stamps of the 1/4¢ (1,967,000 printed), 5/8¢ (605,000 printed), 1 1/4¢ (94,000 printed), and 2 1/2¢ (68,000 printed) denominations. The Emerson Drug Company stamps were Private-Die Proprietary Revenue Stamps. The first stamps weren't produced until 1900. They were first used on *Bromo-Seltzer* bottles in November of that year. The Act was annulled on July 1, 1901 so the stamps were printed in numbers as indicated above. In addition, not all the stamps had been used by July 1, 1901 so the company kept the left over stamps and gave them, upon request, to revenue stamp collectors of the period. Few of the stamps in existence today show evidence of use and in all probability came from the remainder.

The private-die stamps of the Emerson Drug Company can be described as upright rectangular 19 1/2 by 25 1/2 mm. They were printed in red, green, brown, and gold. The central design was the familiar blue, wide-mouth bottle, the label of which carried the following legend:

EMERSON'S  
BROMO SELTZER  
Granulated Effervescent  
(Trade Mark)  
CURES  
Nervous Headache Neuralgia  
Brain Fatigue  
Sleeplessness  
Mental Exhaustion  
Alcoholic Excesses &c  
Prepared by  
EMERSON DRUG CO.  
Baltimore Md.

It has been said that the lettering on this label was the most minute such engraving as had ever been printed on a stamp. And, indeed, under a magnifying glass every letter is perfectly legible.

### **Bromo-Seltzer as a Nostrum**

The Bromo-Seltzer business was a thriving one almost from the very beginning but it was far from a serene one for the Emerson Drug Company.

Harvey W. Wiley, M.D., Ph.D., and Chief of the Bureau of Chemistry in the U.S. Department of Agriculture began a crusade around the turn of the century which resulted in the Pure Food and Drugs Law of June 30, 1906. Dr. Wiley startled the whole country with his exposes of adulterated, poisonous, disease-producing drugs and foods. He showed the need for honesty in labeling and advertising. Thousands of patent and proprietary nostrums were analyzed and found to be dangerous by Dr. Wiley and his assistants. Conspicuous among them was the popular *Bromo-Seltzer*.

Samuel Hopkins Adams wrote in **1907** that "*Bromo-Seltzer is commonly sold in drug stores, both by the bottle and at soda fountains. The full dose is a 'heaping teaspoonful.' A heaping teaspoonful of Bromo-Seltzer means about ten grains of acetanilid. The United States Pharmacopeia dose is four grains; five grains have been known to produce fatal results. The prescribed dose of Bromo-Seltzer is dangerous and has been known to produce sudden collapse.*"

As a result of the 1906 legislation, many changes were made in the patent and proprietary medicine industry. Most of the identified products were driven out of business. Some were able to make changes in their ingredients and claims and stay in business. *Bromo-Seltzer* was one of the latter. While the labeling of the product changed, much of the actual contents remained the same -- dangerous! Here is how author Arthur Kallet put it in **1933**:

*"Acetphenetidin and acetanilid are two common constituents of drug store headache cures which have been responsible for thousands of cases of poisoning and many deaths. The Food and Drugs Act requires that the presence of these drugs be shown on labels. It is evident, however, that naming a drug on the label is not sufficient protection when the dangerous properties of the drug are not recognized by the average person. The label should obviously include also the words 'a dangerous drug' or a similar statement. Bromo-Seltzer, a headache remedy which is not only sold at the drug counter but is also frequently dispensed at the soda fountain, is one of the many preparations containing acetanilid."*

J. B. Matthews and R. E. Schallcross continued the battle in **1935** with this bit of information: *"Bromo-Seltzer has been a standby for over forty years, for 'morning-after' loginess. The acenamilid in Bromo-Seltzer is a habit-forming drug and the product is a dangerous one, the advertisements to the contrary notwithstanding."*

One year later, in **1936**, Ruth deForest Lamb wrote this emotional blast at the Emerson Drug Company: *"Most people, according to the advertising, 'have their first Bromo-Seltzer at the soda fountain.' The druggist is provided with the dispensing apparatus free of charge, simply inserting a new bottle as the stuff is used up."* She continued her rather emotional presentation with, *"One dose of this insidious habit-former may call for another, and in the course of a year the American people, so it is estimated, spend \$20 million to dope themselves with Bromo-Seltzer."*

Surprising as it may be, James Cook wrote in **1958** that *"Bromo-Seltzer is probably the best-known headache and hangover remedy still containing acetanilid--along with sodium bromide, caffeine, and sodium bicarbonate."* Of the latter, Cook went on, *"The reaction between sodium bicarbonate and hydrochloric acid in the stomach liberates carbon dioxide. The belching that follows is due entirely to the release of carbon dioxide gas from the stomach, and not due to actual relief or cure of so-called 'acid indigestion'."*

And finally, as recent as **1967** James Harvey Young wrote: *"Also in the danger class were powerful pain-killers, proprietaries containing large amounts of...mixtures of bromides and acetanilid. The FDA warned analgesic manufacturers to adopt labels giving sensible dosage instructions and cautioning against the hazards of overuse. Most heeded, but some did not, and the FDA undertook a widespread program of seizures. Caught in this particular net were major companies, like the Proprietary Association stalwart Bromo-Seltzer. Its maker protested the FDA's action as 'an arbitrary exercise of power' and vowed to fight up to the Supreme Court, but in the end did not. Instead, the company consented to a decree of condemnation and changed its formula."*

## **The Advertising**

The Emerson Drug Company, led by its founder and chief stockholder, Captain Isaac Emerson, believed in and used a wide variety of advertising to promote their primary product -- *Bromo-Seltzer*. Much of the print advertising can still be found today in old magazines, newspapers, and the like. Most of the advertising was simple and straight forward.

The private-die proprietary revenue stamps discussed above were examples of some of the early and significant advertising. Examples of those stamps can still be found by collectors.

In 1909, following his instinct for advertising, Captain Emerson erected the Emerson Tower Building in Baltimore. It was copied from an old tower in Siena, Italy. Some 200 feet above the pavement there was a huge clock, having a dial 28 feet in diameter. The tower was 357 feet high and topped by a 17-ton facsimile of the 10¢ cobalt blue *Bromo-Seltzer* bottle. The facsimile bottle had 596 electric light bulbs and revolved at a rate of 107 feet per minute. On a clear night it was visible for 20 miles. The 51 by 20 1/2 foot bottle was taken down in the 1930s when it began to deteriorate.

For me, the highlight of Bromo-Seltzer advertising came over the radio when I was a boy. In the 1930s and 1940s it was popular to use the "Sonovox" treatment in radio commercials. Sonovox made birds, beasts, foghorns, and locomotives *talk*. The Emerson Drug Company, having been persuaded that the name of their product repeated over and over was the sort of noise a locomotive makes when it gathers speed, were further persuaded to allow the Sonovox experts a free hand. The result was a talking locomotive, which puffed the product in a slow to ever faster, "*Bromo-Seltzer, Bromo-Seltzer, Bromo-Seltzer, Bromo-Seltzer....*"

### **The Company Today**

After Captain Emerson died in 1931, the Emerson Drug Company was operated successfully by a number of presidents until it was acquired by Warner-Lambert Pharmaceutical Company in 1956. Warner-Lambert moved the firm from Baltimore to Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1967, where it is today -- still producing its famous product with such statements as: "*Bromo-Seltzer is still 'tops' for headaches, but it is equally efficacious for an upset stomach.*"





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**The Little Blue Bottle**

by

**Lolly Carroll**

[ 1936-1988 ]

This is the bottle that started it all,  
That gave me the fever and caused my downfall,  
From a fairly sane person to a little bit crazed,  
Where the sight of a bottle can make my eyes glazed,  
Where each dump I find is cause for elation,  
And each bottle show is a big celebration.

Just a little blue bottle, not very old,  
Machine-made, not pontilled or blown in a mold.  
Those terms at that time were all strange to me,  
It was just a nice bottle and best of all -- free.

A **Bromo-Seltzer**, as common as rain,  
With chips in the lip and a slight touch of stain.  
Then my house was in order, my future arranged,  
But thanks to that bottle, my whole life has changed.

It has given me friends I would never have met,  
It has given me knowledge I'll never forget.  
It's too late to turn back now, the die has been cast,  
I'll be spending my future with things from the past.

No matter what treasures my shelves may display,  
Even if my collection is famous some day,  
When asked for my favorite, the one I'll recall,  
Is the little blue bottle that started it all.

## Illustrations