

"Patent Medicines Once Abounded"

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By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Anyone watching TV this summer has probably chuckled over the country and western group extolling the virtues of Viagra with its song, "Viva Viagra." Reading patent medicine advertisements from long ago provides similar amusement, or at least produces a grin. If Lydia Pinkham's pills were advertised today, there would surely be a catchy jingle; the pills would be an interesting color; and a pretty girl or handsome fellow would swallow them with a smile.

Patent medicines were not usually patented, they were simply trademarked, and distribution of them began early. Some of America's first settlers arrived with English patent medicines tucked in the corner of a trunk, but they could also buy them from postmasters, grocers, tailors, or a variety of other merchants. By the 1800s, these compounds were "sold with colorful names and even more colorful claims."

Most patent medicine producers used similar ingredients – vegetable extracts suspended in generous amounts of alcohol. Some medicines were quite harmless, consisting of nothing more than powdered chalk, while others might have opium, morphine or cocaine added. And there weren't restrictions on the quantity you could order or ingest!

A store that opened in Westminster in 1835 sold medicines and drugs with names such as "itch ointment," "ipecacuanda," "snake root" and "worm-destroying syrup." Heavens only knows what today's Food and Drug Administration would have thought of worm-destroying syrup! Laudanum, a tincture of opium, could be purchased over the counter. I don't believe paregoric, also an opiate, required a prescription when I was growing up, and I distinctly recall how good it tasted when my mother rubbed it on my gums while I was cutting teeth.

Many doctors disapproved of these concoctions, but their widespread sale and constant advertisement in newspapers attest to their popularity, even if the cures never matched the claims. Almanacs were frequently printed by patent medicine companies, ensuring that the products caught your eye as you consulted the almanac.

Lots of patent medicines targeted women suffering from "female complaints" or people who claimed a general malaise. An advertisement for Dr. Henley's Extract of Celery, Beef and Iron said the product "has proven to be exceedingly valuable for the cure of nervous exhaustion, debility, sleeplessness, neuralgia, dyspepsia, general prostration of vital forces, etc." I thought this compound sounded as if it might offer real value but, on further consideration, curing sleeplessness and nervous exhaustion made me suspicious alcohol could have been its most effective ingredient.

Another medicine called "Volina Cordial" promised to cure indigestion, weakness, chills and fevers, malaria, liver complaint, kidney troubles, neuralgia and rheumatism. "It is invigorating and delightful to take, and of great value as a Medicine for Weak and Ailing Women and Children. It gives New Life to the whole System..." An accompanying booklet called "Volina" told the user how to treat diseases at home. Tutt's Liver Pills were "an absolute cure for sick headache, dyspepsia, sour stomach, malaria, constipation, torpid liver, piles, jaundice, bilious fever..." "Chichester's Diamond Brand Pills" for women were sold in red and gold metallic boxes sealed with blue ribbon. One questions whether the buyers needed the pills or just wanted the boxes! Dr. Halliday had a sure cure for corns which "stops all pain – takes "M" out by the Roots." This locally-manufactured drug cost just twenty-five cents.

In the 1880s, Joseph Boyle's Central Drug Store in Westminster sold drugs, medicine, chemicals, perfumery, soaps, trusses, hair brushes, Paris Green for destroying potato bugs...and "pure wines and liquors for medical purposes." Without sulfa drugs, penicillin, various "mycins" and other modern cures, our forefathers turned to what their doctors prescribed... or something in a fancy bottle with an eye-catching label.

CENTRAL DRUG STORE,
 OPPOSITE CATHOLIC CHURCH,
 Main Street, Westminster, Md.
JOSEPH B. BOYLE,
 SUCCESSOR TO WELLS BROS.,

DEALER in Pure Drugs, Medicines,
 Chemicals, Perfumery, Fancy Articles,
 Hair and Tooth Brushes, Combs, Toilet Soaps,
 Segars, &c. Also Trusses and Shoulder
 Braces.

*Pure Paris Green for Destroying
 Potato Bugs.*

PURE WINES AND LIQUORS
 FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES.

Patent Medicines, Horse and Cattle Powders,
 &c. A fine assortment of **STATIONERY.**
 Physicians' orders promptly filled and
 Prescriptions carefully and accurately com-
 pounded.

CHICHESTER PILLS

DIAMOND BRAND

Beware of
Counterfeits.



Refuse all
Substitutes.

LADIES!
 Ask your Druggist for CHICHESTER'S
 DIAMOND BRAND PILLS in Red and
 Gold metallic boxes, sealed with Blue
 Ribbon. TAKE NO OTHER. Buy of your
 Druggist and ask for CHICHESTER'S
 DIAMOND BRAND PILLS for twenty-five
 years regarded as Best, Safest, Always

**SOLD BY ALL DRUG
 TIME
 TRIED EVERYWHERE**

DR. HENLEY'S
 EXTRACT OF
CELERY, BEEF and IRON.

A Most Effective Combination.

CELERY—The New and Unequaled
 Nerve Tonic.

BEEF—The Most Nutritive and Strength-
 giving Food.

IRON—(Pyrophosphate)—The Great
 Remedy to Enrich the Blood and Nourish the
 Brain.

This Preparation has proven to be exceed-
 ingly valuable for the cure of

**Nervous Exhaustion, Debility,
 Sleeplessness, Restlessness,
 Neuralgia, Dyspepsia,
 General Prostration of Vital Forces,
 Loss of Physical Power.**

And all **DERANGEMENTS** consequent upon
 overtaxed mind and body. In fact, it gives
 tone to all the physical functions, and bou-
 ancy to the spirits. Prepared by

HANDY & COX,
 143 North Howard Street,
 Baltimore, Md.
 Oct 17, '85

**IF YOU HAD A
 NECK**
 AS LONG AS THIS FELLOW
 AND HAD



SORE THROAT

ALL
THE
WAY
DOWN

TONSILINE
 WOULD QUICKLY CURE IT.
 25c. and 50c. Hospital Size \$1.
 ALL DRUGGISTS.

Typical advertisements for nineteenth century patent medicines made broad claims about their effectiveness and used a variety of approaches, including humor, to attract customers. From newspapers in the collection of the Historical Society of Carroll County.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a library volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.