Whoever thought of oral hygiene in the old west? Certainly not! When I volunteered at the KSIS Archeological Lab in the Center for Historical Research in Topeka, the subject was introduced when the site excavated at Fort Hays. The site is part of the State of Kansas to establish an agricultural experiment station and a western branch of the state normal school. This institution eventually became Fort Hays State University. The fort has existed from 1865 to 1889. A few of its buildings still stand and are part of Fort Hays State University.

In August 1889, a General Order 69 was issued, ordering Fort Hays to be abandoned, along with Fort Laramie in Wyoming and Fort Lyon in Colorado. The land, consisting of 7,600 acres, was given to the state of Kansas to establish an agricultural experiment station and a western branch of the state normal school. This institution eventually became Fort Hays State University. The fort has existed from 1865 to 1889. A few of its buildings still stand and are part of Fort Hays State University.

In one such fort was set up in the area of Big Creek and the Stoney Hill River in 1865. At first it was called Fort Fetterman, and it was garrisoned by three companies of the First United States Volunteers. These were Reconstructed Yankees, that is, Confederate prisoners of war who enlisted in the U.S. Army to serve on the frontier. On November 17, 1866, the installation was renamed Fort Hays. Shortly thereafter, in June 1867, the site was flooded with loss of life and property. Consequently, it was moved to higher ground.

The KSIS artifacts that are on display consist of a number of toothbrush handle remnants. They are made from ivory, bone, or celluloid, and one is inscribed "Ivory Finish." Several include remains of the bristles.

Among the KSIS artifacts there is indeed evidence that some brushing was going on. The archaeological collection contains a number of toothbrush handle remnants. They are made from ivory, bone, or celluloid, and one is inscribed "Ivory Finish." Several include remains of the bristles.

Bottles in this collection represent at least three different brands of toothpastes. Back then, these preparations were called "tooth washes." One brand, "Rubiflour for the Teeth," was made by E. W. Hoyt and Company of Lowell, Massachusetts. Rubiflour cost twenty-five cents a bottle and was described as being "deliciously flavored." The company even put out a small publication promoting the prevention of tooth decay through the use of its product. It was much later, in 1901, that the idea that bacteria caused decay was accepted.

A second bottle was "Burnett’s Oriental Tooth Wash," made in Boston, Massachusetts. I wasn’t able to locate much information on this product other than a label advertising the properties of "Celanese, Kalliston, Plevnel, Oriental Tooth Wash, asthma remedy and superior cooking extracts."

The third bottle is labeled "Van Baskins’ Fragrant Sozodont" from New York City. Its motto was "Good for bad teeth, bone, and bad for good teeth." Sozodont’s main ingredients included acids, astringents, and sharp abrasives. The major abrasive was diatomaceous earth. Diatoms are microscopic fossils of unicellular algae, found in both fresh and saltwater environments. They are essentially pure silica and survive after the death of the algae. Almost indestructible, they provide a tremendous abrasive medium. Today diatoms continue to be used in dentifrices and are employed in filtering and grinding tasks.

An early broadside promoting Sozodont made some astounding claims: "For cleansing and preserving the teeth, hardening the gums, imparting a delightfully refreshing taste and feeling to the mouth, removingatter and from the teeth, completely arresting the progress of decay and whitening such parts as have already become black by decay." But wait, there’s more! The advertisement went on to say that along with “this power it contains an exhilarating and anti-septic property and a delicate fragrance” that should encourage men, women, or child to use Sozodont regularly. It was also recommended for use by invalids to rinse their mouths.

For those who were not quite as interested in daily oral hygiene, there were other aids. A book on Civil War artifacts refers to a small tin box labeled "Breath Fresheners." Certainly a soldier riding out to protect the trait felt much more confident with a sparkling smile and fresh breath.

Recommended Reading
A Report on Barracks and Hospitals with the Description of Military Posts, Circular No. 4, War Department, Surgeon General’s Office, Washington, D.C., December 5, 1870.
Army of the United States Army, Circular No. 8, War Department, Surgeon General’s Office, Washington, D.C., 1875.