

PATENT MEDICINE: Cures & Quacks

by Peggy M. Baker, Director & Librarian,
Pilgrim Society & Pilgrim Hall Museum

In Sickness & In Health: Medicine in the Old Colony

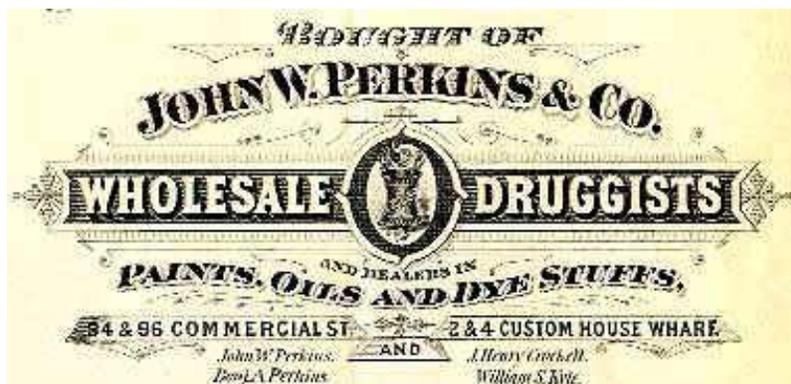
19th century America witnessed many rambunctious manifestations of the entrepreneurial spirit. One of the most flamboyant was the "patent medicine" industry.

Patent medicines are NOT medicines that have been patented. They are instead proprietary (i.e., "secret formula") and unproved remedies advertised and sold directly to the public.

The growth of the patent medicine industry was rooted in the medical shortcomings of the early 19th century. There were few doctors and those expensive. Prospects were not cheerful even for those who could afford professional medical care. Knowledge of human physiology and of the causes and progress of disease was extremely limited (it was not until 1861 that the theory of germs was first published by Louis Pasteur).

Routine health care in the 19th century was generally provided by the mother of the family, relying on home remedies, recipes for which could often be found in cookbooks. Even the most skillful mother realized, however, that she could not combat the terrible diseases that became endemic during the course of the 19th century - typhoid, typhus, yellow fever, cholera.

The fear that these diseases rightfully engendered led directly to the success of the patent medicine industry. Where before, housewives and grandmothers had supplied their friends and relations with homemade remedies, now the spirit of profit took hold. Entrepreneurs with business savvy began to bottle and sell "old family recipes." And, if the recipe were a commercial success, bottling factories would appear, then networks of traveling salesmen, and then distribution systems for wholesaling the product. The profiteering spirit overcame the scientific and philanthropic. Medicine making became big business.



A billhead for John W. Perkins & Company of Portland, Maine.

And it became big business in an age when business was almost totally unregulated. During the 19th century, any drug could be sold on the open market. Any claim could be made.



"Dr. Chilton's Permanent Fever and Ague Cure. One dollar per box. They contain no arsenic mercury or mineral poison. Taken according to directions they are never failing. They will cure the incipient stages of bilious fever. They are perfectly portable and may be sent by mail to any place. They will cure when all other remedies fail. They need only to be tried to be appreciated."

A Growing Market & a long-vanished "disease"

The growth of the patent medicine industry was encouraged by a number of political, social and economic factors. The expansion of public elementary schools meant that everyone could read newspaper ads that promised (unproved) cures and provided (unreliable) testimonials. The craving for news from the front during the Civil War meant that more Americans read more newspapers, giving patent medicine manufacturers access to more customers. The discovery of cheap wood pulp paper and improvements in the printing process meant that advertising volume could grow by leaps and bounds. Newspapers became filled with ads promising quick, easy, inexpensive and sure cures for diseases both dreadful and mundane.

Among the mundane was "dyspepsia," the 19th century's most common disease. With symptoms as varied and vague as those advertised for Dr. E. Rowell's Invigorating Tonic and Family Medicine ("For impure blood, dyspepsia, indigestion, constipation, loss of appetite, biliousness, headache, jaundice, loss of memory, piles, eruptions of the skin, general debility, rheumatism, and all diseases arising from disordered liver, bowels or kidneys"), dyspepsia was the direct result of a poor diet. European visitors to this country universally commented on the American habit of gobbling enormous amounts of starch, salt and fat.



"Brown's Iron Bitters, a True Tonic, cures Dyspepsia, Indigestion, Malaria, Weakness, etc."

On the reverse: "highly recommended for all diseases requiring a certain and efficient TONIC; especially Indigestion, Dyspepsia, Intermittent Fevers, Want of Appetite, Loss of Strength, Lack of Energy, Malaria, etc. Enriches the blood, strengthens the muscles and gives new life to the nerves...As Brown's Iron Bitters is specially adapted to diseases incident to female, we will send in a plain sealed envelope to any lady desiring it, a circular containing testimonials from ladies."

Into the West



Ayer's Cherry Pectoral
For the cure of Coughs, Colds, Asthma, Croup,
Bronchitis, Whooping Cough, and Consumption"

A new market in the West, where settlement opened following the Civil War, spurred additional advertising and marketing.

Homesteaders, often isolated and unable to obtain professional medical help to combat diseases such as pneumonia, dysentery and malaria, relied heavily on patent medicines. The medicine manufacturers increased their advertising, becoming the first businessmen to seek out a national market, going directly to consumers and using a variety of psychological lures.



This Ayer's Cathartic Pills trade cards advertise
"The Country Doctor. - A fine Chromo-Lithograph (7 1/2 x 13 inches, in "Statuette" style) of this original and popular subject, will be sent post-paid to any address, with a set of our elegant Album Cards, on receipt of 10 cents in cash or postage stamps."

Dr. Ayer of Lowell, Massachusetts, was among the first to realize the potential for patent medicines in the West.

He increased his advertising until, by 1870, he had contracts with 1,900 newspapers and periodicals and his factories were daily making 630,000 doses of Ayer remedies



"Ayer's Hair Vigor. Restores gray hair to its natural vitality and color...The Vigor is not a dye; but daily applications for a week or two so stimulate the roots and color glands, that faded or gray, light or red hair, gradually changes to a rich brown color, or even black"

The enormous profits in the patent medicine industry led to the formation of conglomerates, as entrepreneurs bought what was most profitable about patent medicines - not the formulas, but the advertising trademarks. Some merchandisers amassed a "stable" of over 50 proprietary medicines. A witness before a Congressional committee in 1906 estimated that there were 50,000 patent medicines being made and sold in the United States.

And what were these merchandisers selling? All too often, they were selling equal amounts of hope, alcohol and opium.

Hope, Alcohol & Opium



During the 19th century, any claim could be made for any remedy. Any ingredient, even if lethal or addictive, could be put into a bottle and legally sold, without that ingredient being listed on the label. The significant level of alcohol (usually in the 20% range) found in most sarsaparilla remedies could well "cure" the "lassitude, debility, and all disorders peculiar to the "Spring" as advertised by Ayer's.



"While the Deacon is explaining to 'Liza the merits of Ayer's Sarsaparilla, bear in mind that it is not a mixture of cheap or dangerous drugs, but a highly concentrated extract of the genuine Honduras Sarsaparilla and other choice medicinal roots, alterative, diuretic, and tonic; the same being united with the Iodides of Potassium and Iron, forming by far the most economical, safe and reliable blood-purifying medicine ever offered to the public."

The alcohol content of patent medicines was never divulged.

Parker's Tonic, while claiming to be a "Stimulus to the body without intoxicating," was actually 41.6% (83 proof!) alcohol.



"Parker's Tonic. The great health and strength restorer. Cures coughs, consumption, asthma by rejuvenating the blood. Wonderful cures of rheumatism, nervousness and kidney complaint have made Parker's tonic popular."

The sickly invalid on the left says "Oh! that I had your health and appetite."

The fine figure of a man on the right, pouring himself a champagne glass of Parker's Tonic replies:

"I was miserable as you until Parker's Tonic cured me. An occasional dose before eating keeps me well."

Advertising cards (known as "trade cards") were not only colorful, they were often imaginative. Here is a "metamorphic" card for an alcoholic sarsaparilla tonic. The sad "before" picture is visible when the card is folded, the happy "after" picture is seen when the card is opened.



BEFORE: "Once bright and beautiful, a maiden well beloved, adorned the social circle where she moved, but in her veins there lurked the pois'nous taint of scrofula, and many a sad complaint that hid the beauty of her radiant face beneath unseemly blotches nothing could efface, but for Scovill's Sarsaparilla, hope had flown had Scovill's Blood and Liver Syrup been unknown."



AFTER: "Now every trace of scrofula has disappeared, her face, ever marred by blotches, which she feared would never go away, is fair once more and brighter, handsomer than ever before. For all diseases of the blood and liver, something from their fury to deliver or for a pleasant tonic, all your blood to stir up, take Scovill's Sarsaparilla or Blood and Liver Syrup."

The testimonial from the satisfied customer was another advertising technique used by the makers of patent medicines.



"Priscilla, The Mayflower of Plymouth. Presented with the compliments of your druggist and C.I. Hood Company, Lowell, Mass., Proprietors of Hood's Sarsaparilla."

On the reverse: "GOVERNOR BRADFORD, - One of his descendants, Born and brought up in the good old town of Plymouth, Mass., was the picture of health when a child, and is now as a full-grown woman. Her people have always kept Hood's Sarsaparilla in the house..."

She says she is sure there is nothing better for the blood than Hood's Sarsaparilla and consider it, as her father did, the best of all medicines for creating an appetite, making food taste good, aiding digestion, promoting assimilation, saving waste and building up the system. Her name is Carrie E Lantz, and she lives at 8 Gardner Street, Allston, Boston, Mass."

From alcohol to opium

Opiates were sold on the open market in the 1800s. Perry Davis, a shoemaker who was born in Massachusetts in 1791, marketed his narcotic "Pain-Killer" as being efficacious against both cholera and dyspepsia.

"Remember that when anything happens to you or yours, nine times out of ten you can cure it yourself with Pain-Killer."



Perry Davis' Pain-Killer was, according to company advertising, "adapted for both internal and external application, and reaches a great many complaints, such as Sudden Colds, Chills, Congestion or Stoppage of Circulation, Cramps, Pains in the Stomach, Summer and Bowel Complaints, Sore Throat, &c. Applied externally, it has been found very useful for Sprains, Bruises, Rheumatic Pains, Swelled Face &c arising from Toothache."

Davis' subsidiary, Allen's Lung Balsam, also contained significant quantities of opium.



Take Care of the Children. Watch them carefully during this season of sudden changes. See that they are dressed warm, and, above all, have a bottle of ALLEN'S LUNG BALSAM always on hand for immediate use, in case of Colds or Coughs. It will cure Croup."

Containing opium, alcohol AND chloroform, Dr. Thomas' Ecletric Oil advertised that it would positively cure

"toothache in 5 minutes,
earache in 2 minutes,
backache in 2 hours,
lameness in 2 days,
coughs in 20 minutes,
hoarseness in 1 hour,
colds in 24 hours,
sore throat in 12 hours,
deafness in 2 days,
pain by burn in 5 minutes,
pain of scald in 5 minutes."



Remember the Ladies (& their babies)



In 1850, Lydia Pinkham of Lynn, Massachusetts, began brewing her remedy for "those painful complaints and weaknesses so common to our best female population."



When her family became impoverished in 1873, Lydia began to sell her formula and, then, with the assistance of her sons and daughters, to market it. In a stroke of advertising genius, Lydia and her family became the company's trademark. Lydia's remedy, her picture, and the pictures of her family became folklore. By 1881, the Pinkhams were grossing \$300,000 per month. The original compound

was largely sugar, with an 18% alcohol content. The Compound has undergone many changes; today it is regarded as a respectable herbal remedy.

Charlotte Winslow (1789-1850), in contrast, never shared in the fortune resulting from her homemade remedy for teething children. Winslow died shortly before her son-in-law made "Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup" a household name.



The Soothing Syrup's alcohol content was well-known. Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) had, in 1876, drawn universal laughter from the story of an unknowing tropical population who got "terrifically drunk on the Fourth of July on a barrel of Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup." What was not as well-known was that Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup contained opiates, in the proportion of ½ gram morphine to 1½ ounces of syrup and ½ ounce of water.

Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup

By Peggy M. Baker &

Bette Bradway, Historian General of the General Society of Mayflower Descendants



Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, manufactured and bottled by Curtis & Perkins, was based on the homemade formula of a New England mother. Corporate advertising claimed, in 1862, that "This valuable preparation is the prescription of one of the most experienced and skilful nurses in New England, and has been used with never-failing success in thousands of cases" and that Mrs. Winslow was "a lady who for upwards of thirty years has untiringly devoted her time and talents as a female physician and nurse, principally among children."

There was, in fact, a Mrs. Winslow but, by 1862, she was long deceased. Charlotte Newman Noyes (later Winslow) was born in Gorham, Maine, on January 17, 1789. The child of a second marriage, she was one of 13 or more children although some of her half-siblings were grown by the time of her birth. Charlotte may have had a twin sister, Lucinda Pritchard Noyes.

Charlotte married Joseph Winslow in Falmouth, Maine, on October 4, 1804. At the time, she was 15 and he was 31. Joseph, born in Falmouth in 1773, was a descendant of Kenelm Winslow of Plymouth Colony and John Howland of the *Mayflower*.

Charlotte and Joseph Winslow had five children: John, born in 1805; Jane and Mary (twins) born in 1807; Lucy, born in 1809; and Mary Jane, born in 1821. Perhaps it was her twin girls, teething simultaneously, who inspired the creation of her later-to-be famous soothing syrup.

Charlotte and Joseph Winslow's daughter Lucy married Jeremiah Curtis in 1829. It was this son-in-law who brought his mother-in-law's narcotic concoction to the American public.

Jeremiah Curtis was born in Maine in 1804. A biographical note in *America's Successful Men of Affairs* states that while a young man, "he established a bank in Calais, Me., and later built the first railroad in Maine, from Calais to Middletown, and accepted the Abolition nomination for governor of his State, being, however, defeated."

Lucy and Jeremiah had seven children of their own: William, born in 1830 (died in infancy), Laura, born in 1831; Lucy, born in 1833; George, born in 1836; Joseph, born in 1840; Jeremiah, born in 1842 (died in infancy), and Jeremiah, born in 1844.

At the time of the 1850 census, the Curtises (Jeremiah, age 46; Lucy, 41; and their five living children Laura, Lucy, George, Josephine and Jeremiah) were living in Bangor, Maine. Jeremiah is listed as a druggist. Also living in the household were Benjamin A. Perkins, aged 26, a druggist, Samuel E. Perkins, aged 18 and two females (possibly servants). Jeremiah Curtis and Benjamin A. Perkins were partners in Curtis & Perkins, manufacturers of Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup.

By the mid-1850s, the company had moved their offices from Bangor to New York City (Curtis & Perkins later became the Anglo-American Drug Company). Although Perkins left the company in the mid 1850s and returned to Maine, Jeremiah Curtis continued the company as "Curtis & Perkins," employing about 3000 agents in the United States and Canada to sell medicines.

Mrs. Winslow herself seems to have never shared in the company's good fortunes. Charlotte Winslow died in Unity, Maine on July 1, 1850, shortly before the 1850 Maine census was taken. Her husband Joseph Winslow died in 1851. At the time of the 1850 Maine census, he was a 76-year-old farmer living in Freedom, Maine and his entire wealth was valued at \$1000.

The Curtis boys, Charlotte Winslow's grandsons George and Jeremiah, eventually joined their father in the business. By 1870, the Curtises were living in Brooklyn where Jeremiah, then aged 66, is listed in the census as "Manufacturing and Druggist." The family's wealth was considerable: Jeremiah Curtis' real estate is listed as \$100,000 and personal estate as \$50,000; Lucy Winslow Curtis had her own personal estate of \$50,000. The Winslow sons George and Jeremiah W. were living next door. George (age 34) had real estate of \$130,000 and personal estate of \$60,000; Jeremiah (age 26) had real estate of \$130,000 and personal estate of \$25,000.



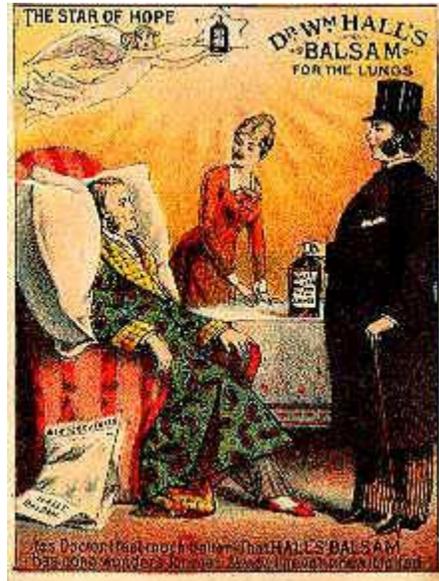
Curtis & Perkins, beginning in the early 1860s, produced one of the earliest recipe books combined with almanac as an advertising tool for Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup.

By 1880, Lucy Winslow Curtis was aged 70; Jeremiah Curtis was listed as a "retired merchant" age 76. Jeremiah died three years later, in 1883. Lucy lived to be almost 90, dying in New York City on May 30, 1899.

The remedy concocted by Lucy's mother Charlotte Winslow and sold so successfully by her husband Jeremiah Curtis had by that time become one of the most widely used children's medicines, marketed for far more than relief from teething

It not only relieves the child from pain, but invigorates the stomach and bowels, corrects acidity, and gives tone and vigor to the whole system. It will almost instantly relieve griping in the bowels, and overcome convulsions, which, if not speedily remedied, end in death.

The Triumph of Hope: outrageous, unsubstantiated (& lucrative) claims



Patent medicine swindlers were not uncommon. Among the most successful were Dr. Kilmer and his brother: their fortune was estimated in the 1890s at \$10,000,000 to \$15,000,000. And no wonder! Their remedies were indeed miraculous (as well as "electric and magnetic"), curing a wide variety of diseases, many of the Kilmers' own imagining.



Claims for Dr. Kilmer's U&O Meadow Plant Anointment include:

"it cools, soothes and cures joint-fever and joint-settlings, nervous-aches, lime-crusting, rheumatic joints, head and brain aches, hard and clumsy joints, spine-aches, bone-marrow disease, heartaches, bone-grumbling and throbbing, stomach-aches, sciatic rheumatism, throat-aches, fever sores and scrofula ulcers, back and kidney aches, syphilitic bone swellings, withering muscles, palsied limbs, shrunken cords, crippled fingers and toes, swollen glands, knotted bunches, pimples, skin diseases, tetter, eczema, salt rheum, frost bites, cancer growths, tumors, scald head. For sore or weak lungs or consumption, lame back, kidney pains, bladder catarrh, gravel, groin swelling, lumps in the breast. For chafing, sore eyes, croup, whopping cough, mumps..."



Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root Kidney, Liver & Bladder Cure was aimed at people suffering from Bright's disease, bloating limbs, lame back, rheumatism, diabetes, dropsy, malaria, dyspepsia, gall stone, fever, ague, gout, pimples, ulcers, syphilis, poor appetite, bad breath, and a previously unknown disease - "internal slime fever."



Dr. Kilmer's Ocean-Weed Heart Remedy lists among the symptoms and conditions that it would relieve and cure: heart disease, faint spells, fits, spasms, vertigo, apoplexy, shock or sudden death!

In comparison, the claims of Dr. William Hall's Balsam for the Lungs to cure "consumption, cold, pneumonia, bronchitis, asthma, croup, whooping cough, and all diseases of the breathing organs" seem modest.

Regulation and Decline

The demise of the patent medicine industry came with the dawn of the 20th century, as a reform movement began to sweep across America. The increasingly powerful "Progressive movement" believed that the federal government should undertake the responsibility of regulating areas that impacted public health and welfare. A growing concern by trained physicians, led by the American Medical Association, led to scientific investigations of patent medicine health claims. "Muckraking" journalists exposed previously "secret formulas" and women's magazines began to crusade against patent medicines because of their high alcohol content.

Samuel Hopkins Adams, who had a background both as a crime reporter and a medical reporter, wrote a series of articles published in 1905-1906 by **Colliers Magazine**, exposing the patent medicine industry as "The Great American Fraud."



The claims for Watkins Liniment, bottled after 1906, remain outrageous and unbelievable. "For man useful in cases of colds, cramps, cholera morbus, colic, diarrhoea, diphtheria, flux, rheumatism, sore throat, cuts, burns." The label gives directions for its use both internally and externally and then claims that in addition to human use, the liniment can be used for horses, cattle, hogs and sheep as it is "invaluable for horse colic, clover bloat, scours, sweeny, etc." There is, nevertheless, a new honesty about the ingredients. The label claims alcohol 47% (94 proof!) and opium 1/3 gram to an ounce.

Adams' articles raised an enormous public outcry and resulted in passage in 1906 of the Pure Food & Drug Act. The legislative battle was hard fought; the patent medicine industry was powerful and wealthy. The output of the industry, valued in census figures at \$3,500,000 in 1859, had risen to almost \$80,000,000 per year (and this is manufactured value, not retail prices). The spirit of the times, however, could not be denied.

The Pure Food & Drug Act was the beginning of the end for the patent medicine industry. The law did not eliminate the use of alcohol or opiates in patent medicines, but it did legislate that all ingredients had to be listed clearly on the label. And with an informed public, the sales of patent medicines declined precipitously.

Sources:

Sources for this article include James Harvey Young's *The toadstool millionaires: a social history of patent medicines in America before federal regulation* (Princeton University Press, 1961); Eric Jameson's *The natural history of quackery* (London: Michael Joseph, 1961); Charles W. Oleson's *Secret nostrums & systems of medicine: a book of formulas* (Chicago: Oleson & Co., 1903); Stewart H. Holbrook's *The golden age of quackery* (Macmillan Co., 1959); Adelaide Hechtlinger's *The great patent medicine era* (New York: Galahad Books, 1970), and Samuel Hopkins Adams' *The great American fraud* (4th ed., P.F. Collier & Son, 1907).

Also utilized were a number of online resources including the Websites of the National Library of Medicine at www.nlm.nih.gov, the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation & Research at www.fda.gov, the Vanderbilt Medical Center at www.mc.vanderbilt.edu and Quack Watch at www.quackwatch.org which has, by permission of the author and publisher, put the text of *The toadstool millionaires* online.