

Contemporary Collectibles: Plop, plop, fizz, fizz. Oh, what a collectible it is!

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

For collectors of "advertiques," there are certain seminal characters, most of which have appeared in print ads, on television, and in three dimensional form. Among the favorites are the Jolly Green Giant, Charlie the Tuna, Tony the Tiger, the Pillsbury Doughboy, the Energizer Bunny, Mr. Clean, Reddy Killowatt - and Speedy Alka Seltzer.

Speedy is a spunky redheaded boy with a dazzling white grin and almost Howdy Doody-like ears. His body is a round Alka Seltzer tablet. He wears another tablet as a hat, labeled Speedy, and wields an "effervescent" wand.

Speedy was created in 1951 for Miles Laboratories by commercial artist Bob Watkins for his World War II army buddy Chuck Tenant, who had the Miles account at the Wade Advertising firm in Chicago. Watkins whipped up the character originally called Sparky in about three hours. A 6-inch prototype model was sculpted by Duke Russell, and by 1952 the promotion was in full swing.

Speedy first appeared in a 1952 women's magazine advertisement. That was followed by more than 200 TV commercials over the decade from 1954 to 1964, featuring the deathless jingle, "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is," in the high-pitched voice of 24-year-old actor Dick Beals, who won out over 200 other auditioners. The concept was created by Paul Margulies, father of actor Julianna Margulies, and the tune composed by Tom Dawes. Miles Laboratory invested more than \$8.5 million a year on Speedy, making it the largest investment of any single advertising campaign in that era.

When Speedy was retired in the 1960s - he made return appearances for the U.S. Bicentennial and the 1980 Winter Olympics - he was replaced by such campaigns as "I can't believe I ate the whole thing!"

The Miles Laboratory Co. had been in business since 1884. It was launched in Elkhart, Ind., by Dr. Franklin Miles. A general practitioner, he also made and sold tonics such as "Restorative Nervine."

Alka-Seltzer's combination of aspirin, baking soda and citric acid, came into being as a direct result of a severe 1928 flu epidemic, during which it came to the attention of A.H. "Hub" Beardsley, then president of Miles Laboratories, that no one on the staff of the local newspaper had fallen victim to flu after the paper's editor provided them with the novel combination of aspirin and baking soda.

Beardsley asked Miles Laboratory chief chemist Maurice Treneer to devise an effervescent tablet based on that simple formula, to which he added citric acid, magnesium, calcium, and phosphate. It was introduced in 1931 and marketed as a cure-all for the relief of heartburn, acid indigestion, hangovers, headaches and other

aches and pains, and even the "blahs." It was first advertised on radio in 1932 with the announcer exclaiming, "Listen to the fizz!"

For the collector, there is a rich lode of material produced during Speedy's heyday. Especially sought after are:

- An 8-inch-tall vinyl display figures made for drugstore counter displays and other display items, some made of latex (one of the latter was recently priced at an optimistic \$4,000-\$5,000).

- A 5 1/2-inch soft vinyl bank in two versions, with and without the word "bank" below the coin slot; an unusual 1950s chalk string holder, the string dangling from the mouth like a piece of dental floss.

- Bobblehead dolls, particularly the 7 1/2-inch, black-and-white version, of which only 200 were made. Note: there is also a widely available recent "Wacky Wobbler" bobblehead Speedy made by Funko in 2003.

Smaller, more affordable objects include early full-color pin-back buttons, an enameled brass figural pin, yo-yos featuring the jovial little lad, as well as print ads. In addition there were several items issued in Spanish, with Speedy translated as Pron-Tito.

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