

## "Electric Bill Parts Some Locals from their Money"

Carroll County Times article for 16 June 1896

By Jay A. Graybeal

The old adage, "A fool and his money are soon parted" seems to fit the June 1896 visit of "Electric Bill" to Westminster. The American Sentinel newspaper of June 13, 1896 reported on his activities:

An eccentric looking individual, calling himself Electric Bill, stood in a buggy on Main street, this city, on Monday night, loudly haranguing a crowd of four or five hundred people, who gathered around, and to whom he descanted on the wonderful curative proprieties of an electric belt, which he offered for sale. Before commencing the sales, however, he exhibited a bagful of silver coin and a large roll of banknotes, which he said contained \$800. He scattered some money in the crowd, which was soon in a buying humor, and he disposed of about fifty of the belts in a very short time.

Then his proceedings were cut short by his arrest upon a charge of selling electric belts upon false pretenses. He was taken before Justice J. Hoffman Fuss, who committed him to jail for a further hearing at 2 o'clock on Tuesday. The belts he sells may have some electric power, but are exceedingly flimsy, and worth only a few cents at most. When arrested the man gave his name as Hall A. Curtis. While speaking to the people he assured them his purpose was to remain here until Wednesday night, and continue his selling operations, but he had already purchased a ticket for Hagerstown, dispatched his baggage to that place, and engaged a carriage to take him to New Windsor Monday night, where it is supposed he intended to board a train for Hagerstown Tuesday morning.

A large crowd of people gathered about the justice's office when he was taken into custody, and when brought out and placed in a carriage to be driven to the jail, it was feared some bodily injury might be done him, as the people pressed upon and jeered him roundly.

At the hearing before Justice Fuss on Tuesday afternoon it was demonstrated that the belts sold by the man possessed some magnetic power, and, although they are of little commercial value, it was decided that they had not been misrepresented by the vendor and that he had not violated any of the statutes of the State. He was therefore discharged from custody and permitted to go on his way to dispose of his wares to other gullible people.

While he gave the name of Hall A. Curtis when arrested, the permit obtained from the corporate authorities to sell on the streets, was in the name of James Ferdon. Whether that is another alias, or the name of his associate, is not known. He is supposed to be the same man who operated at Elkton on Friday night of last week and secured about \$150 from credulous purchasers. An impression prevailed in Taneytown that he was also the individual who visited that place on Thursday night of last week and sold forty-two electric liver pads, at \$1.00 each, but the parties are probably not identical. The man who operated in Taneytown had been at Littlestown, Pa., and at Frederick previously and, it is said, did a thriving business at each place. He left Taneytown on Friday morning for Gettysburg, declaring his purpose to return the same day or on Saturday. But that was the last seen of him. He called himself Big Foot Wallis, and had also an alias which we have not learned. In connection with the liver pad he sold a corn salve at Littlestown, but gave that article away at Taneytown.

No doubt "Electric Bill", Hall Curtis, James Ferdon or whatever his name really was, continued fleecing gullible customers until the public wised up or an angry mob encouraged him to find another line of

work. Not surprisingly, no image of Bill was located in the Historical Society's extensive photograph collection.

Photo Caption: [None]