

## CURATOR'S CORNER

By Emily Ruby, Curator

### Double X Cough Drop Man

If you walked past the top hat and muff in the History Center's collection, you might not take a second glance. To the casual observer they might appear to be just another fashion relic of a bygone era. What you would not know upon first glance is that this particular hat and muff belonged to one of the more famous characters to inhabit the streets of Pittsburgh. For 40 years, Charles Orton, better known as "the Double X cough drop man," sold his Double X Old Reliable cough drops on various street corners in Pittsburgh wearing his signature fur coat and top hat. The wild stories of his past are hard to verify, but intriguing nonetheless.

What we do know is that Orton grew up in Allegheny City, born in the First Ward of what is now Pittsburgh's North Side on April 1, 1847. He claims that he ran away to enlist in the Civil War, but since he was too young, he became a drummer boy instead. After the war, his parents moved west, and Orton purportedly spent time with both the Pony Express (narrowly escaping being scalped after his mother warned him to not go on the next run because of a dream) and shooting buffalo in the company of Buffalo Bill.<sup>1</sup>



Orton selling his cough drops on the street in Pittsburgh.  
Ted Rimmel.

His family eventually returned to Pittsburgh and Orton worked in a South Side rolling mill. Not cut out for mill life, Orton took up with the circus when it came through town, working first as a stake driver and eventually a performer. Details of his life are hazy at this point, but he seems to drift back to Pittsburgh for months at a time before finding another adventure and moving on for some months or years. He joined a traveling acting troupe that his sister was also a member of and they allegedly

put on the first performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that toured the United States. Moving on from acting, he spent another spell managing a tight rope act, eventually performing in it as well. Then there were years spent on the race tracks where he weighed the jockeys and sold score cards, among other responsibilities. Afterwards, he moved on to sell baseball score cards at Exposition Park on the North Side.

A semblance of permanence entered Orton's life upon his marriage to Margaret





Orton always wore his top hat and muff as well as a long fur coat of either bear skin or buffalo depending on the report. As a child Orton had desperately wanted a top hat, but his parents refused. When he was able to finally purchase one, it became his signature look.<sup>7</sup>

HHC Collections, gift of Ted Rimmel, 2013.46.3 a, 2013.46.1.

**"A Street-Scene in Pittsburg,"** *Leslie's Weekly* illustration, 1897.

HHC Detre L&A, 2013.0096.

Dingleburg. The couple resided on Diamond Street, now known as Forbes Avenue. Newspaper reports inform us that the couple had several children, including a set of twins who were some of the smallest surviving babies known in 1890; they also lost a child, a son named Willie, who drowned in the Monongahela River at the age of 10 in 1897.<sup>2</sup> Orton returned to mill work after his marriage, but then tried his hand at the ferry business by taking people back and forth across the river. This venture turned into a full-blown skiff rental company for people interested in spending a day on the water. Around the late 1870s or early 1880s, Orton made a trip to Philadelphia and encountered a successful business selling cough drops. He was soon producing his own cough drops back in Pittsburgh and originally sold them from a storefront on Diamond Street.

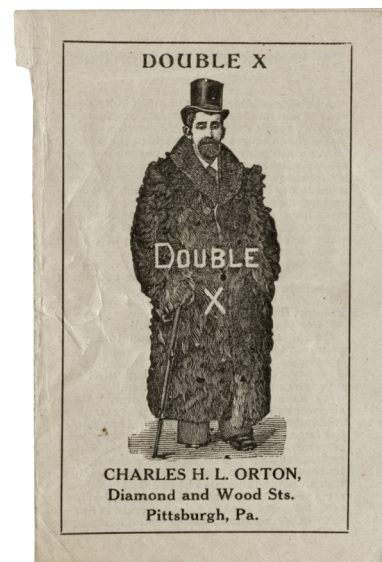
It is unclear when Orton moved his sales to the streets of Pittsburgh and took up his signature look that included a fur coat, top hat, and red box advertising his homemade remedy, but by the late 1880s he was a fixture on the city streets. Stories of "Double X" often



**A STREET-SCENE IN PITTSBURG**

THIS PICTURE REPRESENTS A GROUP CAUGHT BY OUR ARTIST ON THIS PENNSYLVANIA FIFTH AVENUE ONE SMOKY, FOGGY MORNING JUST BEFORE THE BELATED SPRING FORCED THE BULDS TO BURST INTO THE NEW LIFE OF A NEW SEASON.  
Copyright 1897, by Leslie's Weekly.





**Double X Charles Orton Advertising Card, c. 1900.** Orton handed out this card along with his cough drops. The drops were made and packaged in his home and sold five to a box, in a small red package. Apparently, they tasted more like candy than medicine.

HHC Detre L&A, 2015.0218.

**Charles Orton (right) with his daughter Katie (center) and family, c. 1910.**

Ted Rimmel.

claim he stood at the corner of Market and Diamond Streets, but it appears that he moved around over the years, even operating another storefront for a short time that was thought to be the smallest store in the United States.<sup>3</sup> There are several newspaper accounts ranging from the 1890s through the early 1900s that recount his frequent conflicts with the police who made him move his stand. At one point he set up shop in front of the Pennsylvania Railroad

office entrance, which it allowed due to the loss of his leg while in its employ in 1873.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of his death from appendicitis on June 3, 1923, at the age of 76, Orton was a local legend, not only for his signature cough drops and distinctive look, but as a local historian, storyteller, and political hopeful, running for both county coroner and sheriff in the 1890s under the Independent Party.<sup>5</sup> People who took the time to stop and talk

with him could learn about his fascinating life or the changing streets and buildings of Pittsburgh of which he was an expert. In 1897, artist Albert F. King, who painted local prominent individuals such as Carnegie and Heinz, also painted a portrait of Orton and hung it in the Carnegie Museum of Art for a time.<sup>6</sup> We can only hope that one day this lost treasure might surface and be added to our collection of this true Pittsburgh original. 🌟



**C-47B Skytrain “Luck of the Irish” in the final stages of its WWII paint scheme.**

All photos Air Heritage, Inc.

- Air Heritage, Inc., is an active, non-profit aviation museum and aircraft restoration facility located about an hour's drive north of Pittsburgh at the Beaver County Airport.
- The organization was founded in 1983 as Air Heritage of Western Pennsylvania. In 1990, it partnered with local businessman and aircraft enthusiast David Tallichet. In return for restoring his aircraft, Mr. Tallichet constructed the current 14,400-square-foot hangar that comprises the organization's office spaces, library, museum, and restoration facilities. Currently, Air Heritage has over 200 volunteer members who serve in a number of administrative, educational, and technical roles.
- The museum maintains an impressive collection of airframes, artifacts, and paraphernalia related to civilian and military aviation. Among the aircraft maintained at the museum are the F-15A Eagle, F4C Phantom, C-47 Skytrain, Cessna 150, and T-34 Mentor. The flagship of the fleet is the C-123K Provider, nicknamed “Thunder Pig,” a military transport that the organization features proudly at air shows across the United States.
- Air Heritage Museum is open from 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday–Saturday, and open Sunday by appointment. It is closed on major holidays. Admission to the museum is free to the public, but donations are greatly appreciated. For additional information including rentals, how to become a member, volunteer opportunities, and group tours, please visit or contact the museum.
- Air Heritage, Inc., is located at the Beaver County Airport, 35 Piper St., Beaver Falls, Pa., 15010. Visit [www.airheritage.org](http://www.airheritage.org) for more information or contact the museum at (724) 843-2820 or [airheritage1@verizon.net](mailto:airheritage1@verizon.net).

## Air Heritage Museum



**The F-15A Eagle is an example of the U.S. Air Force's primary type of fighter jet.**



**A Fairchild C-123K Provider military transport aircraft outside of the Air Heritage Museum.**



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To find out more about HCAP or to apply for membership for your organization, please contact Robert O. Stakeley, Educator, at [rostakeley@heinzhistorycenter.org](mailto:rostakeley@heinzhistorycenter.org) or (412) 454-6359.

<sup>1</sup> “Double X, Cough Drop Man, Familiar Sight to Thousands, Dies” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, June 4, 1923; William M. Rimmel, “Adventure of ‘Cough Drop Man’s’ Life Told” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, December 26, 1920 [this article was written by the donor’s father and Orton’s grandson. Rimmel wrote a book called *The Allegheny Story*, which is in the Detre Library & Archives.

<sup>2</sup> “The Smallest of Twins,” *The Daily Republican*, June 6, 1890 [according to a conversation on June 6, 2016 with the artifact donor and Orton’s great-grandson, the twins died in infancy]; “Willie Orton’s Body Found,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, August 19, 1897.

<sup>3</sup> “Adventure of ‘Cough Drop Man’s’ Life Told,” 40.

<sup>4</sup> “Cough Drops Only At Night,” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, March 14, 1890; “Orton Must Move,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, October 12, 1903; “Double X Is Moved From Fifth Avenue After Many Years,” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, May 9, 1906.

<sup>5</sup> “An Illegal Ballot,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, October 31, 1899, 11. Orton also claimed to be the originator of the flag lapel pin: he is said to have sent a box of them to President Wilson, who thanked him and wore the pin.

<sup>6</sup> “Painting a Character,” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, February 14, 1897, 2.

<sup>7</sup> “Adventure of ‘Cough Drop Man’s’ Life Told,” 40.

<sup>8</sup> “Painting a Character,” 2.