

University of North Carolina at Asheville

A Period of Deceit:
The Patent Medicine Business Between 1865 and 1906

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of History in Candidacy for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in History

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Asheville, North Carolina

21 November, 2003

The May 27, 1935, Allentown, Pennsylvania *Call Chronicle* printed an ad for something called Natex, in which a satisfied customer described how she had suffered from indigestion, headaches and dizzy spells before taking the remedy. 'Natex seemed to go to the root of my trouble,' she claimed. 'I'm still enjoying good health.' Four columns over on the same page was the woman's death notice. She had apparently died just two days earlier.¹

Natex was a proprietary medicine, more commonly known as a patent medicine. Patent medicines were a popular form of over the counter medication during the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, it was during the period from 1865 to 1906 that patent medicines experienced their greatest prevalence. This surge in popularity began in 1865 with the cessation of the Civil War and ended in 1906 when the first Pure Food and Drug Act was passed. This act required patent medicines to label their bottles with alerts to made consumers aware of potentially harmful contents. People of all races and classes used patent medicines; and spent much of their hard-earned money purchasing these nostrums that often contained narcotics, poisons, and varying quantities of alcohol.

As the use of patent medicines grew and the patent medicine industry gained in popularity, the number of people harmed by the use of patent medicines increased. As the number of people harmed increased, so did the number of printed criticisms against the patent medicine industry. This condemnation of the patent medicine industry quickly led to Congress passing the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. The most influential and widely read criticism of patent medicines was an expose written by Samuel Hopkins Adams, called "The Great American Fraud," and printed in *Colliers Weekly* magazine.

Most of the scholarly research about patent medicines was put in the form of general historical overviews; there are few books about patent medicines that make a decisive statement. Two such books that provide a general overview are Ann Anderson's *Snake Oil Hustlers and Hambones: the American Medicine Show*² and David and Elizabeth Armstrong's *The Great American Medicine Show*.³ Both of these books contain a chapter reviewing the rise and fall of the patent medicine industry, however neither one goes into much depth or detail about patent medicines. Most of the books and articles that do make a statement about patent medicines were written by James Harvey Young. He has to his credit the definitive work about patent medicines, *The Toadstool Millionaires*.⁴ This text discusses all aspects of the patent medicine industry, their origins, the rise of the industry, advertising, the Civil War's effects on the industry, the criticism of patent medicines, and the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. However, this book does not explore all the reasons for the rapid rise of the patent medicine industry, it failed to discuss the westward settlement of many people and the resulting lack of medical care, and the book does not examine all the affects that the temperance movement had on the patent medicine industry.

The term patent medicine originated in Europe, when doctors or apothecaries created a new medicine and it was favored by a member of the royal family, the medicine would be granted a patent as a symbol of royal approval. In addition, a royal patent also gave the inventor exclusive rights to produce and sell the new medicine. As settlers from

¹ David Armstrong and Elizabeth Metzger Armstrong, *The Great American Medicine Show: Being an Illustrated History of Hucksters, Healers, Health Evangelists and Heroes from Plymouth Rock to the Present* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), 167.

² Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil Hustlers and Hambones: The American Medicine Show* (London: McFarland and Company Inc., 1990).

³ Armstrong.

Europe began sailing to North America they brought many of these patent medicines with them. However, once in America the patenting of medicines was discontinued, thereby constituting these medicines proprietary remedies.⁵ Because without a patent a medicine could not be constituted a patent medicine, therefore these medicines were simply remedies produced and distributed by a proprietor. However, the discontinuing of patents did not stop the use of the name, proprietary remedies continued to be called patent medicines.

Even though these medicines were in use long before the Civil War, it was actually not until the Civil War that there was a surge in sales and consumption. This increased usage occurred for several reasons: westward expansion into isolated frontier where obtaining medical care was difficult, a general distrust of doctors and traditional medical care, lack of health among the people of the United States, increased advertising, the Civil War and the Temperance Movement.

For those living on the frontier and in other isolated areas there were few doctors, consequently medical care was often difficult to access and most settlers could not afford a doctor even when available. However, despite the lack of medical care, most settlers could obtain patent medicines, either through a general store or the mail. Settlers usually had access to a general store which would have carried a varied collection of patent medicines. A photograph taken by Russell Lee, a noted photographer hired by the Farm Security Administrations, showed the wide variety of patent medicines that were available in the average general store. This photograph depicted a large section of store shelves dedicated solely to patent medicines. On these shelves there were many varied

⁴ James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicine in America before Federal Regulation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

boxes, each of which contained bottled medicines.⁶ Patent medicines appealed to those living on the frontier because they were accessible and affordable. If settlers did not have access to medicines through a general store they could get medicine in the mail. James C Ayer, the proprietor of Ayer Medicine Company, made his medicines available by mail to ensure that Ayer's medicines could be obtained under any circumstances. Because he knew that people who were moving westward into remote frontier areas would be forced to be their own doctors and therefore apt to purchase patent medicines.⁷ The Ayer's almanac from 1890 promoted the widespread availability of the medicines,

“n the far west, as well as in the sparsely settled portions of the Southern, Middle, and Eastern States, and other countries, many families and individuals live remote from physicians and medical depositories, often many miles away from the nearest little settlement. Ayer's Family Medicines meet a felt want in such cases, and should be kept always at hand. Ayer's Pills are for sale at almost every Indian agency, military station, trader's camp and mining colony on the frontier. If any emigrant has located where access to dealers' supplies is not practicable, let him write us, and we will send the Pills by mail or otherwise.⁸

In addition to the benefit of accessibility, the use of patent medicines saved people time and effort. Since medical care was scarce, many settlers had to be their own doctors and provide medical care for their family. This was a time consuming process, and by using patent medicines these people could save time and effort by getting a dose of medicine from a bottle rather than growing, drying, chopping and mixing their own herbs into medicines.⁹

⁵ Armstrong, 160.

⁶ Russell Lee, “America from the Great Depression to WWII: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945.” American Memory Project. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

⁷ Elizabeth Davoli, “Patent Medicines: Ethnic or Socioeconomic Indicators?” n.d., <<http://www.uark.edu/campus-resources/archinfo/SHACdavoli.pdf>> (25 October 2003).

⁸ Ayer's Almanac, 1890. “Emergence of Advertising in America, 1850-1920: Selections from the Collections of Duke University.” American Memory Project. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

⁹ Anderson, 37.

People living in more urban areas, who had easier access to doctors, often chose to self medicate with patent medicines instead of seeking professional medical advice. Many people made this choice because they did not trust many of the traditional medical treatments of the period, such as bleeding with leaches or surgery.¹⁰ This distrust was not discouraged by medicine proprietors; in fact they often encouraged people to believe that patent medicines were more effective and safer than the traditional medical practices of the time. Doctors informed patients that patent medicines could worsen an illness and potentially result in death; therefore patients were putting themselves at risk by self-dosing with patent medicines rather than seeking professional treatment. In an address to the medical society of North Carolina, Dr S.S. Satchwell expressed his professional opinion of medicine proprietors:

They are mostly confined to broken-down pedagogues, itinerant quacks, deluded young men, and designing men in the regular ranks, who, sacrificing principle to expediency, are ready to avail themselves of any delusion, in order to make money, even at the sacrifice of science and humanity. ... Without any accuracy of disinclination in the signs of disease and the selection of remedies, they use a number of stimulating vegetables, under all circumstances, and often with the most injurious results. In the whole list of their remedies, however, they employ none of any value.¹¹

The medicine proprietors' responded to such opinions by voicing that doctors "...were selfish and too small-minded to recognize a medical breakthrough when they saw one. Doctors, said the proprietary makers, didn't want patent medicines because they

¹⁰ Susan E. Cayleff, "Self Help and the Patent Medicine Business," in *Women, Health and Medicine in America: A Historical Handbook*, ed. Rima D Apple (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1990), 325.

¹¹ SS. Satchwell, MD, "Obstacles to Medical Progress. Annual Address Delivered before the Medical Society of the State of North Carolina, at Edenton, NC., April, 1857," (Wilmington: Fulton and Price, 1857), 4.

didn't want competition. Furthermore, 'the doctor's therapy' was brutal, his was mild. Their treatment was costly, his was cheap."¹²

In addition to the foibles of medical care of the time, there was also a lack of general good health among the populace of America. Most people during the nineteenth century had little concept of how the body worked, where disease came from or how diseases were spread. Nor did they see a need for common sanitation. Sanitation was so minimal that people often dumped their sewage directly into the streets, or gave it to pigs to eat. People then consumed these pigs, which had been fed the sewage. Most people's diets, by today's standards, were low in nutrition and high in fat. The majority of people consumed large amounts of salt-cured pork, while vegetables were eaten only on occasion. Many people placed their outhouses near their water well and thus exposed their drinking water to dangerous contaminants.¹³ This ignorance about sanitation resulted in a general lack of health and frequent disease outbreaks. Barbara Dorsey, a medical worker, who worked with Florida squatters during the Great Depression, illustrated in an interview such living conditions and ignorance about health:

Medical care is almost totally unknown. The squatters use patent medicines and primitive remedies. Wounds, sores and stings are bound with a piece of salt pork "to draw out the poison." Headaches, which are prevalent among young and old, are treated by binding the head tightly with cloths. The FSA [Farmers Security Administration] temporarily made medical attention available to many of the squatters. Limitation of family size has been heard of but most of the squatters feel that it is "agin nature" and therefore wrong. Some women who had given birth to as many as twelve children and received a doctor's care for the first time at childbirth. Sanitation methods were also taught by FSA agencies, but little impression was made.¹⁴

¹² Anderson, 33-34.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Barbara Dorsey, "American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1940." American Memory Project. December 1938. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

In addition to common illnesses that many families dealt with on a regular basis, such as tapeworms, pellagra, hookworms, and dysentery, there were also many disease epidemics that raged through the country in regular intervals. Some of the most common epidemics were yellow fever, cholera, consumption (also known as tuberculosis), malaria, and typhoid. Patent medicine advertisements claimed to be able to cure these diseases, common and epidemic. In fact, some medicines claimed to cure all these diseases.¹⁵ Ross M. Plummer, the owner of a drug store, described in an interview the claims of such patent medicine advertisements. He stated, “‘Remedies is hardly the word to use in describing the patent nostrums of that period. The purveyors of pills, plasters, and poultices, of that gullible era made no half way boasts concerning the merits of their respective medicaments. There were no ‘remedies.’ They were all ‘cures.’ Consumption cures, rheumatism cures, heart trouble cures, and even cancer cures....”¹⁶ Often during disease epidemics the consumption of patent medicines increased because people were desperately trying to rid themselves of these plagues. During a disease outbreak people were willing to try anything and believe anything and therefore often resorted to the use of patent medicines.

Another major factor in the increased use of patent medicines was the Civil War. During the Civil War more men died of ill health than from actual combat. 620,000 soldiers died and 400,000 of these soldiers died of disease and illness rather than from battle. Many of those who did die of ill health rarely had complete recovery from the

¹⁵ Todd L Savitt and James Harvey Young, ed., *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 54.

¹⁶ Ross M Plummer, interviewed by AC Sherbert, “American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project 1936-1940.” American Memory Project. 19 January 1939. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

wounds and illnesses they incurred during the war.¹⁷ Soldiers from both sides, Union and Confederate, returned home after the war with serious ailments that would plague them for the rest of their lives. These ailments included wounds that were not adequately cared for, bodies weakened due to disease, psychological trauma, and poor nutrition. These soldiers used patent medicines in large quantities in attempts to ease their pains. As soldiers used these medicines, they extolled the medicines' abilities to their families and friends, who then often began using the medicines as well.¹⁸ Also at this time, alcohol rations for soldiers were eliminated and alcohol was heavily taxed, due to the temperance movement. As an alternative, many soldiers consumed patent medicines with high alcohol content. These medicines with high alcohol content were easily accessible and cheap because medicines were not heavily taxed. This use of patent medicines with high alcohol content became so common that the Union army bought their soldiers cases of Hostetter's Bitters to drink, which had an alcohol content of about 43 percent.¹⁹ Many medicine makers utilized the Civil War by creating advertising that affiliated the medicine with either the Confederacy or the Union.²⁰ In the almanac for Taylor's Cherokee Remedy, the medicine aligned itself with the Confederacy, by displaying pictures of important Confederates. On the almanac cover there was a portrait of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, and within the almanac there was a two page spread that showed the pictures of all the important Confederate generals.²¹

¹⁷ Anderson., 37.

¹⁸ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 97.

¹⁹ Anderson., 37.

²⁰ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 95.

²¹ Taylor's Cherokee Remedy. "Emergence of Advertising in America, 1850 – 1920: Selections from the Collections of Duke University." American Memory Project. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

Increased advertising also affected the popularity of patent medicines. During and after the Civil War advertising for patent medicines increased greatly, so much so that patent medicine makers became the largest advertisers in the nation.²² Patent medicine makers displayed advertisements everywhere and in almost every form possible. Their advertisements were on billboards, printed in newspapers, painted onto the sides of buildings, and widely distributed in the form of almanacs, trading cards and calendars.

The distribution of almanacs was one of the most common forms of advertisement among medicine companies. These almanacs contained a calendar, farming advice, weather forecasts, the time the sun rose and set and medicine advertisements. These almanacs were read, quoted and cherished by people all over the country. Carl Sandburg recalled the Hostetter's Bitters almanac in his autobiography:

A book we owned each year till it got lost two or three years later was Hostetter's Illustrated United States Almanac meant "for merchants, mechanics, miners, farmers, planters, and general family use." Where we came in was "general family." It had green covers and a string on one corner to hang it to a nail on the wall where it would be handy if you wanted to know when the sun would rise or the moon go down. Half the almanac was filled with good words for Hostetter's Stomach Bitters. There was advice in Hostetter's, how to get rid of warts, corn, boils, ingrown toenails, hiccoughs, earache, how to get a ring off a swollen finger, what to do about a rusty nail in the foot or chicken lice. Five pages had funny drawing with jokes under them.²³

An essential component to all patent medicine advertisements were testimonials. Testimonials consisted of satisfied customers expounding on the medicines qualities and describing how the medicine remedied their ailments. This testimonial for Merchant's Gargling Oil demonstrates the basic form of testimonials: "I have used you Gargling Oil liniment for the earache and deafness, and for the quickness and permanency of the cure,

²² Lewis E. Atherton, *The Southern Country Store, 1800 – 1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 78.

have not found its equal. The dose is from one to three drops, according to the susceptibility of the person and the strength of the medicine.”²⁴ In 1905, it was discovered that medicine companies, much like the practice today of companies selling mailing lists, often obtained testimonials from other medicine companies. An ill individual would write a letter to a medicine company, telling of their sickness and how it was cured by the nostrum. The medicine company would publish the letter in their advertising. After the medicine company was done using the letter, it would be bundled with other letters that described similar ailments. Finally the bundle of letters would be sold to another medicine company to publish in their advertisements.²⁵

Through advertisements medicine manufacturers convinced the consumer of their need for the medicine through fear; the “consumers’ fear of disease.”²⁶ Advertisements described of the symptoms of a disease and the horrible effects it would have if left untreated. This incited many people to purchase a medicine touted to cure the disease, if they had the illness or not. William Naylor described these scare tactics, in an interview:

By the time Doc got through describing symptoms practically everybody in the neighborhood would be imagining they felt some of the symptoms at least and would be convinced that they had it, whatever it was. Why, I used to sit and listen to Doc’s horror stories of diseases till I’d get to feeling the symptoms myself. Doc was a foxy old bird and I guess he wasn’t far off his base when he’d say, “most diseases people get are just imagination, anyhow!” At any rate, Doc’s system of describing symptoms helped stimulate sales of his Indian Remedies wonderfully. I’ve seen the same idea worked in old time newspaper advertisements of patent medicines. And there are lots of people who may be feeling perfectly well when they start to read symptoms described in patent medicine advertisements but by the time they’re through reading the darn thing they have the symptoms bad enough that they rush right out and buy the cure.

²³ Carl Sandberg, *Always the Young Strangers*, (New York: Harcourt, 1953), 227-228.

²⁴ John A Jones Almanac Collection. East Tennessee State University. Merchants Gargling Oil Almanac, 1881. Box 2: Folder 5.

²⁵ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 214.

²⁶ Davoli.

Even otherwise educated people and who are supposed to be intelligent are like that; let them hear enough about symptoms and they will get those symptoms, or let them have a queer feeling and they'll imagine they've got some sort of a queer disease.²⁷

Through patent medicine advertisements, medicine companies and newspapers established a symbiotic relationship; newspapers relied on the money they received from medicine companies for placing patent medicine advertisements in the newspaper, while the patent medicine companies relied on the sales that came from the advertisements. However, this symbiotic relationship relied on newspapers ignoring information on the harmful effects of patent medicines. If a newspaper did get a piece of negative information about patent medicines and chose to print it then the newspaper would be eliminating their main source of income.²⁸

The southern states were an area where patent medicines were often used due to difficulty obtaining and affording medical care. However southerners often could not afford a bottle of medicine either. Consequently, medicine salesmen usually traveled south to sell medicine when it was time for crops to be sold, since this was one of the few times of the year that farmers would have money to spend.²⁹ Marion Wolcott, another photographer working for the Farm Security Administration, took a series of photographs that show medicine salesmen setting up their wares outside tobacco warehouses where farmers sold their tobacco at the auction. After the farmer emerged from the warehouse with the money he earned from his crops, the medicine salesman was there to relieve the

²⁷ William D Naylor, interviewed by Earl Bowman, "American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940." American Memory Project. 18 November 1938. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003)

²⁸ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 211.

²⁹ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 98 – 99.

farmer of some of his money in exchange for a bottle of patent medicine.³⁰ Medicine salesmen also regularly traveled to migrant camps to sell their products. In these camps groups of poor people would temporarily set up residence and medicine salesmen knew that these people had limited access to doctors, and therefore were more apt to purchase bottled nostrums.³¹

The Temperance Movement paradoxically helped increase the sale and consumption of patent medicines, especially those with high proof alcohol. This increase was due largely to the Temperance Movement making it difficult to obtain alcohol. The Temperance Movement legally banned the sale of alcohol in many states, and in the states that did not ban the sale of alcohol, its consumption was often taboo due to moral and religious beliefs. Therefore, those who wanted to consume alcohol often had to resort to high proof medicines.³²

Many patent medicines producers latched onto the growing temperance movement and slanted their advertising in the support of temperance. Advertisements promoted medicines lack of alcohol content, which was often untrue, as in the case of Hostetter's Bitters. Nevertheless, there were a few medicines that accurately advertised, and actually contained almost no alcohol, such as Walker's California Vinegar Bitters.³³ Walker's California Vinegar Bitters claimed that "Whiskey Bitters fill the hospitals, Vinegar Bitters render hospitals unnecessary."³⁴

³⁰ Marion Post Wolcott, "America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA – OWI, 1935-1945." American Memory Project. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (10 October 2003).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 131-133

³³ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 131..

³⁴ John A Jones Almanac Collection. East Tennessee State University. Vinegar Bitters, 1872. Box 3: Folder 37.

Many advocates of the temperance movement avidly self-dosed with patent medicines, often not realizing the medicines alcoholic and narcotic contents. However, this ignorance about a medicines' content was not always the situation as some medicines made their alcohol content obvious, such as Duffy's Malt Whisky, which was often taken by advocates of the Temperance Movement, as described by Samuel Hopkins Adams in his expose "The Great American Fraud," "From its very name one would naturally absolve Duffy's Malt Whiskey from fraudulent pretence. But Duffy's Malt Whiskey is a fraud, for it pretends to be a medicine and to cure all kinds of lung and throat diseases. It is especially favored by temperance folk. 'A dessert spoonful four to six times a day in water and a tablespoonful on going to bed,' makes a fair grog allowance for an abstainer."³⁵ In an interview, Mr. Dunnell recalled the frequency with which this inconsistency occurred: "Most of those old coots that come down from the north won't touch no liquor. But they swill patent medicine that stands off the shakes. Shucks, it's nothing but damned poor whiskey, and awful tasting at that. Costs two or three times as much, too."³⁶

Occasionally members of the temperance movement indulged in high proof patent medicines frequently enough and in sufficient quantity that they became addicted, at which point their duplicity was discovered. One such case involved an upstanding leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She considered her brother self-indulgent because he would often have a cocktail, for which she would scorn him. Then one day her brother discovered her affinity for high proof patent medicines.

³⁵Samuel Hopkins Adams, *The Great American Fraud* (PF Collier and Son, 1905), 18.

³⁶ G.O. Dunnell, interviewed by Robert Wilder, "American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1940." American Memory Project. 13 January 1939. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

‘I’ll tell you what’s the matter with you,’ he said. ‘You’re drunk - maudlin drunk!’ She promptly went into hysterics. The physician who attended diagnosed the case more politely, but to the same effect, and ascertained that she had consumed something like a half a bottle of Kilmer’s Swamp Root that afternoon. Now, Swamp Root is a very credible ‘booze,’ but much weaker in alcohol than most of its class. The brother was amazed until he discovered, to his alarm, that his drink abhorring sister couldn’t get along without her patent medicine bottle! She was in a fair way, quite innocently, of becoming a drunkard.³⁷

Since the makers of patent medicines did not have to reveal the contents of their product, many people unknowingly consumed many harmful narcotics, and poisons such as opium, cocaine, morphine, arsenic and prussic acid. Addictive narcotics were used because when consumed the narcotics gave the user an immediate sense of euphoria. This euphoric feeling caused people to continue using the narcotic laden medicine, which often resulted in the patient becoming addicted to the drugs contained therein and therefore continue to consume the medicine.³⁸

In Doctor Chase’s Recipe Book, there are many medicinal recipes. Many of the recipes listed in the book were patent medicine formulas, and called for quantities of opium, as shown in this recipe, “Cholera Tincture – Tincture of rhubarb, cayenne, opium, and spirits of camphor, with essence of peppermint, equal parts of each and each as strong as can be made. Dose – From 5 to 30 drops, or even to 60, and repeat until relief is obtained, every 5 to 30 minutes.”³⁹ 60 drops every 30 minutes was a substantial and frequent dose of opium. Another recipe called for a large amount of alcohol, about a half gallon of 76 proof alcohol. “Bateman’s Pectoral Drops – Opium in powder, catechu in powder, camphor gum, red saunders, resped, of each ½ oz, oil of anise 1 dr, dilute

³⁷ Adams, 17.

³⁸ Adams, 39.

³⁹ AW Chase, *Information for Everybody: An Invaluable Collection of About Eight Hundred Practical Recipes*, (Ann Arbor: AW Chase, 1880), 134.

alcohol (alcohol of 76 per cent, and water in equal proportions) 1 gal. Keep warm for 2 weeks.”⁴⁰

The most common types of drugs that contained opium were those that claimed to cure cough and consumption, known as “soothing syrups.”⁴¹ Two of the most common cough remedies that contained morphine were Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup and Dr Boschee’s German Syrup, neither of which made any mention on the label nor in the advertising about the narcotic contents.⁴² Dr. Boschee’s German Syrup claimed to cure consumption and other lung ailments, as stated in a Dr. Boschee’s German Syrup almanac:

“Dr Boschee’s German Syrup does not dry up a cough, and leave the inflammation and fever behind it, but loosens the phlegm and morbid matter, relaxes the tissue, allays the inflammation, and permits nature to heal the lung tissue and diseased parts, gives the consumptive a good nights rest, free from coughing, and a light and easy expectoration in the morning. If consumptives are not too far gone it will cure them with care.”⁴³

Dr. Boschee’s German Syrup’s ingredients included “...morphine and some hydrocyanic acid. Therefore consumption will be much less often curable where Boschee’s German Syrup is used than where it is not.”⁴⁴

Often opiate laden medicines, such as Boschee’s German Syrup, worsened a disease, because the narcotic eliminated the pain, giving the patient the impression that they were recuperating.⁴⁵ Advertisements for Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup also never mention the drug’s potentially harmful properties; instead it encouraged the consumer to

⁴⁰ Chase, 134.

⁴¹ Adams, 49.

⁴² Laurence A. Johnson, *Over the Counter and on the Shelf: Country Storekeeping in America, 1620-1920*, ed. Marcia Ray (Rutland: Charles E Tuttle Company, 1961), 116.

⁴³ John A Jones Almanac Collection. East Tennessee State University. Health is Happiness, 1900-1901. Box 2: Folder 11., 5.

⁴⁴ Adams, 49.

use the drug on teething babies. An ad printed by Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup states: "Thanks to Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup we have for years been relieved from sleepless nights of painful watching our poor, suffering, teething children. It not only gives the children rest, but also vigor and health; the little fellow will wake up bright, cheerful, and refreshed; softens gums, cures wind colic, and regulates the bowels. Sold everywhere."⁴⁶ Dr. Chase described in his recipe book, the large quantities of Mrs. Winslow's Syrup that was given to some children. "It is a well known fact that much injury is done to children by the use of... Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, which is now taking the place, to a great extent, in towns of the foregoing, for I noticed a short time ago eighty seven empty bottles with Mrs. Winslow's label upon them, sitting on a counter of one of our drug stores, which led me to ask if they put up her syrup. The answer was no, a lady in this city has fed that much to one child within the past eighteen months."⁴⁷

The 1897 Sears Roebuck catalog showed how affordable and accessible patent medicines were in 1897. In the drug department of the catalog there were numerous pages containing patent medicines, pills, elixirs, and various other medicines available for purchase through the catalog, "Laudanum (Tincture of Opium), USP Strength. 1oz bottle - .10 cents / \$1.00 per dozen bottles, 2oz bottle - .18 cents per bottle / \$2.00 per dozen bottles, 4oz bottle - .29 cents per bottle / \$3.00 per dozen bottles."⁴⁸ Ten cents for a bottle

⁴⁵ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 68-69.

⁴⁶ Mrs. Winslow's Domestic Receipt Book, 1878. "Emergence of Advertising in America, 1850 – 1920: Selections from the Collections of Duke University." American Memory Project. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

⁴⁷ Chase, 134.

⁴⁸ Fred L Israel, ed., *1897 Sears Roebuck Catalogue*, Reprint. (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1993), 27.

of laudanum was affordable for most people, and anyone with the catalog could have the medicine delivered by mail.⁴⁹

Many of the medicine advertisements throughout newspapers, magazines, and the Sears catalog were promoting cures for drug addiction. Many companies offered cures for drug habits which were often caused by the consumption of patent medicines. Usually these addiction cures contained more opium, morphine, or cocaine than the patent medicine that was originally the source of the addiction.⁵⁰ Adams described these drug addiction cures:

Practically all of these advertised remedies are simply the drug itself in concealed form. No effort is made to save the patient. The whole purpose is to substitute for the slavery to the drug purchased on the corner pharmacist the slavery to the same drug, disguised, purchased at a much larger price from the 'Doctor' or 'Institute' or 'Society.' Here is a typical report from a victim: 'When I tried to stop the remedy, I found I could not, and it was worse than the morphin itself. I then went back to plain morphin, but found that I required twice as much as before I took the cure. That is what the morphin cure did for me.'⁵¹

Often the recommended dose of the drug addiction cure was stronger than many people could tolerate. "If I lived through the first dose, the second would kill me, or any of my readers who is not a morphin fiend. The ordinary dose is 1/8 of a grain, heavy dose ¼ of a grain. But The Richie Company supposes I can stand more, so they endeavor to foist their concoction upon me in place of my supposed addiction."⁵² The Sears Roebuck catalog contained an advertisement for a medicine that claimed to cure drug addiction:

Cure for the Opium and Morphia Habit. We here offer a perfectly safe and

⁴⁹ Cayleff, 328.

⁵⁰ Barbara Hodgson, *In the arms of Morpheus: The Tragic History of Laudanum, Morphine and Patent Medicines*, (Buffalo: Firefly Books, 2001), 117.

⁵¹ Adams, 112.

⁵² Adams, 115.

reliable cure to those addicted to the habit of using opium or morphia in any form or manner whatever. We guarantee this preparation to be absolutely harmless, to contain no poisonous narcotics. Can be taken freely without producing any of the deleterious effects on the system, such as are caused by the use of opium and morphia. Immediately on taking a dose of this remedy a calming and soothing effect is produced. A dose can be taken whenever a craving for morphia or opium exists; it will act at first as a perfect substitute, rendering the patient independent of this poisonous drug....⁵³

Many of the patent medicines that did not include opium or morphine instead contained cocaine. The drugs that most often contained cocaine were the medicines known as catarrh powders. Many of the makers of catarrh powders admitted that their medicine contained cocaine, but claimed that the cocaine was harmless because it was in such a small amount. Contrary to this assertion many people became addicted to medicines that contained cocaine.⁵⁴ Adams described the situation with cocaine addicts:

Whether or not the bottles are labeled with the amount of cocaine makes little difference. The habitué does know. In one respect, however, the labels help them by giving information as to which nostrum in the most heavily drugged. "People come in here," a New York City druggist tells me, "ask what catarrh powders we've got, read the labels, and pick out the one that's got the most cocaine. When I see a customer's comparing label I know she's a fiend."⁵⁵

Cocaine containing catarrh powders were often sold in the form of snuff which was inhaled through the nose. Such a product was sold in the 1897 Sears Roebuck catalog:

Catarrh Snuff. This remedy has been used for the past 20 years by a physician who is a specialist on diseases of the throat and nose; we guarantee it to give immediate relief in all ordinary cases of nasal catarrh, hay fever, cold in the head. Everyone who is subject to this distressing complaint ought always to carry with them a bottle of this remedy. We enclose a Perfect Powder Blower in each package with full instruction

⁵³ Israel, 45.

⁵⁴ Adams, 43.

⁵⁵ Adams, 42.

how to use it and can be used at any time without inconvenience.
Complete with blower – 20 cents, per dozen - \$2.25.⁵⁶

In many patent medicines, instead of habit-forming drugs, there were often various poisons.⁵⁷ Many medicines contained poisons such as arsenic, and acetanilid. The Sears Roebuck catalog offered “Arsenic Complexion Wafers. These wafers are from the prescription of a famous French physician, and are perfectly harmless when used according to the directions on each box. They are an excellent remedy for rough and discolored skin. They clear the complexion and make the skin soft and smooth. They tone up the whole system and when used for a length of time will make thin persons plump and keep them so.”⁵⁸ Another poison used in medicines was acetanilid. This poison was used in many pain relievers, it gave relief from headaches and other pains by depressing the heart so that the blood did not completely circulate. However, once the drug wore off the blood circulation would resume its normal flow and the pain would return, which compelled the patient to take more of the medicine in order to regain pain relief. Often people who took medicines containing acetanilide, would suffer from a bluish tone in the skin, and lips due to lack of blood flow.⁵⁹ Around the 1900s, when pain relievers were gaining in popularity, the death rate due to heart failure raised a great amount. In 1902 in New York City, the death rate from heart failure was “1.34 per thousand of population; that is about six times as great as the typhoid fever death record.”⁶⁰

Two of the most commonly used painkillers that contained acetanilid were Bromo Seltzer and Orangeine. A bottle of Bromo Seltzer claimed that the recommended dose of

⁵⁶ Israel, 26.

⁵⁷ Adams, 16.

⁵⁸ Israel, 26.

⁵⁹ Adams, 34

⁶⁰ Adams, 32.

medicine was a teaspoonful, which was estimated to be 10 grains of acetanilid. A fatal dose of acetanilid was 5 grains, so the recommended dose of Bromo Seltzer was dangerous and known to cause unexpected collapse.⁶¹ Orangeine, printed its contents on the label, however most people at the time were not aware that acetanilid was a poison. Orangeine claimed to “strengthen the heart and produce better blood,” however in reality the medicine made the blood thinner, and depressed the heart preventing good circulation of the blood.⁶² Adams recounted a story of a girl who died from the use of Orangeine pain reliever:

Last July an 18-year-old Philadelphia girl got a box of Orangeine powders at a drug store, having been told that they would cure headache. There was nothing on the label or in the printed matter enclosed with the preparation warning her of the dangerous character of the nostrum. Following the printed advice she took two powders. In three hours, she was dead. Coroner Dugan’s verdict follows: ‘Mary A Bispels came to her death from kidney and heart disease, aggravated by poisoned by acetanilid taken in Orangeine headache powders.’⁶³

Another medicine that contained potentially fatal amounts of poison was Lash’s Bitters, it contained toxic levels of lead. If this medicine was taken by a child, a malnourished person, the elderly sick, or if taken in an amount over the recommended dose could lead to death through lead poisoning.⁶⁴ Usually the proprietor of a medicine was aware if the medicine contained deadly poisons. In an interview for the Atlantic Monthly, one patent medicine maker admitted to using poison in his medicine, “...in the

⁶¹ Adams, 37.

⁶² Adams, 32.

⁶³ Adams, 33.

⁶⁴ Michael Torbenson et al., “Lash’s : A Bitter Medicine : Biochemical Analysis of an Historical Proprietary Medicine,” *Historical Archeology*, 34 (2000): 58-60.

failure of the necessary supply of cherry bark, the base of the ‘bitters,’ I had substituted prussic acid....”⁶⁵ Prussic acid was a well known poison.

Often the patent medicines that did not contain narcotics or poisons often contained large quantities of alcohol. For a time more alcohol was consumed in the form of patent medicines than in the form of liquor.⁶⁶ Two of the most commonly used patent medicines were Peruna, and Hostetter’s Stomach Bitters both of which had the highest alcohol contents of the patent medicines. In an interview, a Mrs. Ingalls recounted from her childhood the frequent use of these two medicines: “Hostetter’s Bitters and Peruna were tonics used profusely by the men. I am sure that there wasn’t a home in our community that didn’t have a generous amount of one of these tonics. I suspect the reason was because both tonics had a strong alcoholic base. Bitters time was just before dinner.”⁶⁷ Peruna contained 28 percent alcohol, and Hostetter’s Stomach Bitters contained 44.3 percent alcohol, while the alcohol content of most whiskey was 50 percent.⁶⁸ The large alcohol content of Peruna and Hostetter’s Stomach Bitters was well known. The Office of Indian Affairs was aware of Peruna’s alcohol content, and in 1905 banned the sale of Peruna on Indian reservations.⁶⁹ In Sitka, Alaska bars began serving Hostetter’s Bitters as a liquor drink, this practice was adopted by many bars in the continental United States soon adopted the practice.⁷⁰ In his autobiography Carl Sandburg

⁶⁵ Ralph Keeler, “Confessions of a Patent Medicine Man,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, 26 (1870): 652.

⁶⁶ Anderson, 34.

⁶⁷ Mrs. Ingalls, interviewed by William C Haight, “American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project 1936-1940.” American Memory Project. 20 February 1939. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

⁶⁸ Adams, 13.

⁶⁹ Adams, 14.

⁷⁰ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 130.

recounted the high alcohol content of Hostetter's Bitters: "Us kids heard that you could get drunk on one bottle of Hostetter's."⁷¹

These medicines, with a high alcohol content claimed that the alcohol was necessary to preserve the medicinal herbs contained in the medicine. Hostetter's Stomach Bitters made such a claim in their almanac: "The wholesome alcoholic basis of the preparation is essential to its medicinal efficacy. Without this active principle, the other ingredients would be comparatively powerless. Their various properties are intensified and applied by the spirituous agent; in fact, their sanitary virtues could not be preserved unimpaired without it."⁷² The proprietor of Peruna admitted to his medicine's high proof, as recounted by Adams:

According to an authoritative statement given out in private circulation a few years ago by its proprietors, Peruna is a compound of seven drugs with cologne spirits. The formula, they assure me, has not been materially changed. None of the seven drugs are of any great potency. Their total is less than one half of one percent of the product. Medicinally, they are too inconsiderable, in this proportion, to produce any effect. There remains to Peruna only water and cologne spirits, roughly in the proportion of three to one. Cologne spirits is the commercial term for alcohol.⁷³

In many instances those who regularly consumed quantities of Peruna or Hostetter's Stomach Bitters became addicted to the alcohol content. In the "Great American Fraud," Adams recounted the stories of four people who regularly drank Peruna in quantities sufficient enough for them to get drunk. They all began taking Peruna as a tonic, but ended up being treated for alcoholism due to Peruna.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Sandberg, 228.

⁷² John A Jones Almanac Collection. East Tennessee State University. Hostetter's Almanac, 1871.

Box 2: Folder 12.

⁷³ Adams, 12.

⁷⁴ Adams, 13.

There were cures offered for alcoholism very similar to the cures for the opium and morphia habituate. Often, alcoholism cures contained almost as much alcohol as the medicines that initially caused the addiction. The Sears Roebuck catalog sold an alcoholism cure that was composed of 41.6 percent alcohol.⁷⁵ The catalog contained several advertisements for alcoholism cures, the ad for one stated:

Cure to Stop the Drinking Habit. We guarantee this to cure anyone of the habit of drinking alcoholic stimulants. It is the greatest temperance worker the world has ever known. It creates a desire for food instead of drink. It stops the craving for liquor instantly and stimulates the entire system to healthy action. It quiets nervous digestion, regulates the bowels, repairs the damage caused by over indulgence in liquor and makes one feel like a new man again. We will give special privies to any temperance society who would wish to give it a trial and test its merits. Treat yourself at home and become a new man.⁷⁶

Written disapproval of patent medicines began to occur before the Civil War, nevertheless, criticisms were never widely read because newspapers and magazines usually refused to publish such information. However, by the end of the century publications began to print negative information about patent medicines. In 1890, the *Ladies Home Journal* became one of the first magazines to publish information against patent medicines. The magazine removed all patent medicine advertisements from its pages and printed occasional nostrum criticisms.⁷⁷ However, much of this negative information had little impact, it was not until “The Great American Fraud” by Samuel Hopkins Adams was published that people began to take notice of the harmful effects of patent medicines. Samuel Hopkins Adams was hired by *Colliers Weekly* to research patent medicines and write an article about his findings. To gather the information Adams examined medicine advertisements, had medicines analyzed to discover their contents,

⁷⁵ Anderson, 37

⁷⁶ Israel, 26.

and finally he consulted with doctors about the effects of the various ingredients found in the medicines. Then on October 7, 1905 the first article in “The Great American Fraud” series was printed in *Colliers Weekly*. The last article in the series was printed in February 1906. This expose was the most widely read and influential group of articles against the patent medicine industry.⁷⁸

After the publication of “The Great American Fraud” series and numerous public outcries, the United States Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. This act forced patent medicines to place warnings on their containers alerting consumers to potentially harmful and addictive substances contained within the medicine. Through this act proprietors could no longer make false claims about their medicines contents.⁷⁹ The Act stated:

An Act for preventing the manufacture, sale, or transportation of adulterated or misbranded or poisonous or deleterious foods, drugs, medicines, and liquors, and for regulating traffic therein, and for other purposes. Section 8. The purposes of this Act an article shall also be deemed to be misbranded: In the case of drugs: First. If it be an imitation of or offered for sale under the name of another article. Second. If the contents of the package as originally put up shall have been removed, in whole or in part, and other contents shall have been placed in such package, or if the package fail to bear a statement on the label of the quantity or proportion of any alcohol, morphine, opium, cocaine, heroin, alpha or beta eucaine, chloroform, cannabis indica, chloral hydrate, or acetanilide, or any derivative or preparation of any such substance contained therein.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, this act did not put an end to the patent medicine business. Many medicines actually used this Act in their favor falsely claiming their medicine was approved by the

⁷⁷ Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 210-212.

⁷⁸ James Harvey Young, *Securing the Federal Food and Drugs Act of 1906*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 200-203.

⁷⁹ Armstrong, 169.

⁸⁰ US Congress, *Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906*, (Washington, DC: US 59th Congress, 1906).

Act. For instance one patent medicine label stated: “The Great Remedy, Guaranteed under the Food and Drug Act, June 30, 1906. Serial No. 2437. Contains no opium or morphine and less than 12% alcohol.”⁸¹ Despite this new advertising technique, this Act eventually brought the end to the golden age of patent medicines, because consumers were more informed about the contents of the medicines that they were ingesting.

For several centuries in America many people relied on patent medicines as their main source of medical care, due to the accessibility, effective advertisements, ignorance affordability and quick results of patent medicines. Through these patent medicines many people knowingly and unknowingly consumed large quantities of harmful substances, such as opium, cocaine, alcohol, and poisons. Samuel Hopkins Adams described the patent medicine situation in America; “Gullible America will spend some seventy-five million dollars this year in the purchase of patent medicines. In consideration of this sum it will swallow huge quantities of alcohol, an appalling amount of opiates and narcotics, a wide assortment of varied drugs ranging from powerful and dangerous heart depressants to insidious liver stimulants; and far in excess of all other ingredients, undiluted fraud.”⁸²

⁸¹ Mr. Clement Flynn, interviewed by L.A. Rollins, “American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project 1936-1940.” American Memory Project. November 1938. <<http://www.memory.loc.gov>> (25 October 2003).

⁸² Adams, 3.

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