

*Letters, Email, Bouquets & Brickbats*

# *Issue #13*

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*The C♦DPHS is an association of individuals dedicated to the preservation of the history of our community. To the preservation of the region's oral history, literary history, social history, graphic and pictorial history, and our history as represented by the region's artifacts and structures. To the preservation of this history for future generations. To the art of making this common heritage accessible to the public. And to the act of collaborating with other individuals and organizations sharing similar goals.*

*The Clayton ♦ Deer Park Historical Society's*

## *Letters, Email, Bouquets & Brickbats*

— or —

*Bits of Chatter, Trivia, and Notices  
— all strung together.*

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### *— Society Member Mike Reiter Reports —*

## *“This Box of Red Comet Fire Extinguishers Was in My Grandparents' House!”*

*— by Wally Lee Parker —*

One of the things I remember about the old Clayton school back in the early 1950s was the line of odd-looking red glass bulbs mounted wide apart and just above reach along the walls. I don't recall them being in the classrooms, just in the halls. Since I'm dredging these memories up from seven decades and change, forgiveness for the rustiness would be appreciated.

There wasn't any secret about these artifacts. We were told they were fire extinguishers. The idea was, if a fire got started, one of the older students or adults would take a glass bulb down and throw it at the base of the fire. To reinforce those instructions — meaning the older students or adults part — the bulbs were mounted high enough that the majority of the smaller sized young people couldn't have reached them without standing on a chair, and the even smaller kids not even then.

One of the nice things I can say about Clayton's school, there weren't that many unpleasant memories associated with it. For one thing, the older kids tended to look out for the littler ones. I think there were a couple of reasons for that. For example, it was largely a farm community, and a farm could be a very dangerous place. Families expected the older kids to

watch out for the younger — regardless of who's family the younger ones were in. As a result, anyone caught dragging a chair into the halls while eyeing those bulbs would have been scotched with some rapidity.

Anyway, toward the end of December, last year, I was delighted to be one of the people getting an email from society member Mike Reiter — our groups' de facto vice-president, although he won't admit it. Said email included photos of a box containing six such glass grenades and the pictorial instruction book explaining their use.

Mike's email included the following data. “*This box (see next page) of Red Comet Fire Extinguishers was in my grandparents' house. The glass bulbs are full of carbon tetrachloride, so they make me a little nervous! According to the text of the accompanying brochure, said brochure was first published on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1942.*”

On the included brochure, beneath the words “*Distributed in Your Area by,*” was the following name and address hand-stamped in red ink. “*Charles E. Perkins' Dash Feed Store, 5708 Trent Road.*”

As far as I can tell, there's only a small



***Red Comet Fire Extinguishing Grenades.***

***A box of six standard size carbon tetrachloride glass fire suppression grenades manufactured by Red Comet Inc. of Littleton, Colorado.***

segment of the above noted Trent Road left in the Spokane area. It separates from the newer East Trent Avenue just a hundred or so feet east of Trent Avenue's intersection with North Regal Street, that occurring at East Trent Avenue's 2800 block. What remains of the original Trent Road branches southward at a narrow angle and continues eastward as a vintage blacktop until the pavement is lost about four hundred feet later. After a few hundred more feet the road itself dissolves beneath the truck loading space behind a series of large warehouses sitting to the north of old road. To the south are three parallel sets of railroad tracks trending east and west.

Regarding the name Charles E. Perkins,

nothing clearly connecting that full name to a store in or near the city of Spokane in the 1940s could be located. That said, there was a series of want ads appearing in Spokane's 1945 newspapers listing seeds of various types available at the "Perkins Feed Store, 5708 Trent." In the spring of 1946 similar ads began appearing, but with a change of address to "5918 Trent." After that, all mention of "Perkins Feed Store" seemed to disappear from the area's newspapers.

If we substituted Trent Avenue for Trent Road, 5708 Trent would place us a short distance to the west of Trent Avenue's intersection with North Fancher Road, that approximately 4½ miles east of Spokane's downtown Riverfront



Park. As for 5918 Trent Avenue, that's just a short distance to the east of the Trent/Fancher intersection. There currently is a semi-isolated commercial building carrying the address East 5918 Trent Avenue abutting Trent just a short distance beyond the southeast corner of that same intersection. The data regarding this building indicates it was constructed in 1944 — suggesting it could well have been the site of Perkins' Feed Store in 1946. Of course, this all assumes the current Trent Avenue was in large part constructed over the route of the original Trent Road — at least when said road passed through this area. If such is true, the front part of the original 5708 store's lot is likely buried under the eastbound pavement of today's much widened Trent Avenue. What may be left of the original lot appears to have been merged into a very large storage area for intermodal truck/rail/marine cargo containers belonging to the J. B. Hunt trucking group.

The hand-thrown glass grenades in Mike's collection are the simplest of the devices once offered by Red Comet Incorporated. Other styles were attached to walls or ceilings via metal devices that incorporate heat-activated spring-loaded mechanisms designed to "shatter" the glass containment vessels and "scatter the Red Comet fluid in a shower in mid-air."

Regarding these Red Comet devices, the brochure says, "Their first cost is the only cost as they last for years — there are no moving parts to wear out — never have to be 'serviced' or re-filled — the fluid cannot leak out or evaporate."

In another place the brochure notes, "This powerful fluid does not spot or stain the finest fabrics, furniture, machinery or equipment, except to act as a cleanser or a degreasing agent. The fluid is also ideal for electrical or motor fires, as it is a non-conductor of electricity and it is known as the very best for gasoline and oil fires, for the fog smothers, instead of spreads, the fire."

As the brochure explains, once the fluid is splashed over or otherwise introduced to the flames, "the fluid changes into fog almost instantly at this heat, and greatly expands to a powerful, fire-smothering blanket, which is drawn to the heart of the fire by the draft."

It then continues, "This blanket of fog keeps the oxygen away, and smothers the fire — for a fire cannot live without a continuous supply of oxygen."

As to the nature of the fluid in Red Comet grenades, the brochure says, "Red Comet fluid is the purest carbon tetrachloride, (it's) known and recommended by fire chiefs and fire protec-



Photo by Mike Reiter.

### Price List.

*Copied from the Red Comet company brochure, the following indicates the price and weight of the standard and senior size fire grenades.*

*The standard size grenade contained 1 lb., 7 oz. of fluid. Add the glass weight, and the above postal scale appears to be reading correctly for the standard size — such being evidence that Mike's grenades are said size — each of which cost \$2.55. The senior size held 2 lbs., 6 oz. of fluid, and each cost \$3.90.*

*For orders over 99, each standard grenade was discounted 25¢, and each senior 50¢.*



### ***Red Comet Fire Grenade, Standard Size.***

***Left: This image from the Brochure shows a standard size grenade in an “Economy Wall Bracket.” It goes on to note, “For fast manual use. Not automatic. Made also in senior size, and in red, clear, or frosted grenades.”***

***Right: Mike Reiter took this photograph of one of the grenades from the box of six found in his grandparent’s house. The ruler suggests the grenade’s size, which should be in the neighborhood of roughly 6 inches long and 3½ inches wide — any optical discrepancy is probably due to the fact that both the grenade and the ruler are resting on the same surface. The ruler makes a handy stand-in for a type of device archaeologists and paleontologists call a “scale bar” — that used when photographing artifacts as they are being unearthed to suggest their size. A typical device would be a wooden stick painted in horizontal strips of high contrast colors — most often black and white — with each alternating band being of equal width — such as an inch or one or more centimeters.***

*tion men as one of the most effective fire extinguishing liquids ever developed. The same fluid that has been used for years in other types of extinguishers, but the Red Comet is so refined as to be practically pure.”*

So, what is carbon tetrachloride, and what makes it so special? It’s within a group of chemicals known as synthetic chlorinated solvents — meaning manufactured compounds that contain chlorine. As for being a solvent, it was used as a degreaser, metal cleaner, and in dry-cleaning, and also as a paint thinner, spot cleaner, and a number of other household uses.

Carbon tetrachloride is described as a

clear, volatile liquid at room temperature — the term volatile suggesting it will readily evaporate when exposed to the open air, especially if the temperature of the liquid rises above 47° Fahrenheit. Said liquid will freeze if its temperature drops below minus 9° Fahrenheit. Winter temperatures in the Clayton/Deer Park area have historically fallen as low as minus 40° Fahrenheit, suggesting a liquid such as water freezing and expanding in glass containers would be a problem. But carbon tetrachloride, unlike water, shrinks when it freezes.

Conversely, the chemical boils at 170° Fahrenheit. It isn’t flammable as either a liquid



or gas — meaning it will not burn in either form — but it does chemically decompose at temperatures above 750° Fahrenheit, with some of the fumes being produced extremely toxic and/or corrosive in nature. Temperatures reached in a fully furnished burning room can easily exceed a thousand degrees Fahrenheit.

When Red Comet's literature states that the chemical contained in their grenades will form a "blanket of fog, keep the oxygen away, and smothers the fire," the phenomenon described arise from the fact that carbon tetrachloride's vapor is significantly denser, meaning heavier, than atmospheric air. As the chemical vaporizes in the heat of the fire, it sinks to the floor, displacing the oxygen laden atmosphere any living thing drawing breath needs. Which is to say, once loosed it not only "smothers the fire," it also smothers everything else it covers.

In her 1925 book "*Industrial Poisons in the United States*," Doctor Alice Hamilton, "Assistant Professor of Industrial Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts," and "Formerly Special Investigator of Poisonous Industries for the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics," wrote the following about carbon tetrachloride. "*Carbon tetrachloride, or tetrachloromethane, CCl<sub>4</sub>, is used in industry as a solvent for gums, resins, and fats. Since it is non-inflammable, it is sometimes substituted for the inflammable carbon disulfide in the manufacture of automobile tires, and the same property leads to its use as a dry cleaner. It is also a constituent of some rubber cements, is used to clean oil from machinery, and, under the name of Pyrene, is widely used as a fire extinguisher.*"

After noting reports of necrosis of the liver in test animals after exposures to high levels of carbon tetrachloride, Doctor Hamilton adds the following regarding the chemical's metabolism after inhalation.

*"This breakdown in the body, with liberation of HCl (hydrogen chloride, which, in solution with water, becomes hydrochloric acid), reminds one of the mode of poisoning when phosgene gas is inhaled; and in fact, poisoning by*

*carbon tetrachloride under certain conditions is really poisoning by phosgene gas."*

Regarding the above, a paragraph from Dr. Hamilton's *Industrial Poisons in the United States* notes, "*This gas, so famous in trench warfare during the latter part of the World War, is of very restricted use in industry, yet it has given rise to fatal accidents in chemical works producing dye intermediates, for it is a necessary step in the production of an important one, Michler's ketone. It owes its poisonous action to the fact that it decomposes readily in the presence of water to hydrochloric acid and carbon dioxide. This decomposition takes place within the body when the gas reaches the finer bronchioles and the alveoli of the lungs and is acted on by the watery vapor there. The effect of phosgene thus differs from the effect of hydrochloric acid, in that it is not immediately irritating, and therefore while the latter attacks the upper air passages and produces violent inflammation of the larynx, trachea, and bronchi, phosgene does not produce its effect till it has penetrated deeply into the lungs, and because it does not produce any local irritation the victim has no warning of the fact that he is breathing a deadly gas.*"

In simplified terms, the above noted chemical "Michler's ketone" is an intermediate in the production of dyes and pigments. Most data on the subject is very technical, but the one thing that stands out is the suggestion that this substance is likely highly carcinogenic.

The literature on phosgene gas appears to suggest that the typical post-inhalation improvement expected after being exposed to the gas is replaced within days by a progressive pneumonia, which can prove fatal. During the First World War, it's estimated that approximately 85,000 battlefield related deaths can be attributed to the use of phosgene gas.

By 1970 there was little doubt remaining that carbon tetrachloride was an extremely hazardous substance, so its use was largely banned in common consumer products — cleaning agents and the like. Industrial use continues, but under the weight of increasingly complex regula-

#### **Further Reading: Regarding Dr. Alice Hamilton.**

The link below will take you to the Hagley Museum and Library's online site. Located in Wilmington, Delaware, this organization provides online access to its extensive archives specializing in the "history of business, technology, and society." On said page you'll find a archive search portal. Typing "Alice Hamilton" into this portal will draw up a column of fully accessible books written by or about Dr. Hamilton — including her autobiography, "Exploring the Dangerous Trades." Please note, some of these works are still under copyright, so appropriate cautions when reprinting passages from those so encumbered should be taken.

*Hagley Digital Archives*



tions. For example, carbon tetrachloride's electrical nonconductivity was an advantage as the working fluid used within fixed fire suppression systems where water could be as damaging to a building's contents as the fire it was intended to suppress. This working fluid was branded halon-14. As of 1994, the use of this fluid was banned in all new installations of fire suppression systems; the rationale given being the chemical's erosive effect on the atmosphere's ozone layer. As of this date chemicals less hazardous to human health, as well as the environment, have largely replaced most industrial applications of carbon tetrachloride. In cases where there is no suitable substitute, strict controls regarding environmental releases of and workplace exposure to the chemical is enforced.

One example of a once well-known device affected by 1970's prohibition was the "Lava Lamp." With a United States patent applied for on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, 1965, and granted as number 3387396 on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1968, the patent application notes that the fluid within the lamp was composed of "dyed water and a solidified globule of mineral oil, paraffin and a dye as well as paraffin wax or petroleum jelly, preferably

*Ondina 17 (medicinal grade mineral oil) with a light paraffin, carbon tetrachloride, a dye and a paraffin wax or petroleum jelly."*

As to the part carbon tetrachloride played within the lamps, the amorphous lava blobs were composed of a petroleum-based wax, and as such the blobs would have been lighter than the surrounding water. Since the wax and carbon tetrachloride are miscible — meaning they can be mixed together in a homogeneous solution — and considering that carbon tetrachloride, with its greater density, is heavier than the wax, enough weight was added to sink the blobs of wax to the bottom of the lamp. When the lamp was turned on, the lightbulb at the bottom would create just enough heat to float the blobs of warmed wax upward. As the wax globules cooled, they would slowly float downward again. The artistic value of the resultant display — whether beautiful or creepy — was and is highly dependent on the esthetic sensibilities of the viewer.

Special thanks to Mike Reiter for bringing the historical oddity of Red Comet fire extinguishers to the society's attention.

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 "Clayton & Deer Park Historical Society" into Facebook's search engine.

**Society's Office:**

South side of the Deer Park City Hall Complex, 300 Block of East 'A' Street — look for the sign.

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Great-Great-Great-Great  
Grandkids?*



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*Open Meeting Second Saturday of Each Month — 10:00 AM.  
Deer Park City Hall Complex — 300 Block East 'A' Street — Look for the Sign.*

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*Illustration from "The Sphinx and the Mummy: A Book of Limericks," by William H. S. Pearce, 1909 Edition.*