

Protecting the Trail and the Teeth



This bottle held Rubifoam for the Teeth, which was made by E. W. Hoyt and Company of Lowell, Massachusetts.

Whoever thought of oral hygiene in the old west? Certainly not I when I volunteered at the KSHS Archeology Lab in the Center for Historical Research in Topeka. The subject was introduced when Chris Garst, who oversees, processes, and protects a huge collection of artifacts from sites around the state, asked me to look through some boxes of material from Fort Hays. I did, and soon found several bottles used to hold tooth wash and some remnants of toothbrushes. These items that dated back some 125 years fascinated me, and I began to research the subject. But first, let's set the scene.

The Civil War had ended, and the West was calling. Large numbers of people began the trek toward new homesteads. The United States Government established forts along several trails to protect the settlers and the stage and express lines.

One such fort was set up in the area of Big Creek and the Smoky Hill River in 1865. At first it was called Fort Fletcher and was garrisoned by three companies of the First United States Volunteers. These were "Reconstituted Yankees," that is, Confederate prisoners of war who enlisted in the U.S. Army to serve on the frontier. On November 17, 1866, the installation was renamed Fort Hays. Shortly thereafter, in June 1867, the site was flooded out with loss of life and property. Consequently, it was moved to higher ground.

Marshall Clark is a volunteer in the Archeology Lab. He is a retiree who has always had a fascination with history and who is thankful that a lot of progress has been made in oral hygiene during the last one hundred or more years. He thanks his wife, Katrina Clark, for typing and editing this paper.

Photos by Craig Cooper.

In August 1889, General Order 69 was issued, ordering Fort Hays to be abandoned, along with Fort Laramie in Wyoming and Fort Lyon in Colorado. The land, consisting of 7,600 acres, was given to the State of Kansas to establish an agricultural experiment station and a western branch of the state normal school. This institution eventually became Fort Hays State University. The fort had existed from 1865 to 1889. A few of its buildings still stand and are part of Fort Hays State Historic Site.

"Brushing the teeth, though in vogue in foreign armies and approved by hygienists as a preventative of agues and diseases, was rare," states George W. Adams in his fascinating book, titled *Doctors in Blue*. Conditions at the fort were of no help. An 1870 Surgeon General's circular reported that, although there was an unlimited supply of water, after a rain, it was impregnated to a limited extent with lime and magnesium along with carbonic and sulfuric acids. Even worse, the fort's cemetery was located in a spot from which drainage went directly into the water supply.

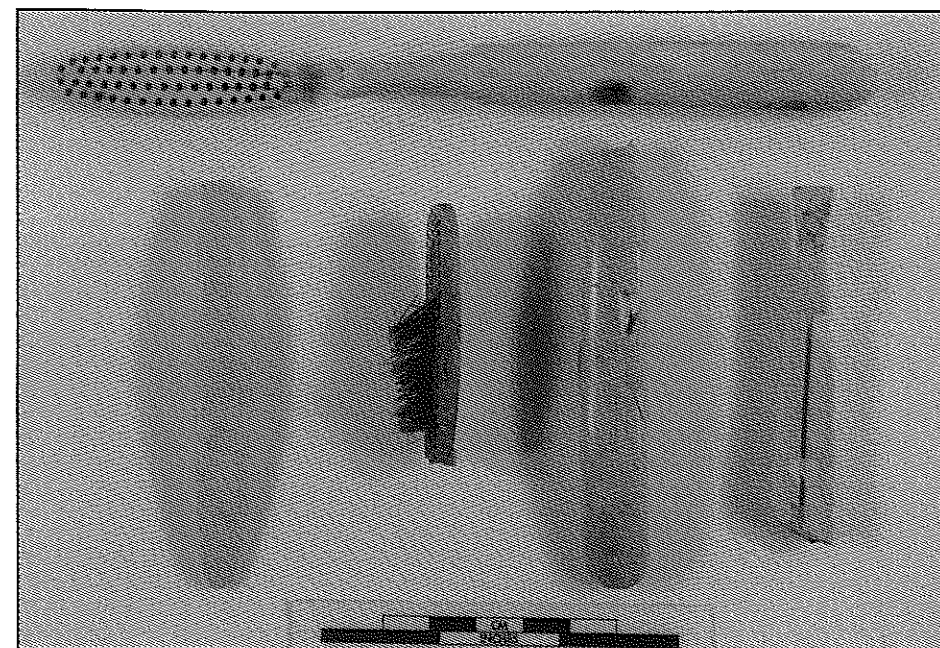
Considering these conditions, we would hope that residents at the fort tended to their oral hygiene. In the January 1867 Fort Hays post council records, there is a description of the supplies carried by the post sutler, and that list includes toothbrushes.

Among the KSHS artifacts there is indeed evidence that some brushing was going on.

The archeological collection contains a number of toothbrush handle remnants. They are made from ivory, bone, or celluloid, and one is inscribed "Ivory Finish." Several include remains of the bristles.

Bottles in this collection represent at least three different brands of tooth cleaners. Back then, these preparations were called "tooth washes." One brand, "Rubifoam for the Teeth," was made by E. W. Hoyt and Company of Lowell, Massachusetts. Rubifoam cost twenty-five cents a bottle and was described as being "deliciously flavored." The company even put out a small publication promoting the prevention of tooth decay through the use of its product. It was much later, in 1901, that the idea that bacteria caused decay was accepted.

A second bottle was "Burnett's Oriental Tooth Wash," made in Boston,



(Top Left) This photo shows remnants of toothbrushes from the Fort Hays excavations. Note the fragment with some remaining bristles.

(Top Right) Van Buskirk's Fragrant Sozodont was made in New York City and promoted as "Good for bad teeth, not bad for good teeth."

(Right) These two bottles originally contained Burnett's Oriental Tooth Wash, which was made in Boston, Massachusetts.

Massachusetts. I wasn't able to locate much information on this product other than a label advertising the properties of "Cocaine, Kalliston, Florimel, Oriental Tooth Wash, asthma remedy and superior cooking extracts."

The third bottle is labeled "Van Buskirk's Fragrant Sozodont" from New York City. Its motto was "Good for bad teeth, not bad for good teeth." Sozodont's main ingredients included acids, astringents, and sharp abrasives. The major abrasive was diatomaceous earth. Diatoms are microscopic fossils of unicellular algae, found in both fresh and saltwater environments. They are essentially pure silica and survive after the death of the algae. Almost indestruc-



child to use Sozodont regularly. It was also recommended for use by invalids to rinse their mouths.

For those who were not quite as interested in daily oral hygiene, there were other aids. A book on Civil War artifacts refers to a small tin box labeled "Breath Fresheners." Certainly a soldier riding out to protect the trail felt much more confident with a sparkling smile and fresh breath.

Recommended Reading

Adams, George W. *Doctors in Blue*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985.

A Report on Barracks and Hospitals with the Descriptions of Military Posts, Circular No. 4, War Department, Surgeon General's Office, Washington, D.C., December 5, 1870.

Hygiene of the United States Army, Circular No. 8, War Department, Surgeon General's Office, Washington, D.C., 1875

tible, they provide a tremendous abrasive medium. Today diatoms continue to be used in dentifrices and are employed in filtering and grinding tasks.

An early broadside promoting Sozodont made some astounding claims: "For cleansing and preserving the teeth, hardening the gums, imparting a delightfully refreshing taste and feeling to the mouth, removing tarter and scruf from the teeth, completely arresting the progress of decay and whitening such parts as have already become black by decay." But wait, there's more! The advertisement went on to say that along with "this power it combines an embalming and anti-septic property and a delicate fragrance" that should encourage man, woman, or