

There was a time... presents:

A Few Thoughts on Patent Medicines

By John Salicco

This content of this publication is the property of *There was a time...* LLC. As long as proper credit is given, reproduction of this information is allowed without restriction for educational uses. No rights to publication or use for profit are granted without the express permission in writing by *There was a time...* or its agents.

Published by *There was a time...* LLC, MMVI

A Few Thoughts on Patent Medicines

By John Salicco

The medicine show was a sales technique with significant relevance to the present. The infamous "Snake Oil" salesman of the late 19th Century is the exception, not the rule. Most patent medicines were sold through local merchants. They were widely advertised in the papers of the day. Often, the purpose of the medicine show was to create interest in the product and to attract a local merchant or medical practitioner as a supplier, who would continue to sell the remedy when the salesman moved on to the next town.

American "Patent Medicines" have their roots in England. Shipped to America until the revolution, they were sold by postmasters, goldsmiths, grocers, and tailors. With the revolutionary war, shipments of these English nostrums were temporarily cut off and the vacuum created in the colonial markets was eagerly addressed by Yankee entrepreneurs. Once domestic production of these remedies gained a foothold, there was no turning back.

1793 American patent legislation and the growth of daily and weekly newspapers helped to foster an enormous variety in these medicines. Most of the "Patent Remedies" were actually never patented. What we would now call Trademark was much more important to sales than the contents. The label, shape and color of the bottle were what made the sale. Before the era of statistical "double blind" testing and pharmaceutical standards, health claims were at best anecdotal and at worst pure charlatanism. Though there were some curative benefits to a few of these remedies, some were actually harmful to your well being.

It was no coincidence that alcohol was the largest ingredient of most patent medicines. There was a practical reason. Alcohol is an easily made common preservative. It keeps the other organic ingredients from spoiling. (In modern times, think of the liqueur Irish Cream. It's made with cream, but does not sour or curdle even in warm surroundings. The alcohol preserves the cream.) Bottled in what could at best be called less than sterile conditions, these patent nostrums of vegetable and herbal extracts would quickly spoil without the addition of alcohol. Alcohol is also a solvent, as Lydia Pinkham explained to the Government and the Women's Christian Temperance League. Concentrations varied, but Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound contained up to 18% alcohol per bottle.

In addition to the vegetable extracts and sugar which gave each brand its flavor and color, the remedies were sometimes laced with cocaine, caffeine, opium, or morphine. For a time in the late 19th century, there was actually a morphine-laced mixture sold through the Sears catalogue. It was intended to be slipped into a wayward



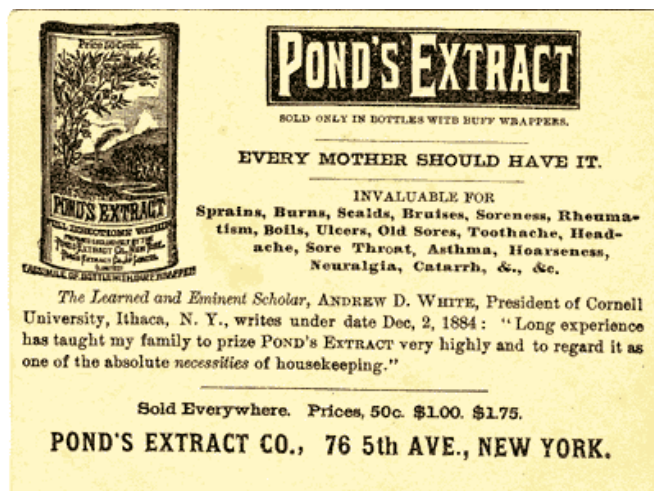
husband's coffee in order to keep him home nights. Otherwise respectable people, who would never consume the “demon rum”, could, by taking their medicine, benefit from the same effects. Bored housewives and the homebound elderly were especially susceptible to becoming addicted to these concoctions. These medicines may not have cured what ailed you, but they did make you feel better – at least for a while.

Not all “Quacks” were intentional charlatans and “snake oil” salesmen. It is apparent from diaries and accounts from the day, that many were completely sincere in their belief that their nostrums had amazing curative properties. Many customers swore by their effectiveness and took them daily in much the same way that modern people take daily vitamins. Many nostrums were not just intended to cure diseases, but to ward them off in the first place. Repeat sales were critical to business success and many of these elixirs were sold to apparently satisfied consumers for decades. Indeed, some of these 19th century patent medicines are still available today, albeit with revised and toned down health claims. Modern day Geritol and Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia began their existence as patent medicines in the 19th century. Two modern day soft drinks, Root beer and Coca-Cola started as patent medicines. John Stith Pemberton introduced Coca-Cola as a non-alcoholic patent medicine in 1886. He claimed it cured myriad diseases, including morphine addiction, dyspepsia, neurasthenia, headache, and impotence.

So why did so many buy the “quack” nostrums? The placebo effect bears some responsibility, but some of these concoctions really did perform as advertised. The simple answer is that people then as now, want to do the right thing for their own and their families’ health. They just didn’t know what to do and short of the sometimes outlandish advertising, there was nothing else to guide them. The growth of crowded cities provided a breeding ground for disease. There was a lot of sickness. Limited refrigeration and slow transportation put fresh fruit and vegetables out of the reach of most of the population for most of the year. Diet by and large was less than ideal for all but the wealthy. The manure particles, dust and soot polluting the urban air of the 18th and 19th century created an ideal environment for infections, tuberculosis and other respiratory ailments. It became apparent to everyone that traditional medicine was

ineffective and by the 1820’s doctors were at a low point in terms of their credibility from the general public.

Where science failed, mysticism prevailed. Most Americans believed that Divine Providence had stocked the promised land with vegetables and herbs unknown elsewhere that could cure disease. A common idea was that shamans and medicine men of the native tribes, being close to nature, were privy to the secrets of



POND'S EXTRACT
SOLD ONLY IN BOTTLES WITH BUZZY WRAPPERS.

EVERY MOTHER SHOULD HAVE IT.

INVALUABLE FOR
Sprains, Burns, Scalds, Bruises, Soreness, Rheumatism, Boils, Ulcers, Old Sores, Toothache, Headache, Sore Throat, Asthma, Hoarseness, Neuralgia, Catarrh, &c., &c.

The Learned and Eminent Scholar, ANDREW D. WHITE, President of Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y., writes under date Dec, 2, 1884: "Long experience has taught my family to prize POND'S EXTRACT very highly and to regard it as one of the absolute necessities of housekeeping."

Sold Everywhere. Prices, 50c. \$1.00. \$1.75.

POND'S EXTRACT CO., 76 5th AVE., NEW YORK.

these indigenous herbal cures. In some cases, they really were! One successful patent

medicine, Pond's Extract, claimed to be derived from a recipe provided by an Oneida medicine man. (Yes, this is the same Pond's company that went on to cold cream fame.) It was in fact a solution of witch hazel. It was and still is useful as an astringent for insect bites or small cuts and abrasions. The witch hazel (hamamelis water) currently available in most drug stores is essentially the same recipe as sold by Pond in 1840.

Another circumstance of the time that we tend to forget was the lack of policing of who could practice medicine. For most of America, up until the 1890's there was no legal requirement for medical degrees or board certification of any kind to practice medicine. Even when the states tightened up rules for the educational pre-requisites and licensing of doctors, these new laws grandfathered those who were already practicing medicine. It was well into the mid twentieth century before the last of these unlicensed practitioners finally retired. The "legitimate" doctors railed against these patent medicines from as early as the 1820's, but the unlicensed practitioners continued to prescribe and to sell them well into the 20th century.

We like to think that we, as a modern "informed" society, could not be taken in by the breed of quacks who duped our ancestors. Consumer protection and disclosure laws, the FDA, better general education and a well policed medical profession have put an end to most of the patent medicines. Or have they? We should consider that a great many of the vitamin and health supplements for sale today have no scientific basis for their efficacy. Then there are the fitness machines of every shape and size. Some modern herbals may offer actual health benefits, but their benefits are usually anecdotal. As long as they restrict the wording on their labels, contain no regulated substances and are careful not to claim to cure specific health problems, they are legally allowed to "imply" all sorts of benefits. And from longer life, to hair replacement and sexual potency, they do imply some incredible benefits.

Many of these modern products have actually been scientifically tested and shown to be ineffective. These scientific findings are readily available to the general public, but in a mass information age, it seems easier to believe than to research. In the presence of too much information, people fall back on emotion. Despite the advice of consumer advocates and medical professionals, millions of people continue to spend their money on these modern gadgets and nostrums. It's grown to a billion dollar industry world wide. As they say... the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Sales techniques in print and other media mirror the methods of a by-gone age. TV "info-mercials" are modern versions of the old medicine show. Attract an audience. Create an emotional impulse to buy. Sell the product. Past or present, business is business.