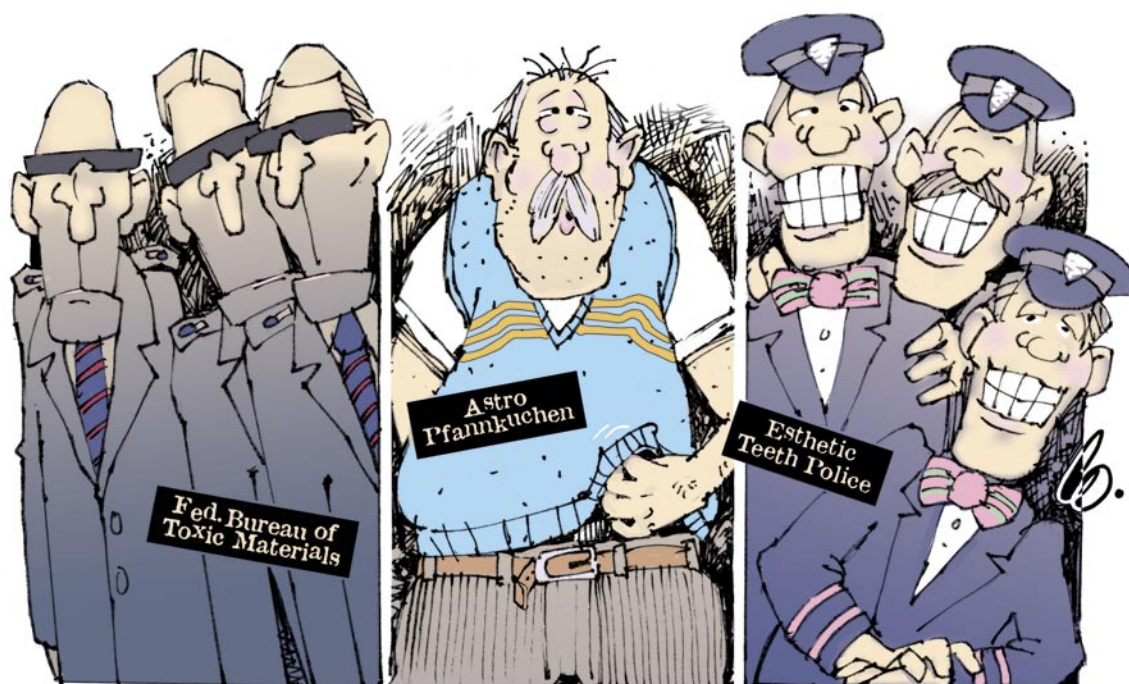


# Tooling Down Memory Lane



For reasons that defy analysis, I wanted to do one last amalgam for old time's sake.

→ Robert E. Horseman, DDS

ILLUSTRATION  
BY CHARLIE O.  
HAYWARD

I placed an amalgam the other day. I realize this impetuous, foolhardy act put me in grave risk of being interrogated by Federal Bureau of Toxic Materials enforcers or, at the very least, the Esthetic Teeth Police, White Stuff Division. I would ask their indulgence. For those too young to remember, amalgams were once used extensively as a restorative material. For more than 150 years they were popularly known as “silver” fillings because in the alloy of silver, copper, zinc and mercury, silver sounded classier. It’s like when “restoration” replaced “filling”—same thing.

In the mid-1980s, discovery by certain forward-looking entrepreneurs that white looked better in a tooth than black, heralded the advent of the Cosmetic Age in dentistry. More like a rebirth, actually, because up until the mid-20th century a material called “silicate cement” was used

to placate the esthetic-minded patient. It was very popular with dentists, having a useful life only marginally longer than a fruit fly.

The discovery, quite by accident, of a couple of ancient amalgam capsules in my lab triggered a wave of nostalgia that became well nigh insupportable. For reasons that defy analysis, I wanted to do one last amalgam for old time's sake. Like riding a bicycle, I was sure the technique would come back to me in spite of the fact that my enamel hatchets, cleoids, discoids, and amalgam pluggers had gone missing, probably encrusted with the verdigris of old age.

My wattles flushing a dusty pink, in less than a week, I had uncovered the hiding place of the amalgamator, an unexpected bonus since the traditional mortar

CONTINUES ON 373

DR. BOB, CONTINUED FROM 374

was absent its pestle — or the other way around, I forget which. The elements were all in place now except for a willing patient.

For a patient, I chose an old friend, Astro Pfannkuchen, whose concession to the Cosmetic Age was a weekly encounter with his Gillette and the occasional brisk scrub with a Mickey Mouse toothbrush I had given him in 1997. It was my duty to explain to him the downside of amalgam, mentioning as casually as I could with an elastic conscience that I had put in enough silver fillings containing the toxic substance mercury to have contaminated every fish in the Pacific this side of the Marianas Trench.

Pfannkuchen, who always appears to be hovering on the verge of syncope, surveyed me vacuously. “Will it hurt?” he quivered, his tiny pig eyes bright with apprehension.

“Nah,” I lied buoyantly. “Not half as much as a shot. Open wide.”

The one thing I remembered about amalgam was, in the absence of prime-etch-rinse-dry-bond-blow-gently-cure-incremental-fill-cure, one needed to have the inside of the prep bigger than the outside.

Clearly a job for an inverted cone bur if I had one. No carbides, but I did find a diamond with several of the chips still attached. This would do and I fell to with a will on the occlusal of No. 2, regretting only that I could have enhanced the whole experience greatly had I not thrown away my Doriot handpiece for lack of a belt in 1955.

In less time than it took to build a single mile of the Great Wall of China, I had the amalgam mixed, packed, carved, and ball-burnished, much to the interest of my assistant who clucked dutifully at each procedure. “What will they think of next?” she fluted with more enthusiasm than I had seen for ages. She usually regards my chairside work as among the

In less time than it took to build a single mile of the Great Wall of China, I had the amalgam mixed, packed, carved, and ball-burnished, much to the interest of my assistant who clucked dutifully at each procedure.

major soporifics of all times, her ennui cunningly concealed beneath her mask.

Pfannkuchen rejoined the living long enough to inquire how long before he could eat.

“Four hours.”

“How long will this silver filling last?”

“Four hours.”

“That long!” he exclaimed in wonder.

“Oh, sorry,” I replied, still steeped in nostalgia. “I was thinking of silicates. How about 50 years, give or take a month?”

You could speculate on the foregoing until the cows come home, but nostalgia is a two-edged sword and must be indulged judiciously. First thing you know, dark visions of pre-insurance, pre-OSHA, pre-HIPAA and pre-AIDS appear like ghosts of Christmas past until visible waves of despair radiate off you like heat from a diaper drier.

I once made a vulcanite denture in 1940. I wonder if ... ■■■■