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.
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

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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