

## SCENES FROM THE PAST X-RAY MANIA: THE X RAY IN ADVERTISING, CIRCA 1895

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### I. INTRODUCTION

It is interesting how a seemingly innocuous event can lead inexorably to a quest that consumes many hours of one's life. Such was the case many years ago when, at a flea market, I (E.S.G.) stumbled across a sign advertising "X-ray Headache Tablets". I decided to see if I could find an actual bottle of patent medicine. Shortly thereafter, at an antique show in central Massachusetts, I went from booth to booth, asking dealers of apothecary or country store memorabilia about X-ray Headache Tablets. One dealer from upstate New York responded that he thought he had such a bottle back at home. A few weeks later, I received a letter in which he apologized for having misled me. He had been mistaken. Instead, he had a box of X-ray Prophylactics, which I purchased. The question was obvious: What could x rays have to do with headache tablets or prophylactics? Thus began a quest to collect and otherwise document other "x-ray" products, dating from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, that attempted to capitalize on the marketing potential ascribed to this new technology.

Why would an advertiser for headache pills or golf balls or stove polish choose to put the word *x ray* on their products? For the same reasons that we see the word *laser* applied to everything from courier services to running shoes: New technologies have an appeal that reaches far into the public psyche. Nancy Knight, a historian of technology, has written about this phenomenon (1). And I have also discussed it with James Twitchell, professor of history at the University of Florida, Gainesville, and with Joseph J. Corn, professor of the history of technology at Stanford University, California. These and other writers have looked at the common mindset that responded to the x ray as a powerful, potent metaphor and at advertisers who played—in sometimes bizarre ways—off this public perception.

One explanation for the marketing phenomenon was simply that, for at least a short period after the discovery of x rays in 1895, everything about the new rays was dazzling and fascinating to the public. Knight discussed the immediate and widespread "x-ray mania" that followed the announcement of the amazing "new light":

In the last century [19th], some futurists dreamed of great breakthroughs but could not articulate the content or form of the medical miracles. These optimists would not have to wait long for inspiration. With the discovery of x-rays, the basis for the first "miracle machine" in clinical medicine, a change occurred in medical dreams. In the first months after Roentgen's announcement, the medical profession and the public were treated to predictions of immediate miracles. X-ray mania began early and grew quickly. People reacted to the discovery of the x-ray in different ways. There was an immediate popular response that spawned the sort of cultural manifestation common to fads. X-rays appeared in advertisements, songs and cartoons. X-rays, many believed, would become a part of everyday culture, from henhouses to the temperance movement, from the detection of flaws in metal to the analysis of broken hearts. Hopes for new technology reflected a wide spectrum of contemporary concerns. The public learned that x-rays might soon be used routinely for everything from diagnosing pregnancy to raising the dead. The rays represented the miracle cure that someday, with the flick of a switch, might heal a wide range of mortal ills. One author called the field of radiology a "veritable fairyland of science" in which the most extravagant hopes might someday be realized.

### II. VISITING THE SHOPS OF THE PAST

The impact of the word X-Ray, for promoting many products would be observed in the different shops, ranging from the pharmacies to the hardware stores. Here in Figures 1-24 we can now look through the old shops and advertisements and reflect on the impact X-Ray had on our society, in addition to being one of the greatest contributions to the practice of medicine.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

**X-RAY EXPOSURE**  
GIVE ME A DOSE

OH MY POOR HEAD

**KOHLER'S ANTIDOTE**

**FOR HEADACHE**  
HAS RELIEVED THOUSANDS

**WHY NOT YOU?** IT WILL CURE THE WORST KIND OF HEADACHE, WHETHER CAUSED BY Sick Stomach, Excess of Spirituous Liquors or Neuralgia

**GIVES RELIEF IN 15 MINUTES**

8 Mailed to any address in U. S. 25  
DOSES Post paid, on receipt of price, CENTS.

**KOHLER MFG. CO., BALTIMORE, MD.**

When you write, please mention "The Cosmopolitan."

Figure 11

—USE—  
**X-RAY'S RENOVATOR.**  
A Cleaning Fluid of Surpassing Excellence.

Will not shrink, stain or injure the most delicate fabric, and penetrates where others fail.  
LEAVES PLEASANT PERFUME AFTER USING.

Figure 12

Not a Geographic 2/11/17

**More than Mere Light**  
**Engineered Lighting**

The best light for the eyes is X-Ray Lighting, combining beautiful fixtures and efficient illumination.

**X-Ray Lighting**  
from Concealed Sources

is indirect lighting. But it is far more. It is diffused light—light without glare.

The wonderful evenness and softness of X-Ray Lighting is due to X-Ray Reflectors—a patented idea.

X-Ray Reflectors are concealed and silver coated. The corrugations break up the light rays and completely diffuse them. The silver coating reflects all the light. Thus in X-Ray Lighting there are neither eye-blinking bright spots nor deep shadows. Rooms are flooded with beautiful light. By actual test X-Ray Lighting tires eyes less than direct or semi-direct light.

You can work or read by it without the slightest eye-strain. In absence of glass keeps the pupil of the eye relaxed. The eyes do not tire.

In offices, schools, churches, public buildings, stores, homes—people everywhere are installing X-Ray Lighting—the only engineered lighting—patented and installed by men who know. Investigation will satisfy you that X-Ray Lighting means 100 per cent light. And it costs no more—70 per cent less in maintenance.

Ask your Architect or have the nearest X-Ray Dealer show you. Their lighting knowledge will prove valuable.

**"How to Know and Have Good Lighting"—FREE**

Send for this beautiful free book of latest developments in lighting. Learn why leading corporations, educational institutions, governmental buildings, great hotels, clubs and homes have X-Ray Lighting.

**FREE LIGHTING PLANS** Tell us purpose and dimensions of your interior and we will send you a complete set of plans—FREE. Just fill out and mail the coupon—TODAY.

**NATIONAL X-RAY REFLECTOR CO.**  
240 W. Jackson Blvd. CHICAGO 31 W. 46th Street NEW YORK

Write for literature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_  
State \_\_\_\_\_  
Zip \_\_\_\_\_

“Mention the Geographic—it identifies you.”

Figure 13

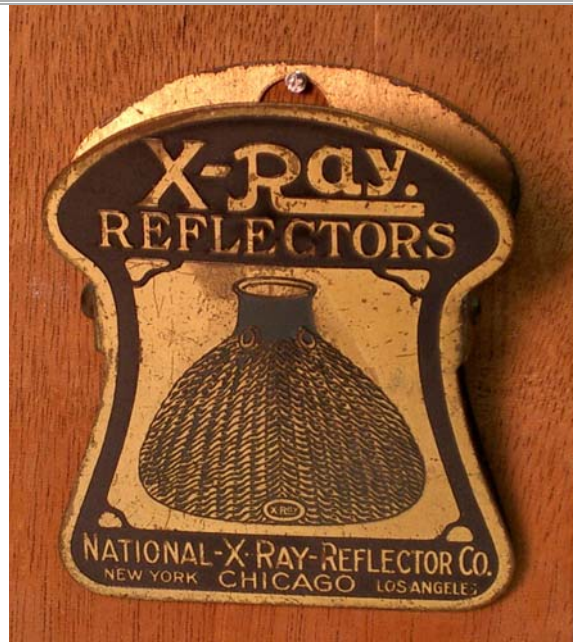


Figure 14

1897

**PEOPLE'S THEATRE** Kensington Avenue  
434 Cumberland Street  
Every Evening This Week, Matinee Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday  
Manager  
**IN OLD KENTUCKY**  
Next Week-ED. HARRIGAN IN OLD LAVENDER

**SPECIAL**  
Theatrical, etc., or any  
Under Three Theatres,  
Matinee and evening  
States of the Law.

**CHESNUT**  
NIXON & ZIMMERMAN  
I. FRED. ZIMMERMAN  
GEORGE R. A. ZIMMERMAN  
Week Commence  
**The Herald**  
Wedge  
Chas  
**BOTTLED**  
N. E. Cor.  
BREWERY, 32d St.  
Between the Acts, I  
Also Extra Fine

An Important Discovery

**X-Ray**  
Whiskey  
BRANDY TONE

Scientific, Substantial,  
Beneficial

**EDWARD MULLIGAN'S SONS**  
Tenth and Christian Streets  
PHILADELPHIA

Figure 15

**ORDER BLANK**  
X-Ray Incubator Co.  
Weyan, Nebraska

QUANTITY	No. 4 INCUBATOR	\$10.00
QUANTITY	No. 5 INCUBATOR	\$10.00
QUANTITY	No. 4 & 5 RAY JUNIOR BROODERS	\$10.00
QUANTITY	No. 2 & 3 RAY JUNIOR BROODERS	\$10.00
QUANTITY	No. 3 BROODER	\$10.00
QUANTITY	No. 1 & 2 RAY JUNIOR BROODERS	\$10.00

W. H. HARRIGAN  
W. H. HARRIGAN  
W. H. HARRIGAN

**Just Out-**  
Illustration of a chick hatching from an egg.

**Our X-Ray Vacuum Drinking Fountain**  
Get One Free

This is the best thing we have ever used in our experimental chicken house. It never freezes, and you have to do to see that it is filled with warm water once a day. It furnishes clean fresh water to your chicks, and you can get clean fresh water, and plenty of it. You can get clean fresh water, and plenty of it. You can get clean fresh water, and plenty of it.

The X-Ray drinking fountain is worth \$5 to any farmer or poultry tract.

We give you one free with our order for an incubator or brooder or waterer. We give you one free with our order for an incubator or brooder or waterer.

Thousands of modern farmers have wanted to buy our Drinking Fountain. We are preparing to sell one of all the year before you order one. We are preparing to sell one of all the year before you order one.

For more \$5 in actual machine equipment—and you make a good every time \$5 every season in the number of chicks saved, look for your incubator or brooder or waterer by any other name, and you will get our X-Ray Vacuum Drinking Fountain.

The X-Ray Incubator Co.  
Weyan, Nebraska

This is the X-Ray Vacuum Drinking Fountain. Does not freeze. Is absolutely safe in brooder. Will not run over. No dirt can get in. For small chicks. For large chicks. Furnishes clean, fresh water all day, and in all weathers. Saves lives of dozens of chicks every season.

Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

### III. CONCLUSION

The x-ray grabbed the imagination of scientists and the public with great intensity. Scientists focused on its powers to make matter transparent and to cure illness. The public concentrated on its magical ability to see through objects and its

miraculous capacity to change the world as they knew it. Together, everyone focused on the x ray as an unexpected technologic advancement that encouraged belief in other similar or even more miraculous advances. Hence, x-ray became exemplary of the better future that all might experience. The x ray extended the normal human senses and promised to improve quality of life. What product would not benefit from such sub-conscious association?

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#### REFERENCES

1. Knight N. The New Light: X-Rays And Medical Futurism. In: Corn J, Ed. Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology, And The American Future. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986; 10–30.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Edwin S. Gerson, M.D., is a Semi-Retired Radiologist practicing in Atlanta, GA, USA. Being a naturally curious radiologist and an inveterate collector was the motivation for developing an extensive collection of items and advertisements that used the name “X-Ray” to promote their products.

Perry Sprawls, Ph.D., is a Medical Physicist with a major interest in preserving and publishing the history of Medical Physics and related applications. This includes serving as Co-Editor of this Journal.

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