Trade card illustration found new life on two different stamps

By Daniel Piazza

From 1872 to 1881, William E. Clarke of Providence, R.I., manufactured and sold Hunt's Remedy, a purported cure-all wonder drug known in New York and New England since at least 1850. He used colorful, dramatic trade cards to advertise his product, including one that inspired a match and medicine stamp long popular among revenue collectors.

The image on the front of the trade card shows a fierce and hearty male pa
tient wielding a bottle of Hunt's Remedy against death, personified as a skeleton with a scythe and hourglass. The reverse lists no end of ailments against which the wonder drug has “never been known to fail,” including back pain, kidney problems, and “female diseases.”

It was Clarke himself who first translated this masterpiece of Victorian trade imagery into philately. In 1879 or 1880, he commissioned the National Bank Note Co. to engrave and print 9,000 examples of the 3c private die medicine stamp (Scott RS56). It paid the federal excise tax on a 75c bottle of his miracle cure and, like all private die stamps, afforded a terrific opportunity to advertise at the same time.

More than a century later, United States Postal Service art director Carl T. Herman created another stamp (Scott 3182f) from the image. The 32c postage stamp commemorates the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act, passed in the wake of a public outcry caused by Upton Sinclair's The Jungle, as part of the Celebrate the Century series. The Act regulated the hyperbolic claims made by earlier patent medicine producers such as Clarke, and required accurate labeling of ingredients.

Little is known about the ingredients in Hunt's Remedy beyond the claim made on the back of Clarke's trade card that it was “purely vegetable” and based on a recipe that descended from the original Dutch inhabitants of New Amsterdam. The secret formula was acquired by new owners around 1881, and Hunt's Remedy was apparently still being sold as late as 1908, when a Kansas State Board of Health Report described it as a “brown solution of bitter vegetable drugs, containing 17.2 per cent alcohol.”

William E. Clarke’s 3c
USPS stamp exchange complaint withdrawn

By Bill McAllister
Washington Correspondent
An Indiana stamp dealer has withdrawn a complaint he filed with the Postal Regulatory Commission accusing the United States Postal Service of violating its own rules on the exchange of unused postage.

William Smith of Dyer, Ind., told the commission Feb. 15 he was dropping the charges because of the Postal Service's "willingness to negotiate" the issue.

The commission agreed Feb. 19 to allow Smith to withdraw.

Smith said he took the action because the USPS had made the withdrawal a precondition of the settlement talks.

"I'm waiting for them to set up a time to have a teleconference, present their position and possibly negotiate a settlement (or else I'll just refile it)," he told Linn's in a Feb. 20 e-mail.

Smith said he is still hoping to find a letter from USPS officials explaining in detail their reasoning for the Dec. 23, 1970, rule that governs the exchange of unused postal stationery and precanceled stamps.

In his petition to the commission, Smith said he has 37,000 pieces of postal stationery and stamps that the Postal Service refused to exchange for prepaid Priority Mail envelopes, as reported in Linn's Feb. 25 issue, page 13.

He contends he meets all the rules set in the Domestic Mail Manual for the exchange of the material.

The Postal Service rejected his offer in 2011.