

The Poisoning of Count Achilles de Vecchj and the Origins of American Amateur Mycology

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Abstract

The fatal mushroom poisoning of Count Achilles de Vecchj, an Italian diplomat residing in Washington, DC, in 1897 was widely reported in the press and served as a stimulus to promote knowledge of mushroom identification. Count de Vecchj died from eating *Amanita muscaria*, a toxic species not normally fatal. Subsequent investigation of the de Vecchj poisoning by botanists of the United States Department of Agriculture resulted in public advisories about toxic mushrooms and edible species sold in public markets in Washington, DC. The poisoning occurred at a time of increasing popular interest in mushroom identification and mycophagy, and mushroom clubs in the northeastern United States took great interest in the case to educate the public about mushrooms.

Keywords: *Amanita muscaria*, amateur mycology, Charles Horton Peck, Charles McIlvaine, Count Achilles de Vecchj, mycophagy

IN 1897, AT THE K Street Market in Washington, DC, a person could purchase fresh wild mushrooms from several African-American market women. The women collected these fungi in nearby fields and woods and routinely offered them for sale along with other vegetable produce available at the market. They were noted for wisely limiting their selection to four common edibles, and authorities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture confirmed the expertise of the market women in identifying and keeping to these species.

The unfortunate occasion that gave rise to this confirmation was the unusual purchase of a poisonous species from a man not normally known as a mushroom vendor at the K Street market. The purchaser, Achilles de Vecchj, a well-known Washingtonian who was reportedly “an expert in mushrooms” instructed the market man to collect the mushrooms for him and purchased a basketful to enjoy at the table. On the morning of November 9, 1897, Count de Vecchj sat down to breakfast with his friend Dr. Daniel J. Kelly; the two men consumed platefuls of the mushrooms,

believing they were eating *Amanita caesarea*. What they ate was actually *Amanita muscaria*. Dr. Kelly lapsed into a stupor, was hospitalized, and survived; Count de Vecchj, a portly man whose health was compromised by several chronic problems, fell into a coma and died the following day. The fatal poisoning was widely reported in the press, sending a shockwave of concern through the mycological community of Washington and the northeast coast, especially since the Count’s reputation as member of the Italian Diplomatic Corps and legendary leader of a United States Civil War brigade heightened the sense of notoriety and misfortune of the misidentification. In fact, the de Vecchj poisoning represents a significant moment in the growing popularity of mushrooming in the 1890s, and the case became instructive as a cautionary tale of what could happen to a mushroom fancier whose attention to detailed identification proved too cavalier.

American culture in the 1890s involved an expanding middle class and the growth of many popular sporting activities with enduring significance, like baseball and cycling. Among the



leisure activities of the time was a burgeoning interest in mushrooms. Mushrooming as a hobby near the turn of the century sometimes arose at the converging pursuits of botany and horticulture, as the work of mushroom cultivator William Falconer suggests, and sometimes stood alone, isolated from mainstream amateur botany as a peculiarity fit only for alienated individuals like artist Mary Banning, taunted and teased by street urchins for her interest in the fungi. William Dean Howells neatly captured the ambivalence of the growing fascination with mushrooms used for nature study in a middle-class Boston family in his novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Howells wrote: “Lily, the elder of the girls, had brought back a number of studies of kelp and toadstools, with accessory rocks and rotten logs, which she would never finish up and never show any one, knowing the slightness of their merit.” Interest in mycophagy grew steadily from the time of the Civil War. Popular articles with titles such as “A Basketful of Fungi,” “Mushrooms for the Table,” and “French Mushrooms” appearing in the periodicals *American Kitchen Magazine*, the

Columbus Horticultural Society Journal, and *Popular Science Monthly*. Endorsing wild mushrooms as a standard item of cuisine still met with general resistance save for those individuals stimulated by a curiosity for the natural world and a propensity to utilize “nature’s bounty.” As the unwary and uninformed began to notice and eat mushrooms, and perhaps be poisoned by a toxic variety, the need for basic instruction in identification became paramount. Publications on identifying edible and poisonous species became more frequent in the 1890s; the first mushroom clubs were organized in Washington, Boston, and Philadelphia; and several individuals stepped forward to educate the masses about the pleasures and dangers of fungi. These included Thomas Taylor, Charles Horton Peck, William Hamilton Gibson, Julius A. Palmer, and Charles McIlvaine.

Thomas Taylor (1820–1910) was the first to disseminate critical information about mushrooms to a broad audience in the latter part of the 19th century. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) hired Taylor as its microscopist in 1871, when the department had but a single mi-

croscope for the study of the fungal origin of plant diseases and the adulteration of foods. Besides his professional studies and published reports on grape mildews like *Botrytis* and *Oidium*, Taylor reserved a passion for the gilled mushrooms. His annual U.S.D.A. *Report of the Microscopist* led to a serial publication entitled *Student's Handbook of Mushrooms of America Edible and Poisonous* (1897–98), stemming from his enormously popular “Twelve Edible Mushrooms of the U.S.” in the U.S.D.A. annual report of 1885. In 1894 and 1895, the USDA mailed out over 36,000 copies of this report, attesting to the phenomenal public interest in mushrooms. These reports, along with Charles Peck’s annual reports in New York, were the first publications that served a growing constituency hungry for detailed knowledge about the identification of fungi. Taylor and Peck, of course, were correspondents for over two decades from 1874 on matters mycological. Peck provided assistance with the identification of specimens, placed Taylor in contact with Mary Banning for mushroom sketches, and also corresponded with his daughter A. Robena Taylor, who assisted in Taylor’s mushroom studies. For Thomas and Robena Taylor, as for many others, Peck was a touchstone and powerful magnet for mycological inquiry; his singular expertise and generous outreach were unsurpassed in developing general interest in the fungi.

Charles Horton Peck (1833–1917) was an authority on the fungi and an internationally known figure in the botanical community in the late 19th century. Appointed the first New York State Botanist by the Board of Regents of the State University of New York in 1867, Peck forged a unique career in mycology and botany, assiduously collecting and cataloguing the fungi, mosses, and vascular plants of New York and identifying specimens from around the world for a host of correspondents in the United States and Europe. Though he restricted his fieldwork to New York, his mycological exploration of the state was extensive, and his work was very well known through the publication of annual reports of the New York State Museum. Beginning with the 22nd *Annual Report of the Regents of the University of the State of New York* in 1870, he published regular collection catalogues and research findings that provided a reliable source of information for botanists and mycologists. Over

the course of his lifelong career at the New York State Museum he identified, named, and illustrated over 2,700 species of fungi and published scores of articles describing them in botanical journals and popular magazines. Though he focused on the fleshy fungi (mushrooms), Peck also studied plant pathogens and in the 1890s shifted his focus to edible and poisonous mushrooms in an effort to educate a public that was increasingly interested in mycophagy. His *Report of the State Botanist on Edible Fungi of New York, 1895–1899* (1900) culminated this aspect of his work. In 1893 he organized a prize-winning exhibit of edible and poisonous mushrooms for the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois.

As Peck’s reputation developed, a great diversity of individuals wrote to him seeking his determinations for their specimens and copies of his published reports, and he happily served the amateur mycological community of the time. Several expressed not only an interest in identifying and eating mushrooms, but in promoting this interest to feed the impoverished and unfortunate, based on the perception that mushrooms as a food source were generally abundant but going to waste through ignorance and disuse. One of these was Charles McIlvaine (1840–1909) whose personal mission was “to popularize knowledge of fungi and have the vast supply of useful food now wasted, utilized.” McIlvaine became a regular correspondent, first writing to Peck in 1893 with this challenging introduction as a mushroom enthusiast: “I take no man’s word for the qualities of a toadstool. I go for it myself.”¹ His voracious appetite for suspicious toadstools included such species as *Russula emetica* (“among the best”) and *Boletus satanus* (“one of the very best”). McIlvaine earned an enduring reputation as a bold experimenter and for his nonchalance in tossing off extravagant claims for the edibility of toxic species of *Hypholoma* and unpalatable species of *Cortinarius*. These claims seem scarcely credible today, and no one having an acquaintance with common mushrooms would recommend eating, for example, the poisonous *Hypholoma fasciculare*, as did McIlvaine: “It is not poisonous, but one of our most valuable species. . . . It makes a choice pickle and a good catsup.”² McIlvaine’s legendary gastrointestinal fortitude (he has been known by the moniker “Old Ironguts”) and unwavering enthusiasm for mycophagy as a panacea for hu-

mankind once led John Cage to quip, “Charles McIlvaine was able to eat most anything, providing it was a fungus.” McIlvaine was partial to alcohol and sexual dalliance in his private life, to pontification in mycological company (except, perhaps, with Peck), and to florid eloquence in his Chautauqua lectures. He complained to Peck that many of Thomas Taylor’s illustrations mislabeled “edible” species as “poisonous,” and in 1893 he publicly lashed out at Taylor in the *New York Tribune* with a cantankerous editorial, “The Protest of a Mycophagist,” which led Robena Taylor to pen these words to Charles Peck:

Do you know a Mr. McIlvaine who keeps advertising the fact that he is about to publish a book with illustrations of 400 mushrooms which he has eaten and who claims that emetica satanus piperatus etc. are all good eating when cooked? He attacks Father and he attacks Palmer saying that nearly every one of the mushrooms in Palmer’s plates marked poisonous [is] edible. A member of Congress told us he was something of a crank but I have never met him and he seems quite wild because Father does not bother to answer his attacks. He seems to write on the principle of the man who says, “He who cometh after me *may* be greater than I, but *all* who come *before me* were thieves and robbers.” [original emphasis] . . . He does not scruple to mislead or misrepresent in his remarks. . . . He generally writes his articles under cover of editorials which are full of “Capt McIlvaine’s” views and exploits in mycology.”³

Another of Peck’s regular correspondents from 1893 to 1912 was a confederate Civil War veteran, Berry Benson (1843–1923). Benson’s is a utterly remarkable story, for he served as a confederate scout and sharpshooter in the Civil War, experiencing the furor of battle and risking his life through the entire war, from the firing on Fort Sumter to Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. Captured by Union forces behind enemy lines in 1864, Benson was sent to Elmira Prison in New York where he and several other prisoners crafted a daring escape by tunneling to safety and living on the run for weeks. Peck was probably unaware of these exploits until Benson revealed them to him in a letter in 1912; in the meantime, his letters bespeak a man eager to learn the fungi for their own sake and in order to teach poor country folk near his home in Augusta, Georgia,

about an overlooked but abundant food source. Benson had been in communication with Taylor, McIlvaine, Andrew Price Morgan, and Henry Ravenel’s daughter when he initiated his contact with Peck in a letter of December 15, 1893, stating that “my principal object in educating myself in this line is to educate, in turn, the poor people about me to use the bountiful provisions of nature which they allow to go to decay, unused, at their very doors, in such quantities.”⁴ Benson appealed to Peck for assistance with identification, describing such local mushrooms as “Rufus Brown,” the “Canary” *Tricholoma*, and “Gingy-cake” (*Boletus edulis*, a.k.a. ginger-cake). Peck even entertained a notion for naming a “*Boletus bensoni*” in his honor. One mushroom, however, that commanded particular interest for Berry Benson was *Amanita muscaria*.

Over a ten-year period, from 1894 to 1904, Benson reported to Charles Peck the results of his experiments eating *Amanita muscaria*, a known poisonous species, and directed probing questions to Peck about the nature of its toxic qualities. In fact, he had such success in avoiding any ill effects in this endeavor that he doubted that the species was toxic. There is little indication that Benson appreciated the psychoactive potential of this mushroom, but here again, he reported nothing remarkable, other than one fleeting instance of feeling “a little light-headed.” Benson felt he was serving the science of mycology in his quest, and like many advanced amateurs of the time he acquired a respectable expertise in both theoretical and folk taxonomies of the fungi and in what we would now call ethnomycology. He asserted decisively to Peck that “[c]onsidering the close morphological relationships amongst species widely separated in spore-color, I do not yet feel satisfied that the present classification *lies along the lines of evolution*, which w[oul]d certainly be the most natural classification.” [original emphasis] The perceptive intelligence of this observation is matched by his questions concerning *Amanita muscaria*, such as “Is there an *Amanita* so closely resembling *muscaria* that it would deceive me?” And “Are some *Muscaria* poisonous and others not?”⁵ He examined the problem from several differing angles, pondering whether the famed fly agaric was or was not toxic, was variably toxic, or whether he had misidentified the species altogether.

From the careful descriptions and several samples that he provided Peck, it is unlikely that Benson misidentified his subject. Of similar species, he observed that *Amanita caesarea* “might appear to a mere novice the same [as muscaria], is widely different to my eye, even at a glance. I eat that freely and find it excellent.”⁶ He told Peck that he began his experimentation by dropping a small piece of *Amanita muscaria* in a cup of hot coffee and drinking it. He gradually increased the dosage, measuring his specimens by “grains” on a druggist’s scales, until he was eating several at a time. On November 24 he reported “I began eating on Monday, a small piece, and increasing the quantity every breakfast, till, on the next Sunday . . . I ate of them till I was surfeited.” This mycological Mithridates noted that the taste was “very rich,” and he “observed no results of any kind, from eating them, either good or bad.” However, five years later, in 1899, he reported to Peck a “peculiar” illness that his physician suggested “came from eating A. M.” based on the alkalinity of his urine.⁷ The British mycologist Miles Joseph Berkeley had theorized that mushrooms became toxic through an excess of alkali, though Julius Palmer, for one, later rejected this idea. Benson was fully familiar with Palmer’s writings on the subject.

Benson’s efforts to determine the edibility of *Amanita muscaria* represented a personal investigation based on a homegrown scientific curiosity that was independent of Charles McIlvaine and Julius Palmer. Benson communicated regularly with McIlvaine and appreciated the good Captain’s wide experimentation in mycophagy, but it seems doubtful that he was merely copying McIlvaine’s efforts. In fact, he expressed his skepticism at the Captain’s preposterous claims about the volatility of the *Amanita* poison, reporting to Peck that “Capt. M. has often warned me against handling them, and wrote to me that he was once rendered insensible by smelling one [*Amanita*], and that he killed a dog by holding it to his nose for five minutes.”⁸ We know that McIlvaine himself experimented with *Amanita muscaria* from his remarks in *One Thousand American Fungi* (1900), in which he observed that a “raw piece of the cap, the size of a hazel nut, affects me sensibly if taken on an empty stomach” but that [n]icotine from smoking a pipe with me abates the symptoms.”⁹ He concluded that it was a

highly poisonous species. Julius Palmer, too, harbored a fascination with *Amanita* poisoning, and, like McIlvaine, believed that human absorption of poisons provided the key to understanding the toxic principle of the genus as a whole. Palmer also postulated absorption through the pores of the skin, making a similar fantastic claim that an “*Amanita* held in the closed hand will produce all the symptoms of poisoning, even to convulsions.”⁹ Like Benson and McIlvaine, Palmer valued the experiential dimension of practical mycophagy and once reported to Peck his own, albeit inadvertent and inconclusive, dinner of *Amanita muscaria*:¹⁰

My brother told me that in a certain meadow land, there was an abundance of long-stemmed yellow topped mushrooms, to use his exact expression, looking just like griddle-cakes; I went for them, and had he said corn-meal instead of buck-wheat the description would have been correct; I gathered some, brought them to Boston, broiled three, all that suited me in appearance, and Mrs. Palmer and I had them with our Sunday chicken, pronouncing them very sweet and good; when I got along a little farther in my investigations, I identified the griddle-cakes as *Am. muscaria*. Now, I suppose you would ask for my explanation; the worst of it is, that I hav’n’t any to offer; I kept expecting to find something else for the *Musc[aria]*, and to this day, I never have; the only theory I can offer is that of mistake in identity, at the time I ate them, my discrimination not being nicely cultivated then; yet, as I think of their appearance at this moment, the manner in which the large white gills flattened down, and the shapely stem came out, I feel as sure of their identity as one is of a striking face he has once seen. Soon after this, I began to write to the doctors when I heard of a poisoning case, and ever since I appreciated the dangers of the *Amanita* family, I have not taken the pains to confirm or impeach my early experience.¹¹

If there is any mushroom surrounded by aura and burdened with the freight of mysticism, mayhem, and mortality, it is surely *Amanita muscaria*. The type species of the genus *Amanita*, this red-capped and statuesque representative of the fungal world carries powerful and enduring associations with the supernatural in cultures the world over and is known variously as the fly aga-

ric, tue-mouche (France), Fliegenpilz (Germany), and mukhomor (Russia). In Germany it was also known as “Giftpilz”—the archetypal “poisonous toadstool.” Robert Gordon Wasson’s thesis that *Amanita muscaria* was the “divine mushroom of immortality” of the ancient Aryans, the *Soma* of the sacred Hindu text *Rig Veda*, has captured the attention of historians and orientalists as well as mycologists. Though Wasson’s speculations fall short of conclusive evidence, his book *Soma: The Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (1968) has spawned unceasing interest in the role of fly agaric as a psychoactive agent in the history of religion; however, it is the toxicological history of the fly agaric that is more germane to the present story. Theodor Weiland (1968) stated that its toxicity “is generally overestimated” and that symptoms of intoxication are “very complex and resemble those of drugs that act on the central nervous system.”¹² Most important to note here is that the toxins that are (variably) manifest in *Amanita muscaria* are completely unlike the potent, life-threatening amatoxins of *Amanita phalloides* and related species. Knowledge of the spectrum of toxic action in the genus was emerging in the 1890s at the time Benson, Palmer, and McIlvaine were experimenting with eating *Amanita muscaria*. While these mycophagists convincingly demonstrated that this species was not ordinarily lethal, the widely publicized case of Count Achilles de Vecchj exploded on the scene in 1897 with a sensational counter-example that eating this fungus could indeed prove fatal, contrary to some contemporary observation and most subsequent toxicological history.

It could be argued that Washington, DC, and Albany, NY were the two major centers for the dissemination of mycological knowledge to the general public in the late 19th century through Thomas Taylor’s various U.S.D.A. circulars and Charles Peck’s annual New York state reports. Interest in mushroom hunting and mycophagy ran very high in the Washington area. A mushroom club had been organized as early as 1894 and, three years prior to the Achilles de Vecchj incident, city readers encountered a disturbing newspaper account of a death precipitated by eating deadly mushrooms. The *Washington Post* of October 18, 1894, ran the news story, “Chung Yu Ting’s End,” with the subtitles, “Count Mitkiewicz Mourns His Gifted Servant’s Loss” and

“Poisoned by Eating Toadstools.”

Chung Yu Ting, the personal servant of the prominent Count Mitkiewicz and his family of Washington Circle, had emigrated from China to the United States in 1878 with Ma King Chiang, an imperial envoy. He was the eldest son of Li Hung Chang, known as the “Chinese Bismarck.” Multi-lingual, multi-talented, and highly regarded in the community, Chung fancied he knew all about the mushrooms he found growing in Bethesda Park near the ruins of a hotel fire. Bringing nearly a bushel-load back to the Mitkiewicz family, who then believed they had successfully convinced him to destroy them, Chung nonetheless prepared and ate “a great dish of the spongy vegetation” and sent packages of the fungi, later identified as *Amanita phalloides* at the USDA by Thomas Taylor, to “several of his housekeeping friends.” Count Mitkiewicz discovered Chung much later that evening in intense agony, and his demise followed the classic progression of symptoms of *Amanita phalloides* poisoning. Chung Yu Ting died four days later, to the enormous chagrin of the Mitkiewicz family. Before he succumbed, however, he managed to enumerate the addresses to which he dispatched his packaged mushrooms, thus preventing injury or worse to his beloved friends. The *Post* reported his terse last words to the Countess Mitkiewicz on October 17, 1894, “I disobeyed for once, and therefore I must die. Good-bye.”¹³

This harrowing local story of mushroom poisoning remained vivid and memorable for many Washingtonians who read a similarly shocking newspaper account just three years later, in 1897. On this occasion, however, the tragedy befell the high and mighty, not the servants. Born in Milan, Italy (c. 1836) near Lake Maggiore, Achille Paul de Vecchj was a prominent attaché of the Italian Diplomatic Corps whose reputation rested solidly on two remarkable exploits in the American Civil War. The first was that de Vecchj was the special ambassador of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Italian nationalist revolutionary leader, and had personally delivered to President Abraham Lincoln Garibaldi’s letter of support for the Union cause at the outset of the war. The second was that he entered the Civil War himself after serving as a soldier in Italy, leading the 9th Massachusetts

Continued on page 52

The Poisoning of Count de Vecchj,

continued from page 42

Artillery, a unit known as “De Vecchj’s Battery.” He was injured by a gunshot wound and a fall from his horse at Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1863. De Vecchj settled in the United States and, though he was a man of wealth and property in Italy, he listed his occupation as “engineer” and served as a member of the Italian legation, becoming an ardent supporter of the Republican party and a friend of President Benjamin Harrison. De Vecchj was a large, imposing man “of a fine physique and carriage”: six feet four inches in height and over 300 pounds at the time of his death, he was regarded, according to the *Washington Star*, as “one of the best-known Italian residents of this country.” The press characterized Achilles de Vecchj as a man of great cultivation and refinement, and the *Star* remarked that he was “said to be very fond of mushrooms and prided himself that he knew all about them.”¹⁴

De Vecchj died from eating *Amanita muscaria*, and the story unfolded in the Washington press as follows: While shopping at the K Street Market, de Vecchj encountered a market dealer by the name of John Bowes, who resided near Arlington, Virginia, and questioned him about the availability of mushrooms in his vicinity. Bowes told him of some things “he supposed to be mushrooms” and at de Vecchj’s request, brought them to market soon after. The Count performed some chemical tests with acids and noted that their stems did not blacken when cut with a knife. Bowes, dumbfounded at the news of the poisoning (and his role in providing the poison), related to investigating authorities that the Count believed these to be infallible tests of wholesomeness. De Vecchj also customarily compared mushroom purchases at the market “with colored pictures of a Department of Agriculture publication.” He took the mushrooms home and prepared them to eat with his friend Dr. Daniel J. Kelly, an assistant examiner at the U.S. Patent Office who resided at the same location as the Count, 1635 19th Street. After a liberal breakfast of *Amanita*, at which both men declared them “the finest mushrooms they had ever eaten,” Dr. Kelly proceeded to his office in town. Within minutes the Count grew ill and close to collapse. Refusing an emetic offered by Mrs. Kelly, he fell prostrate, lost all sense

of vision, and lapsed into unconsciousness, all within two hours. Meanwhile, colleagues noticed that Dr. Kelly was growing incoherent and stupefied at his desk at the patent office and had him taken to a local hospital, where he shortly recovered. However, despite the efforts of his physician to revive him by injections of apomorphine and atropine, Count de Vecchj, racked by convulsions so terrific that he broke his bed apart, never regained consciousness and died the following day, November 10. The Washington coroner certified the cause of death as “mushroom poisoning and apoplexy.” No inquest was held, and the deceased was interred at Arlington Cemetery.¹⁵

As soon as news of the poisoning had been broadcast, U.S.D.A. botanists Frederick Coville and Victor K. Chesnut launched into action to investigate the matter. Chesnut, an expert on food poisons, interviewed Dr. Kelly at length. Coville asserted unequivocally that the poisonings of Chung Yu Ting and Achilles de Vecchj required a strong warning. Seeking to allay public apprehension about mushroom sales at the K Street market, Coville praised the expertise of the regular mushroom vendors, African-American women who restricted their sales to “the common mushroom (*Agaricus campestris*), the horse mushroom (*Agaricus arvensis*), the shaggy mushroom (*Coprinus comatus*) . . . , and the puffball (*Lycoperdon cyathiforme*).” Coville stated, “[T]he judgment of the colored market women in Washington that a particular species is edible I consider as safe a guide as the decision of the highest botanical authority, not because their knowledge of mushrooms is extensive but because they are thoroughly familiar with the two or three edible species they handle and know them as certainly from poisonous kinds as they know persimmons from crab apples or opossums from rabbits.”¹⁶ At least one of the women, however, revealed a recipe for preparing *Amanita muscaria* for eating, a process that involved boiling in salt water and steeping in vinegar. District of Columbia health department reports indicate that official action to condemn unwholesome food in public markets for the year ending June 30, 1898, included meats, vegetables, and fruits, but no specific mention of fungi. To all appearances, the problem raised by the poisonings resided not in any failure of public health, civic ordinance, or market practice but in the isolated misidentifica-

tion of mushrooms growing freely in the wild by persons interested in eating them. The answer lay in education, and mycologists rose to the challenge of meeting the growing public interest in mycology and mycophagy over the next several years with the de Vecchj case firmly in mind.

U.S.D.A. Circular No. 13, "Observations on Recent Cases of Mushroom Poisoning in the District of Columbia" (1898), written by Frederick Coville, is the *locus classicus* of the Achilles de Vecchj story. D. W. Prentiss discussed the case in a report on five cases of mushroom poisoning in the *Philadelphia Medical Journal*, and Dr. Kelly himself gave an address before the Chemical Society of Washington, DC, entitled "A Personal Experience with *Amanita muscaria* Poisoning."¹⁷ Several mycologists became interested in the incident, not the least of whom were Taylor and McIlvaine. Robena Taylor immediately informed Peck about her father's role in the case:

I suppose you saw the account of [the] case of poisoning of two gentlemen here by mushrooms. Father has one of the mushrooms taken from the same plate from which the gentlemen eat [sic] and a piece of one which Dr Kelly eat—or was supposed to have eaten. Dr K is an old friend of ours and we were much disturbed at his dangerous illness. He says he did not see the dish that he eat until the mushrooms were cooked. It is mooted that the other gentleman Count V was color blind. He would not take an emetic as Dr K did else he might have been saved. He was a stalwart man. Father is going to examine chemically I believe. Dr K is all right now.¹⁸

Charles McIlvaine, ever the mycological maverick, felt compelled to supplement the official U.S.D.A. investigation with his own, or so he said. He told Peck, "I am carefully investigating the poisoning of Dr. Kelly and Count de Vecchi, in Washington, D. C. They ate a large quantity of *A. muscaria*, mistaking it for *A. caesarea*. The sudden action of the poison is so at variance with that of Amanitine, that I strongly suspect they ate a species of which I have found but one specimen."¹⁹ McIlvaine was founder and president of the Philadelphia Mycological Center, a name that seems to harbor the connotation of an investigative institute rather than a mushroom club, which is really what it was. Perhaps the Center's name

provided a certain cachet to his "investigation," which he hinted to Peck that he had completed, but it is unknown what became of his efforts beyond a rather predictable complaint that Victor Chesnut's USDA report was "very rotten."²⁰ McIlvaine contested and begrudged Chesnut's thesis that the species *Amanita phalloides* contained two toxic agents, whereas he believe it contained only Amanitine. Finally, the most potentially damning statement made by those surrounding the case was that of Frank Baker. A superintendent at the Smithsonian Institution, Baker wrote to Peck in 1898: "You have probably heard of the death from mushroom poisoning that occurred in this city last fall due to an error in an illustration of *Amanita muscaria* published by that Department [U.S.D.A.]."²¹ If it is true that an error in a published U.S.D.A. illustration resulted in de Vecchj's misidentification, the fault does not reside in Thomas Taylor's most popular mushroom publications.

The de Vecchj poisoning reverberated through the mycological community for several years. Lucien Marcus Underwood of the New York Botanical Garden, author of *Moulds, Mildews and Mushrooms* (1899), discussed the subject with mushroom clubs in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. William G. Farlow speculated that de Vecchj had mistaken the fly agaric for *Amanita rubescens* since his collection of *A. muscaria* was gathered in late autumn "when it is generally paler than in midsummer."²² Nina L. Marshall published *The Mushroom Book* in 1901, placing Count de Vecchj in the same company with Czar Alexis of Russia (both succumbed to *Amanita muscaria*). In the Charles Horton Peck Archive, an unpublished manuscript by John N. Brown, *The Field Book of American Mushrooms*, mentions the death of "Count de Vecchi and a number of his friends," seemingly beginning a process of mythologizing the case by exaggerating its results. Later discussions of the de Vecchj incident appear in an appendix on "Mushroom Poisoning" by O. E. Fischer in C. H. Kauffman's *The Agaricaceae of Michigan* (1918) and in "The Distribution of Poisons in Mushrooms" (1909) by William W. Ford, based on an address given to the Boston Mycological Society.



If anything, the poisoning of Count de Vecchj served to increase, rather than abate, interest in the fungi at century's turn. The Boston and Washington mushroom clubs flourished, and Charles McIlvaine published the first edition of *One Thousand American Fungi* in 1900. Of all the popular identification guides of the time, this is the one that has best endured, perhaps through—and not in spite of—the Captain's brilliant eccentricity. McIlvaine's busiest years were filled with moments of personal tribulation, including a divorce (which he depicted as a “housequake” to Peck), in which his wife charged that he had falsely accused her of trying to poison him—a ridiculous and ironic capstone to the personal story of the man disposed to recommend *Russula emetica* as an edible mushroom. Interest in mushrooms among Washingtonians continued in high gear because mushrooms were amazingly plentiful. In fact, at a time when urbanization had yet to obliterate pastures, parks, commons, and woodlands, mushrooms were conspicuous and ubiquitous. Fred J. Braendle, a local mushroom enthusiast, wrote to Charles Peck in 1898 describing a colossal growth of fungi on an island in the Potomac River. Braendle related that thousands of people had visited the island to view and collect the mushrooms, which included species of *Lepista nuda*, *Lyophyllum decastes* [*Clitocybe multiceps*], and *Coprinus comatus*. Braendle reported on a new “wonder of the world” in Washington:

I have dispatched to you another box containing a specie in which I am particularly interested. It is not only very pretty, but its edible qualities are nearly first class. It is always clean and neat, light purple all over and free from larvae, and keeps well several days. I have tried its edibility thoroughly. At my last meal I have eaten eighteen good-sized plants fried in butter and relished the last one as much as the first. The spore prints show that the spore[s] are of a pinkish yellow hue. These mushrooms grow in great profusion on the Potomac flats in company with *Clitocybe multiceps* and *Coprinus comatus*. This mushroom growth will be a wonder of the world. It seems to me the entire flats will soon be one solid mass of fungi: *Coprinus* [c]omatus and *Clitocybe* grow I should say by the hundred thousands to say very little and of the purplish ones bushels of them can be gathered in a few hours. The soil of these flats was made about four or five years ago from the dredgings of the

river bed and is about ten feet pure earth and only begins to dry now. Since last year the crops of fungi has [sic] increased a thousand fold and *Lepiota naucinoidea* is just beginning to appear. . . . On one single rootstalk of [*C*]litocybe multiceps we have cut off[f] ninety two caps but their [sic] are thousands of cluster[s] containing two to three hundred in one compact mass. In many place[s] the three species *Coprinus*, *Clitocybe* and this purple one are so wedged together that they seem to grow on one stalk.”²³

The local press reported that Washingtonians by the hundreds went to marvel at this prodigious fungal growth. A few years later in 1907 Mr. Braendle published a pamphlet entitled *The Two T's or the Golden and Silvery Tricholoma*, with the subtitle “two abundant edible species of mushrooms in the pine woods of the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia, about the time of Thanksgiving Day.” At the conclusion of his guide, Braendle lyrically expressed the wisdom sticking to a couple of reliable edibles, urging his readers to “Make no mistake!” Perhaps he had Achilles de Vecchj in mind.

You have now been told that mushrooms
are many:

Make no mistake! Do not eat any
But these tricholomas, be they yellow or gray,
And not till storms have swept all others away.
Should you then wish to learn some more,
In the same vein, and on the same score,
Pictured more clear, and words more terse,
I shall soon give you a chance
To get
Mushrooms
In
Prose and Verse
All at a Glance.²⁴

NOTES

1. Charles Horton Peck Papers, New York State Museum, Series 1: Correspondence; Charles McIlvaine to Charles Peck, May 1, 1894 [hereafter cited as CHPP].
2. McIlvaine, Charles. 1901. *One Thousand American Fungi*. Dover reprint, 1973. p. 357.
3. CHPP; A. Robena Taylor to Charles Peck, August 21, 1894.
4. CHPP; Berry Benson to Charles Peck, December 15, 1893. See also Berry Benson's *Civil War Book*, edited by Susan Williams Benson, 1962.

5. CHPP, Benson to Peck, June 28, 1894; November 24, 1894; October 30, 1894.
6. CHPP, Benson to Peck, October 15, 1894.
7. CHPP, Benson to Peck, November 14, 1899.
8. CHPP, Benson to Peck, October 30, 1894.
9. McIlvaine, C. op. cit., p. 15.
10. Palmer, Julius. 1894. *About Mushrooms: A Guide to the Study of Esculent and Poisonous Fungi*, p. 44.
11. CHPP, Julius A. Palmer to Charles Peck, December 22, 1890.
12. Weiland, T. 1968. "Poisonous principles of mushrooms of the genus *Amanita*." *Science*, March 1, 1968, 159 (3813): 946–52. For a recent summary of *Amanita muscaria*, see Michelot, D. and L. M. Melendez-Howell. 2003. "*Amanita muscaria*: chemistry, biology, toxicology, and ethnomycology." *Mycological Research* 107 (2):131–46.
13. *Washington Post*, October 18, 1894.
14. *Washington Evening Star*, November 9, 10, and 11, 1894; *Washington Post*, November 10, 11, and 12, 1894.
15. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; Civil War Pension Records, Achilles de Vecchj, death certificate; August 10, 1898.
16. Coville, F. 1898. "Observations on recent cases of mushroom poisoning in the District of Columbia." U.S. Department of Agriculture, Circular No. 13 (rev. ed.).
17. Prentiss, D. W. 1898. "Five cases of mushroom-poisoning, three of which proved fatal; treatment of the poisoning." September 24, 1898, *Philadelphia Medical Journal*.
18. CHPP, A. Robena Taylor to Charles Peck, November 16, 1897.
19. CHPP, Charles McIlvaine to Charles Peck, November 13, 1897.
20. CHPP, McIlvaine to Peck, October 19, 1898.
21. CHPP, Frank Baker to Charles Peck, August 19, 1898.
22. Farlow, William Gilson. 1898. "Some edible and poisonous mushrooms." U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bulletin No. 16.
23. CHPP, Fred J. Braendle to Charles Peck, November 7, 1898.
24. Braendle, Fred J. 1907. *The two t's or the golden and silvery Tricholoma*.

