

# PARALYSIS IN A BOTTLE

## (The “Jake Walk” Story)

by Cecil Munsey  
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Fig. 1

### RECOLLECTIONS

“JAMAICA GINGERS,” an article by Dewey Moss that appeared in *Western Collector* in 1967, was my first introduction to Jamaica Ginger and the bottles in which it came. Moss was one of several pioneering authors who devoted themselves to creating literature for bottle collectors during the first years of organized collecting. The following is his short article based on recollections from his youth in the 1930s:

“Years ago the counties here in Utah regulated the sale of liquor; some were dry while an adjacent one was wet. Travel then was slow, but on special occasions ‘the boys’ would pool their money and send one of the gang by train to a wet county for a supply of their favorite brands of hard liquor.

“I was a small boy but I can remember the merry makers meeting the train with a buckboard, their eager hands outstretched to help the returning member struggling with two heavy laded ‘please don’t rain’ suitcases (cardboard). Being a curious kid, I managed to get hold of some of the bottles and read their brands. If the gang was prosperous the brand was usually ‘Yellowstone,’ but when they were short of funds the brand would invariably be ‘Joe Folsom.’

“There were a few older gents in my town who were ‘alcoholics,’ these codgers having to have their drink daily. Although the county was dry and the sale of whiskey, wine or beer prohibited, it was perfectly legal to buy and sell a much stronger drink. The merchant who sold everything including wagons, rakes, harnesses and all hand tools dispensed this product. I can picture so vividly the cracker barrel, the pickle barrel, the cheese cutter, the tobacco cutter, the many bolts of cloth, along with the spools of thread and the many brightly colored ribbons. And, there were always the coils of hemp rope.

“In one corner of the store were the

patent medicines. Prominent among them would be a good supply of various brands of Jamaica Ginger. This product was an amber color, colored perhaps with burnt sugar or ginger itself. Usually on the label would be the alcoholic content, which was always above 90% [75-90% would be more accurate]. This was the beverage the weathered drinkers would buy very cheaply and with no trouble.

“In the town was a mill powered by a water wheel. After the shift would leave, one of the old guzzlers would take a seat above the water wheel as a watchman. I found it very amusing to sit on a hill, which overlooked the mill as well as the river and spy on the ‘watchman.’ After he was there just a short time he would take from a lunch box a bottle of Jamaica Ginger, extract the cork stopper and drink the entire contents in one gulp. Even today I marvel at how he could do that without gasping for breath or dropping dead from lack of oxygen. Very soon he would be woozy, stagger around and cut ‘figures.’

“I took my perch evening after evening watching this character get falling-down-drunk on about four bottles of

Jamaica Ginger, with the empties always landing in the river, and I went there expecting to see him fall in too. I don’t know what I would have done if he had fallen—somehow he never did.

“One day I asked my dad why the old watchman had such a peculiar limp. ‘Jake leg’ was his reply.

‘What’s Jake leg?’, I asked.

‘Well, son, when a man drinks Jake long enough he gets a sort of paralysis in one or both legs,’ he told me. [This is not exactly true. Jake had been used for almost 100 years as a cheap source of alcohol. Only Jake of the early 1930s that contained a toxic adulterant caused paralysis. It took seven to sixteen days for onset of symptoms, and many cases resulted in permanent neurological damage].

“Still a little confused, I asked him what Jake meant. ‘That’s short for Jamaica Ginger. He drinks it every day and one of these days he’ll die in one of his drunks on Jake.’

“I cannot recall whether dad’s prediction came true. However, looking back on those days and the people of those days, I cannot help wanting a fair-sized collection of Jakes (empty or full).



Fig. 2



"They were not large bottles and were almost always aqua, and the names embossed in the glass are interesting. Many makers of sarsaparilla, whiskey and patent medicine also produced and sold Jamaica Ginger. The earlier Jakes are crude, many with short tapering collars. The old 'F. Brown's Ess of Jamaica Ginger' with a pontil scar is very much desired. The tapered collar on these is so much more attractive than the newer square collared F. Brown's.

"Perhaps Jamaica Ginger did some good when properly used. In our house it was used as a toddy greatly reduced with water and sweetened with sugar for the relief of stomach cramps and colds, administered at night before retiring and again in the morning. The more temperate families used similar toddy but made from ground ginger root and other spices with no alcoholic content.

"Some seasoned drinkers often used Jake for 'sobering up' ['hair of the dog']; how one could 'sober up' on a 90% alcoholic drink is beyond me, but that's the way it goes.

"My collection—well, it's relatively small when you consider the number of Jakes available, but that means it's always challenging and rewarding to find a maverick."

#### Jake

The Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906 had in effect guaranteed neither pure food nor pure drugs. It required only honest labeling. If a patent medicine contained morphine, opium, cocaine, heroin, alpha or beta eucaine, chloroform, cannabis indica (marijuana), chloral hydrate, acetanilide, or

alcohol, the label had to say so.

Jake was the alcoholic "essence" of Jamaica ginger, extracted from the pulverized root and closely resembled the standard pharmaceutical preparation "Tincture of Ginger" described in the *United States Pharmacopoeia* (U.S.P.). It was one of several thousand dubious but generally harmless patent (proprietary) medicines that Americans had been relying on for over a century. It was a pale orange-to-amber concoction usually packaged in a small glass bottle, and promoted as a carminative, headache cure, a remedy to treat catarrh, flatulence, "late menstruation" and other real or imagined illnesses. Because it averaged 80% alcohol (160 proof), a small bottle packed the kick of four jiggers of whiskey. Priced at 25 to 35 cents, it was readily available in local drugstores, groceries, and even dime stores; and anyone, including preachers and schoolmarm, could slip the little flat aqua or clear glass bottle into a pocket for a discreet nip at home or away. Common "drunks," however, might take a bottle into the store's back room, which many Jake sellers kept as low-rent speakeasies, mix the Jake with Coca-Cola or some other mixer and have their own furtive little party.

Jamaica ginger bottles, easily recognized by shape, label, and embossing were available in hundreds of different brands and are sought by today's collectors. Most are considered common and generally not expensive, but they do represent an interesting period in American social and health history. A random photographic selection of Jamaica ginger bottles is shown throughout this article.

The Volstead Act, also known as the National Prohibition Act, went into effect February 1, 1920 to further define exactly what was prohibited by the just ratified 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. It turned every state dry, but banned only *beverage* alcohol. Essence of Jamaica Ginger and other alcoholic "medicines" originally were exempt from the ban. By 1925, however, in the face of widespread use of Jake as an intoxicating beverage, the Treasury Department had ruled that it could be sold over the counter only if the ginger root

extractives (oils and resins) were increased to twice the previous level. At this concentration the tincture became extremely unpalatable unless diluted; and illicit preparations began to appear on the market to sidestep the restriction. Although labeled as conforming to official specifications, these misbranded products were actually adulterated, substituting molasses, glycerin, castor oil, and other additives for much of the oleoresin of ginger, thus greatly reducing the strong pungent taste.

The economics of National Prohibition by 1930, eleven years after it started, homed in on the urban and small-town poor. Affluent cityfolk could buy bonded liquor from Canada; backwoods hillbillies often had access to stills, but low-income townfolk drank what they could get—rubbing alcohol, hair tonic, doctored antifreeze. These desperate people were referred to as "rummies," "stewbums," "boozegobs," "hooch histers," or simply "drunks." Some would take Three-in-One shoe polish and strain it through a powder



Fig. 5

muff, “. . . it would be just as clear as water,” according to one writer. It was not uncommon for foolhardy drinkers to filter Sterno (“canned heat”) through bread to separate-out most of the ingredients except alcohol. Songwriter Tommy Johnson wrote “*Canned Heat Blues*” in 1928 to commemorate that particular activity. What many drinkers really preferred, however, was “Jake.”

### The Paralytic Epidemic

In early 1930, a strange new paralytic plague with symptoms similar to anterior poliomyelitis began to be reported in the American South and Midwest. Victims of the disease developed numbness and pain in their legs, followed by muscle weakness, and finally paralysis with foot drop. Although fatalities were unusual, recovery was slow and many cases would result in permanent neurological damage and long-term disability. It also caused impotence.

The name of the first person to come down with Jake Leg is lost to history. On February 27, 1930, a man staggered into

Reconstruction Hospital in Oklahoma City. The patient’s feet dangled like a marionette’s, so that walking involved swinging them forward and slapping them onto the floor. Within a few days - in the East, the South, and the Midwest - many other men began to exhibit the same rubber-legged gait. Worcester, Massachusetts reported fifty-five cases; five hundred cases practically overnight in Wichita; six hundred and ninety were reported in Topeka; a thousand in Mississippi. William G. Shepherd described the malady in *Collier’s Weekly* this way:

“The victim of ‘Jake paralysis’ practically loses control of his fingers. The feet of the paralyzed ones drop forward from the ankle so that the toes point downward. The victim has no control over the muscles that normally point the toes upward. When he tries to walk his dangling feet touch the pavement first at the toes, then his heels settle down jarringly. Toe first, heel next. That’s how he moves. ‘Tap-click, tap-click, tap-click, is how his footsteps sound. The calves of his legs, after two or three weeks, begin to soften and hang down; the muscles between thumbs and index fingers shrivel away...”

One of the first newspaper stories about the epidemic was headlined, “The Worst Has Happened.” A one-paragraph story in the *Topeka Daily Capitol* exclaimed, “Emporia, the Athens of Kansas, has ‘Jake leg.’” Newspapers across the country came up with other nicknames for the ailment: “Jake walk,” “jakeitus,” “jakeralysis,” “gingerfoot.” The mystery plague afflicted Johnson City, Tennessee particularly hard. According to writer Dan Baum in *The New Yorker*:

“It was discovered that numerous people had bought some Jake in Johnson City at a roadside store run by a man named Will Kite and his daughter. The Kites denied that their Jamaica ginger extract had caused the illness. They pointed out that the bottles were all labeled ‘United States Pharmacopoeia 70% alcohol.’ Because it was labeled so and carried a governmental certificate, it couldn’t be the cause of the illness, the Kites argued. They backed up their beliefs by openly consuming the Jake in the store. The Kites continued to operate the store for a time. This was accomplished with



Fig. 6

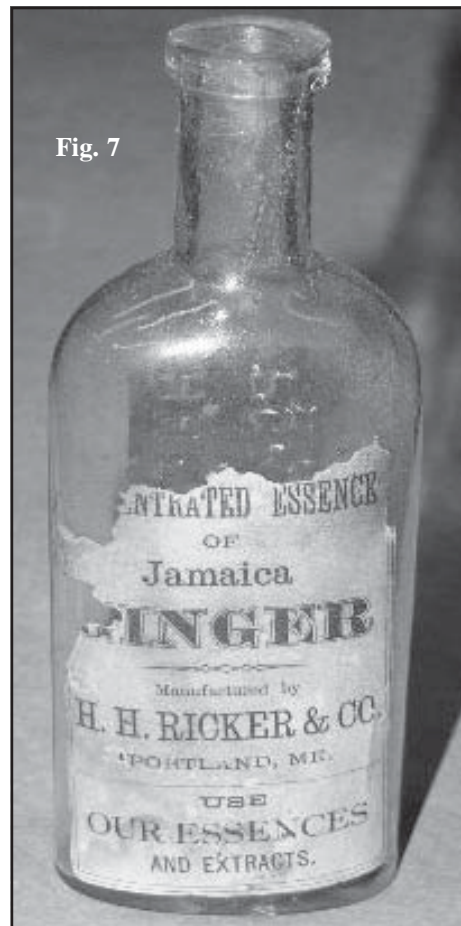


Fig. 7



Fig. 8

difficulty because they both had to crawl on hands and knees from the back rooms of the store to the counter to wait on customers.”

Once Jamaica ginger was established as the culprit, there was no escaping the eventual accusation that victims had brought the affliction upon themselves. “God is handing out a redflag as a danger sign to those who violate His law,” thundered Dr. C. K. Wingo, one of the two ministers of the Munsey Memorial Methodist Church in Johnson City during the period 1928-32.

The first person to record a connection between Jamaica ginger and the paralysis that caused the foot-flopping gait may have been Ishman Bracey, the black blues singer and songwriter who recorded “Jake Liquor Blues” in March 1930 at Grafton, Wisconsin. None of the contemporary news or medical accounts mentioned what appears to have been the disease’s most embarrassing consequence; but Bracey relates in his song, “It’s the doggonest disease ever heard of since I been born. You get numb in front of your body, you can’t carry any lovin’ on.” Other references by Bracey were to “limber leg” or “limber trouble,” both of which suggest that Jake Leg often caused impotence.

Dr. John P. Morgan, a professor at the City University of New York Medical School who called himself a “pharmacothnomusicologist,” was a lover of early American vernacular music and collected a number of songs about the Jake leg or the Jake walk. A typical example is *The Jake Walk Blues*, written by brothers Austin and Lee Allen, recorded May 5, 1930 in Memphis. It is estimated that the original release of the song sold over 20,000 copies.—

The Jake Walk Blues

*I can’t eat, I can’t talk  
Been drinkin’ mean Jake, Lord, now can’t walk*



*Ain’t got nothin’ now to lose  
Cause I’m a Jake walkin’ papa with the  
Jake walk blues.*

*Listen here papa, can’t you see  
You can’t drink Jake, and get along with me  
You’re a Jake walkin’ papa with the Jake  
walk blues  
I’m a red hot mama that you can t afford  
to lose.*

*Listen here daddy, while I tell you once  
more  
If you’re gonna drink Jake don’t you knock  
at my door  
Listen here mama have to call your hand  
I’m a Jake walkin’ papa from Jake walk  
land.*

*I’m not good lookin’ and I’m not low down  
I’m a Jake walkin’ papa just hangin’ around  
Now I’ve made this song and it may not  
rhyme  
But I’m a Jake walkin’ papa just havin’ a  
good time.*

*My daddy was a gambler and a drunkard  
too  
If he was living today he’d have the Jake  
walk too  
When I die you can have my hand  
Gonna take a bottle of Jake to the promised  
land.*

*Now I’m feelin’ kinda drunk, brother  
Be a wearin’ Jake socks after awhile  
You know they call them iron socks\*  
You know, I bet you don’t know one from  
the other, brother, which is the other?*

\*braces  
[Other Jake-based songs are listed in the



Fig. 10

Appendix].

It is estimated that during 1930-1931, some thirty to forty thousand people were affected, many ending up in poorhouses, county farms, veterans’ homes or similar places.

**“Who Dunit?”**

The Jake leg epidemic broke out just after the infamous stock market crash of 1929 and before full effects of the Great Depression were really felt in America. In those years government was small, regulations were skimpy, enforcement was almost an afterthought, and product-

**Appendix**

**Jake-Based Songs of the 1930s**

<u>Date</u>	<u>Writer</u>	<u>Song</u>
1928	Lemuel Turner	“Jake Bottle Blues”
1930	Allen Brothers	“Jake Walk Blues”
1930	Ray Brothers	“Jake Leg Wobble” - instrumental
1930	Byrd Moore	“Jake Leg Blues”
1930	Ray Brothers	“Got The Jake Leg Too”
1930	Narmour and Smith	“Jake Leg Rag - instrumental
1930	Tommy Johnson	“Alcohol and Jake Blues”
1930	Ishman Bracey	“Jake Liquor Blues”
1930	Mississippi Sheiks	“Jake Leg Blues”
1930	Daddy Stovepipe	“Jake Leg Blues
1933	Asa Martin	“Jake Walk Papa”
1934	Willie Lofton	“Jake Leg Blues

liability was yet to be invented. The Agriculture Department's small Food, Drug and Insecticide Administration policed drug standards, but the idea that the federal government should play a role in fighting Jake leg was hardly even discussed. There were no Centers for Disease Control such as we have today; and as the affliction spread across the land many theories were proposed to explain the cause. Most centered on contamination of Jamaica ginger.

The National Institute of Health (newly created out of the Public Health Service's Hygienic Laboratory) was as poorly funded as the Agriculture Department. Its annual budget was less than a million dollars and it had only twelve PHS physicians on its staff. One of the doctors was Senior Pharmacologist Maurice I. Smith, who in early 1930 decided that he needed to get his hands on a sample of poisoned Jake so it could be analyzed.

It wasn't an easy task.

As word of the epidemic spread, storekeepers, fearful of prosecution, removed Jake from their shelves. More than once, like today's bottle collectors, Smith had to recover bottles from cesspits and outhouse privies. He found his first samples in Findlay, Ohio and sent them to Washington where tests were performed by Bureau of Industrial Alcohol chemists. They soon identified the neurotoxic adulterant as tri-ortho-cresyl phosphate (TOCP)—a plasticizer formulated to keep

synthetic materials from becoming brittle, and commonly used in the manufacture of products such as lacquers, leather dopes, and airplane finishes. Only two companies made it: Eastman Kodak in Rochester, New York and the Celluloid Corporation of Newark, New Jersey.

The Treasury Department had ordered the doubling of bitter extractive solids in Essence of Jamaica Ginger to prevent people from getting any pleasure from drinking it as a beverage. Ignorant of the toxicity of TOCP, vendors used it to boost the total solids in Jake in a criminal effort to foil the government's assay.

Dr. Maurice Smith traveled to Cincinnati and to Johnson City, Tennessee to examine personally some of the victims of Jake poisoning. Jamaica Ginger extract was sold in Cincinnati under at least eight different brands and in Johnson City under at least four. Unfortunately for bottle collectors, history has not yet revealed a list of the brands of adulterated Jake. Dr. Smith wrote in *Public Health Reports*:

"Only a chemist of some ability could have thought of [using TOCP] and had there been anything known about the pharmacological action of this substance and the possible dire consequences, it is probable that it would never have been used and the disaster would never have happened."

Dr. John Morgan researched the problems of the Jamaica Ginger paralysis episode of the 1930s for twenty-seven years and made these comments in *JAMA*:

"Often these companies were not traceable, and all sellers involved had numerous names, mailing addresses, and fronts. In more than one state, a grand jury indicted one 'S. A. Hall' of Brooklyn as a conspirator in the traffic of adulterated Jake. This was a mail-drop office used by a Brooklyn seller and was so named because it stood next door to a Salvation Army installation."

"Tens of thousands of mostly poor drinkers were afflicted with paralysis ('Jake leg') after



consuming a cheap 'medicinal' liquor substitute that had been adulterated with an industrial plasticizing chemical for purposes of evading scrutiny by Prohibition enforcers. But when the mysterious outbreak of paralysis occurred there was no reason initially to suspect that adulterated Jake had any role."

The poisoned Jake samples obtained from privies and cesspits ultimately led investigators to Harry Gross and Max Reisman, two Boston brothers-in-law. Both of these men had been involved in shady businesses and known to law enforcement for years. It was 1928 when Gross and Reisman rented the third and fourth floors of a building in Boston, renamed their business Hub Products and went into full-time production of Jamaica ginger extract. They shipped the Jake around the country in big barrels, which they filled at night and labeled "liquid medicine in bulk." After some complaints from customers about the quality of their Jake, and reassurance from Celluloid Corporation that TOCP was harmless, Hub Products bought a hundred and thirty-five gallons of it. That was enough TOCP to adulterate 432,000 bottles of Jake and to paralyze tens of thousands of people.

Gross and Reisman were charged with conspiracy to violate both the Prohibition Act and the Pure Food and Drugs Act. The charge of "conspiracy" was important because it qualified the offense as a felony and could lead to imprisonment. The owners of Hub Products were in violation of Prohibition laws because their Jamaica ginger extract was intentionally altered so that it could be consumed as a beverage rather than a medicine, a legal distinction usually impossible to prove. Most Prohibition-period Jake labels carried the



Fig. 11

warning: "This preparation must not be used for beverage purposes under penalty of law." Hub's product was also prosecuted under the Food and Drugs Act because the toxic Jake was adulterated and misbranded, but such violations were classed as misdemeanors and normally punishable only by fine.

The men eventually pleaded guilty, the company was fined \$1000, and each man sentenced to two years in prison; but sentences were suspended with two years probation. They were convicted in April 1932. Later, Gross was charged with violation of his probation and ordered to serve his two-year prison term. Reisman never did time.

As the 1930s progressed, pressure for reform of food and drug legislation increased. By 1937 such tragedies as the one involving Jamaica Ginger created enough public outrage to cause passage of the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. This law prohibited the marketing of new drugs in interstate commerce until manufacturers provided the FDA with satisfactory evidence of their safety.

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bill@munsey.org: Perham, Bill. Archivist of Munsey Memorial Methodist Church in Johnson City, Tennessee. *E-mail*: "Looks like you have a choice of names for the 1930-34 time frame. The ministers of Munsey Memorial Methodist Church were: Dr. C. K. Wingo who was here from 1928—32, and Rev. W. F. Blackard from 1932 until 1937."

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<http://www.herbalgram.org/iherb/herbalgram/articleview.asp?a=957&p=Y> "The JAMAICA GINGER Paralysis Episode of the 1930s."

<http://www.ibiblio.org/moonshine/drink/jake.html> "The Jake Walk Effect."

## Photos:

**Fig. 1:** Embossed N.K. Brown's Aromatic Essence Jamaica Ginger, Milwaukee, Wis.

**Fig. 2:** 1937 postcard showing Jamaican women "scraping" ginger.

**Fig. 3:** Clipping from Johnson City (Tennessee) *Staff News*.

**Fig. 4:** Dr. Lynas' Unexcelled Essence Jamaica Ginger with its original label.

**Fig. 5:** Embossed F. Brown's Ess. Of Jamaica Ginger, Philla.

**Fig. 6:** Standard Extract of Jamaica Ginger, J. Hungerford Smith Co., Manuf. Chemists, Rochester, N.Y.

**Fig. 7:** Aqua bottle with part of the label, H.H. Ricker & Co.

**Fig. 8:** Jamaica ginger was commonly found in aqua bottles, such as this example. This one is embossed C.M. JOHNSON'S EXTRACT OF JAMAICA GINGER.

**Fig. 9:** Record cover. Tunes include: Jake Walk Blues (Allen Bros.); Jake Leg Wobble, Got the Jake Leg Too (Ray Bros.); Jake Legs Blues (Byrd Moore); Jake Leg Blues (Willie Lofton); Jake Leg Rag, Limber Neck Rag (Narmoure & Smith); Jake Walk Papa (Asa Martin); Jake Liquor Blues (Ishman Bracey); Jake Bottle Blues (Lemuel Turner); Jake Leg Blues (Mississippi Sheiks); and Jake Leg Blues, Jake Walk Blues (Maynard Britton).

**Fig. 10:** Tradecard advertising Dow's Jamaica Ginger Cordial, "for colds, cramps, Malaria, &cc." N.Y office at 42 Hudson St.. H. Scripture, Manager. The caption of the front reads, "Johnny, you get the ball, I'll stay here!"

**Fig. 11:** "Two Jakes." One, McMillan & Kesters Ess. of Jamaica Ginger, S.F., the other, Mertan, Moffitt & Co., S.F.

**Fig. 12:** Early wooden dovetail box with paper label advertising Thurber's Jamaica Ginger.

**Fig. 13:** Embossed R. Brown's Ess. Of Jamaica Ginger bottle.

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Fig. 13