

FINAL DRAFT

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Vapo-Cresolene (1881-1950)

**(One of the many medically worthless
turn-of-the-twentieth-century
proprietary antiseptics)**

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(Fig. 1. Vapo-Cresolene Vaporizer and lamp)

AS THINGS WERE:

Of the approximately 60,000 drug stores in the United States in the early 1900s, probably half devoted a large portion of their window-space and shelf-space to “antiseptics” and mouthwashes. Several million dollars were spent annually in magazine, newspaper and other advertising to convince a gullible public that only in bottled antiseptics lay sanitary salvation.

Small lamps manufactured and marketed for medicinal purposes are commonly found in antiques shops and on the Internet. The most common brand found is the Vapo-Cresolene “lamp.” These items are not technically lamps, but rather employ a small flame as a heat source. It is possible to find complete examples, but these lamps are often missing some of the parts, such as the tin dish or Olmstead-type milk glass or clear glass chimneys. Occasionally these lamps are found in their original box, complete with instructional sheets, testimonials and an extra wick included. Bottles of the Vapo-Cresolene chemicals are frequently found as well, sometimes empty but occasionally still

with some of their original contents, which should be treated as a toxic material. Bottle collectors, miniature or night lamp collectors, or those with a pharmaceutical or medical interest, often collect these devices and their dimpled bottles in blue, clear, or amber glass.

SUPPOSED USE:

The Vapo-Cresolene vaporizer was supposed to cure **“Whooping Cough, Spasmodic Croup, Nasal Catarrh, Colds, Bronchitis, Coughs, Sore Throat, Broncho [sic] Pneumonia, The Paroxysms of Asthma and Hay Fever, The Bronchial Complications of Scarlet Fever and Measles and as an aid in the treatment of Diphtheria and Certain Inflammatory Throat Diseases.”**

DIRECTIONS FOR USE:

From the instructions booklet and original box (**Fig 2 & 3**):

“Fill the lamp with the best Kerosene (Petroleum) Oil obtainable. Alcohol will explode the lamp if used in it. Light the lamp allowing as large a flame as possible; but care be taken for the first fifteen minutes to see that it does not smoke. Place the lamp under the Vaporizer. Place the Vaporizer in a tin or crockery dish to guard against overturning, and set the same on a table near the bed, but out of reach of small children. Lastly fill the movable cup with Cresolene. Tarry sediment remaining in the cup may be removed with alcohol.

“Cresolene should be vaporized in a bedroom of ordinary size and the doors and windows should be kept closed while the Vaporizer is in use. In oppressive weather a window may be open for ventilation. The most convenient time to use the Vaporizer is at night. The cup full of Cresolene is generally sufficient for a night’s treatment. The most delicate child or person in good health experiences no injury. Large doses of whisky, vinegar, Epsom or Glauber Salts should be given once if Cresolene is swallowed or if it falls on the skin, apply vinegar or alcohol. The odor of Cresolene will soon pass away if the room is thoroughly aired during the day. Cresolene imparts a burning sensation to the skin and is poisonous if taken internally, it should therefore, be kept out of reach of children.”

Vapo-Cresolene

Registered U. S. Pat. Off.
Registered France, May 1st, 1914.


TRADE MARK

Registered Canada, April 22nd, 1913.
Registered England, May 15th, 1912.

FOR

Whooping Cough, Spasmodic Croup
AND CERTAIN
Inflammatory Throat Diseases

; its eff.



THE CRESOLENE VAPORIZER

PRICE LIST FOR UNITED STATES AND CANADA

VAPORIZER, including lamp and a 2 oz. bottle of CRESOLENE, neatly packed in box, \$1.75. CRESOLENE, 2 oz. bottle, 30 cents; 4 1/2 oz., 60 cents; 16 oz. (Family size), \$1.75. Lamp complete, 40 cents. Globes, 10 cents. Burner 15 cents. Wick, per dozen, 10 cents. Cresolene Antiseptic Throat Tablets, 25 cents.

Vapo-Cresolene Co.

62 Cortlandt Street New York, N. Y., U. S. A.

FOREIGN AGENCIES

37 Lombard Street, London, England.
Leeming Miles Building, Montreal, Canada.
411 Smith Street, Durban, So. Africa.

Widely sold in foreign countries through the
Retail Drug Trade.

(Fig. 2. Vapo-Cresolene instruction booklet)



(Fig. 3. Vapo-Cresolene vaporizer box)

CIRCA 1900 PARTS PRICE LIST:

“At the turn of the century the Vapo-Cresolene Co. published the following price list for the United States and Canada:

“VAPORIZER, including lamp and 2 oz. bottle of CRESOLENE, neatly packed in box, \$1.75 (in 1910). CRESOLENE, 2 oz. bottle 30 cents; 4½ oz. bottle 60 cents; (Family size), \$1.75 (Figs. 4, 5, 6, 7). Parts prices: (Fig. 8): Lamps complete, 40 cents. Globes (milk glass or clear) 10 cents. Burner 15 cents. Wicks, per dozen, 10 cents. Lamp base, 10 cents (Fig. 9) and Cresolene Antiseptic Throat Tablets (not shown), 25 cents.”



(Fig. 4. Rare blue Vapo-Cresolene bottle)



(Fig. 5. Typical Vapo-Cresolene (aqua bottle))



(Fig. 6. Sun colored lamp base in a rare purple color)



(Fig. 7. Four parts that make up Vapo-Cresolene vapoizor and lamp)



(Fig. 8. vapo-cresolene amber bottle)



(Fig. 9. Vapo-Cresolene vaporizer)

WHAT IT IS:

“Vapo-Cresolene is a germicide. It is made with carbolic acid, and is powerful in its Germ-destroying properties. The liquid is vaporized in the apparatus and the air is thus rendered antiseptic and as breathed by the patient it is carried through every passage, tube and cell of the breathing organs and produces a direct action on the very seat of the disease. This being the case, inhalation treatment is an important means of surely and readily treating many bronchial troubles and bringing specific antiseptics to act upon and stop the growth of the germs of disease. During the past thirty-five years [1910], since Vapo-Cresolene was first introduced, while it has obtained a prominent position in treating **Whooping Cough and Spasmodic Croup**, it has also been found effective in treating other zymotic [sic] diseases, viz: **Bronchitis, Coughs, Asthma, Nasal Catarrh, Hay Fever, Influenza, Colds**, the bronchial complications accompanying **Scarlet Fever and Measles**, to relieve the difficulty of breathing the coughing spells in **Broncho-Pneumonia**, and as a protection to those necessarily exposed to infectious diseases, and adds to the probability of a successful outcome.

“The odor of Cresolene is not at all disagreeable and soon disappears after airing the room. It is absolutely safe. The youngest child can inhale it for any length of time without harm. The person in health is

not unpleasantly affected by it. The small kerosene lamp is useful in every household to give a faint but sufficient light at night.

“Vapo-Cresolene varies much in color, from light to dark red, due to age and exposure to light’ its efficiency, however, is unchanged.”

AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION OPINION (A.M.A. JOURNAL April 4, 1908):

“Vapo Cresolene has been examined in the A.M.A. laboratory and the chemists’ report follows:

“According to statements on the trade package, Vapo-Cresolene *“..is a product of coal-tar possessing far greater power than carbolic acid in destroying germs of disease.”* It is recommended as a remedy for a number of diseases, including croup, catarrh and diphtheria. According to the manufacturers, it should be used only in “the Cresolene vaporizer,” which makes it “unequaled for the disinfection of sick rooms” and the safest and simplest method of destroying infection and purifying the air.”

“From the examination we conclude Vapo-Cresolene is essentially **creosote** and corresponds in every respect to cresol of the U. S. Pharmacopeia.

“This report indicates that Vapo-Cresolene is a member of that class of properties in which an ordinary product is endowed with extraordinary virtues. The type is so common and has been referred to so frequently that but for dangers attendant on inhalation of any phenols, this product need not have been mentioned. “

CRESOLENE AS A LIQUID SOLUTION:

“If there is Cresolene in the house, a cheap and effective antiseptic solution may be made by adding one teaspoonful of Cresolene to a quart of water. **“These proportions must be carefully followed.”**

“Laboratory tests by C. J. Bartlett, M.D., Professor of Pathology, in the Yale University Department of Medicine, with a one per cent solution of Cresolene, show that it kills germs of Diphtheria, Typhoid Fever and the Pus germ in from 30 seconds to one minute. These tests prove the antiseptic value of the solution.

“This solution may be used as a healing and antiseptic wash for cuts, sores or ulcers. It is effective for Eczema, eruptions, heat rash, and for the disinfection of wounds. Rinse the mouth with a solution of half a teaspoonful of Cresolene to a quart of water, and it will prevent and stop the decay of the teeth and sweeten the breath. As a disinfecting solution for use about the house, or wherever a liquid germicide is required, use one ounce (1/2 the contents of a 2 oz. or 30-cent bottle) to a gallon of water.

“Cresolene is not poisonous in this diluted form.

“Cresolene should always be used in its concentrated form in the Vaporizer.”

CRESOLENE ANTISEPTIC THROAT TABLETS:

“They combine the soothing effect of slippery elm bark and licorice and the germ-destroying properties of Cresolene. For dry, teasing coughs, hoarseness and sore throat they are excellent.”

VAPO-CRESOLENE IN DISEASES OF ANIMALS:

“Vapo-Cresolene is very effective in the treatment of Distemper, Pneumonia, Coughs and Colds in horses and dogs and Roup in chickens. The animal bird should be put in a small enclosure and the apparatus so placed it cannot be overturned. “

ITS REAL VALUE:

Almost without exception, such preparations were of little worth for the thousands of purposes for which they were advertised. And their makers were not only for poisoning the public mind with a stream of groundless fears which business enterprise could translate into dollars, but often caused the postponement of proper treatment in cases where serious conditions actually existed and demanded treatment of unquestioned effectiveness.

Almost without exception the proprietary antiseptics commonly found in those early 1900s drug stores could not be trusted to destroy germs under ordinary conditions of use, and in the ways claimed in advertising; and whoever depended upon their antiseptic action in emergencies was taking a needless and foolish risk. Included in that category were such mixtures as *Listerine*, *Pepsodent Antiseptic*, *Borine*, *Odol*, *Boraacetine*, *Sozodont Liquid* and *Vapo-Cresolene* – the subject of this article.

VAPO-CRESOLENE HISTORY:

The Vapo-Cresolene Company was established in 1879. They maintained offices in New York City, first at 180 Fulton Street and then at 62 Cortlandt Street, and in the

Leeming-Miles Building, 1651 Notre Dame Street, Montreal, Canada and at 411 Smith Street, Durban, So. Africa. As early as 1881, Messrs. Allen and Hanburys, Plough Court, London, were listed in a British pharmaceutical journal selling **Page's Patent Vaporizers**, as they must have been referred to prior to the trade name Vapo-Cresolene. In later advertisements, they are listed as Allen & Hanburys, Ltd., Sole Agents located at 27 Lombard Street, London. The company's production facility was located in Chatham, New Jersey. The Vapo-Cresolene Company survived well into the 1950's and perhaps later and used a small electric unit as the heat source (Fig. 17).

In his book entitled Chatham at the Crossing of the Fishawack John T.

Cunningham wrote:

"James H. Valentine made a crude vaporizer in 1879 in an effort to ease the pain of his young daughter, who lay racked with whooping cough. In desperation the father put a coal tar acid named Cresolene in a tin cup and suspended it over a small kerosene lamp. The girl found quick relief as soothing fumes filled the bedroom. Valentine recognized that he had discovered a commercial product: named 'Vapo' for vaporizer and 'Cresolene' for the coal tar acid."

He writes further: "The first vaporizers were made in Kelley's Hall (over the grocery store), but Valentine did not have the capital to expand the market for his product beyond village limits. He was helped financially by George Shepard Page, and in time sold out to Page's four sons – Albion, Lawrence, Harry, and Raymond - and their sister Florence. The Pages shifted manufacturing to the old Stanley Hall near the Fairmount Cemetery."

"The Vapo-cresolene lamp was first patented by **Elias H. Carpenter** as a, "*Method of and Apparatus for Volatilizing Cresylic Acid.*" Carpenter received his **patent No. 247,480** on September 27, 1881 and assigned it to James H. Valentine, who in turn assigned one-half of it to George Shepard Page. G.S. Page's son, Albion Lambert Page, became president of the Vapo-Cresolene Company in the late 1880's.

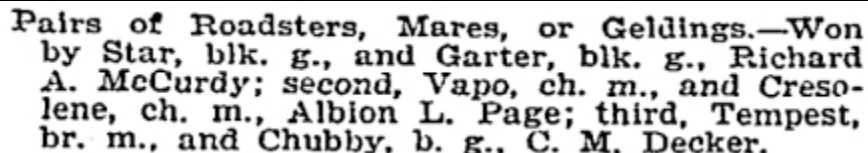
"George Shepard Page (1839-1892) grew up in the coal tar business, having learned it from his father, Samuel Page, who distilled paraffin oils, varnishes, and other products in Boston, Mass. The 1862 Boston Business Directory lists them as Samuel Page & Son, doing business at 88 & 90 Water Street, and residing in Chelsea. One of George's first ventures in the early 1860's was the formation of the New York Coal Tar Chemical Company. George S. Page was recognized as one of the leaders in the coal tar and gas production fields both in the United States and Europe, where he frequently traveled. He developed and perfected many processes for the use of the by-products of these related industries, turning what was once considered waste products into something valuable. Since the cresolene "is a product of coal-tar possessing far greater power than carbolic acid in destroying germs of disease," it was natural

for him to take advantage of the disinfecting properties thereof, and develop a broad market for this product, both domestically and abroad.”

SIDEBAR:

(Fig. 10): Portion of a **New York Times** article dated October 14, 1900 reporting on the annual horse showoff the Morristown Field Club in Morristown, New Jersey.

Note that **Albion L. Page**’s horses were named *VAPO* and *CRESOLINE*.



Pairs of Roadsters, Mares, or Geldings.—Won by Star, blk. g., and Garter, blk. g., Richard A. McCurdy; second, Vapo, ch. m., and Cresolene, ch. m., Albion L. Page; third, Tempest, br. m., and Chubby, b. g., C. M. Decker.

(Fig. 10. NY Times advertisement Oct. 14, 1900)

PRESUPPOSITION:

The basic premise of the invention was to heat a dish suspended over a small heat source to vaporize the chemical contained therein. Vapo-Cresolene was used to "*cure or considerably alleviate*" primarily diseases of the respiratory system and throat such as whooping cough, asthma, diphtheria and scarlet fever. It was also used to sanitize rooms – bedrooms, "sick rooms," or other areas where there were sick or infected patients, or where the bacteria were thought to be lurking. From Carpenter's patent specification:

"If a room is to be disinfected, one or more of the devices are supplied with cresylic acid, the lamps lighted, and the room is closed. The vapor will commence to rise from the basin soon after the lamp is lighted, for the liquid cresylic acid will vaporize at a low temperature; but the amount of vapor expelled will increase as the temperature is raised, and the vapor will fill every part of a room, enter every crevice, and pass through or between every article."

THE VAPORIZER

On August 4, 1885, James Henry Valentine obtained **Letters Patent No. 323,547** for a "Vaporizer." Depicted in the patent drawings are the familiar Vapo-Cresolene lamps, and a version designed to be used with a gas lamp. One of his main improvements over the previous version was a way to deflect the heated air away from the basin to prevent it from overheating by adding vent holes around the ring that holds the dish or basin. Many of these "lamps" are embossed around the ring with the August 4, 1885 and an August 8, 1888 patent date.

OTHER ADVERTISING:

A wide variety of advertising was used over the years to promote Vapo-Cresolene. Among those were several from the period around the turn of the century (Figs. 11, 12, 13). In their own way Cresolene bottles became familiar and were a form of advertising (Figs. 14, & 15).



Vapo-Cresolene
CURES
WHILE YOU SLEEP

Hundreds of thousands, all over the world, use Vapo-Cresolene. Do you? Cresolene cures Whooping Cough every time; stops Croup almost immediately. Colds, Asthma and Catarrh cannot resist its healing virtues. I. N. Love, M. D., of St. Louis, says: "I have instructed every family under my direction to secure it." Mrs. Ballington Booth says: "I recommend that no family where there are young children should be without it." Anthony Comstock says: "Malignant Diphtheria in my house; Cresolene used; case recovered in two weeks; no others were affected." Descriptive booklet with testimonials free. Sold by all druggists.

VAPO-CRESOLENE CO., 180 Fulton St., NEW YORK.

(Fig. 11. "Vapo-Cresolene Cures While You Sleep" adv.(1870)

VAPOR-CRESOLENE **A New Compound from Coal Tar.**

A SPECIFIC FOR
Whooping Cough *Vapo-Cresolene*

And a Remedy for Asthma, Croup, Colds, Diphtheria, Croup, Hay
 Fever, Sore Throat, and Diseases of the Air Passages.

THE BEST ANTISEPTIC AND DISINFECTANT.
A Deodoriser and Disinfectant for Hospitals, Sick Rooms, etc.
*The safest and simplest method of destroying infection and
 purifying the air.*

It is now an admitted fact that Zymotic Diseases, as Scarlet, Typhoid,
 and Typhus Fevers, with Whooping Cough, Croup, Measles, and Dipht-
 heria, are generated by the agency of bacteria and other low forms of
 life. These bacteria develop with great rapidity, those in the air passages
 being with difficulty reached even by Atomizers and other spraying
 machines which fail in achieving other than a local and partial result, and
 it is essential that a strong antiseptic agent be applied directly and con-
 tinuously to these living organisms. This can be most successfully
 accomplished by the volatilization of VAPOR-CRESOLENE, until the air
 of the room is thoroughly charged with the vapour, and the patient is
 thus brought under the beneficial influence of this valuable germ destroyer.

Vaporizer and Lamp, with a war. bottle of Cresolene, ready bound, 1/5;
 obtainable of any chemist. Additional Cresolene, 7-oz. bot., 1/6; 4-oz. 1/4.

Sole
Agents: **Allen & Hanburys**
PLOUGH COURT, Lombard Street, LONDON,
And at 7, YERE STREET, CAVENDISH SQUARE, W.

(Fig. 12. Vapo-Cresolene advertisement (1895))



(Fig. 13. Vapo-Cresolene advertising paperweight featuring some of their favorite slogans)



(Fig. 14. Vapo-Cresolene bottle circa 1930)



(Fig. 15. Vapo-Cresolene paper labeled bottle circa 1930)

Occasionally a Vapo-Cresolene lamp with a relatively tall clear glass chimney is found. It is just an example of an early apparatus where a substitute shade has been used for some unexplained reason (Fig. 16).

Vapo-Cresolene and its vaporizers (Fig. 17) were on the market and sold until the mid-1950s or almost seventy-five years. The last examples were electric, made in green ceramic and very hard to find.



(Fig. 16. Vapo-Cresolene - vaporizer with clear-glass upright chimney (unusual))



(Fig. 17. Vapo-Cresolene c.1950 electric vaporizer)

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