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Texas State Documents

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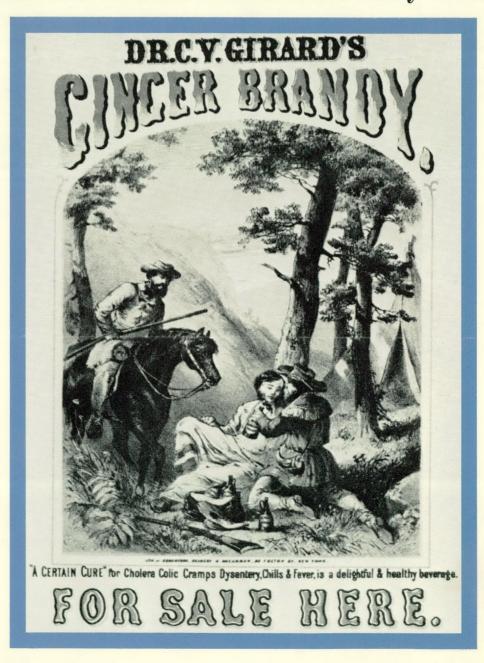


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"Wond'rous Cures Performed": Medicine in Nineteenth Century Texas



This is the second section of a two-part series on Medicine in nineteenth-century Texas.

My medicine, though made of herbs. Doth wond'rous cures per-

form. And yet each one may prac-

tice it Without producing harm

Dr. Richard Carter

In the 1840's, one Texan, who simply signed the editorial as "Old Settler" commented on the state of medical quackery: "This may well be called the era of quackery. Thousands are daily quacked, out of comfort, out of temper, out of health, out of money, out of liberty, out of their senses, and finally into their graves." The chief offenders in perpetuating medical frauds were the patent medicine makers. Throughout the nineteenth century, Texans had a wide variety of "patent medicines" which could be acquired at local stores, through the mail, or by salesmen with traveling medicine shows. The advertisements and labels on the bottles imparted the medicines with almost miraculous properties.

Dr. Spencer's vegetable pills modestly claimed to cure: "Bilious Fever, fever and Ague, Dyspepsia, Liver Complaint, Sick Headache, Enlargement of the spleen, Jaundice, Asthma, Dropsy, Rheumatism, Piles, Colic, Bowel and Summer Complaints, Female Obstruction, Heartburn, Nausea, Furred Tongue, Distension of the Stomach and Bowels, Incipient Diarrhoea, Flatulence, Habitual Costiveness, Loss of Appetite, Botched or Shallow Complexion and in all cases of Torpor of the Bowels."

"Balm of Columbia" purportedly would restore the hair, while "Larzetti's Juno Cordial or Procreative Elixir" was a remedy for barrenness in both sexes. "Texan Universal Pills" cleansed the digestive system.

Most patented medicines were never patented at all. They did make people feel better, mainly because the active ingredients

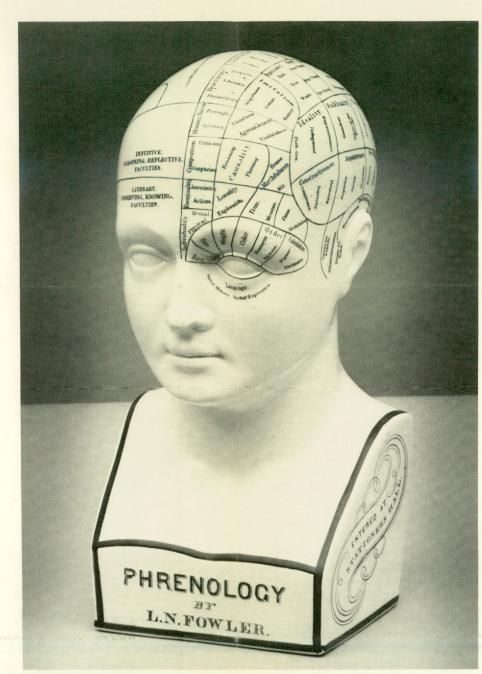
were often an opium derivative or alcohol (up to 55%) or a combination of both. One physician estimated that there were 100,000 opium addicts in the United States by 1876. By the late nineteenth century, a "Cure for the Opium and Morphine Habit" could be ordered from Sears Roebuck, which ironically also sold the drug.

One of the most universal nineteenthcentury quack remedies (not confined to Texas) was the "madstone," which people firmly believed cured rabies. The stones were found in the stomachs of animals such as deer and were probably gallstones or alimentary concretions. Apparently, the madstone was thought to have the power to draw out the poison when applied to the bite of a rabid animal. In some cases the stone would turn green in color after each application. One Texas madstone originally belonged to Ben Milam. Before his death at the Alamo, he gave one-third of it to Collin McKinney (a signer of the Declaration of Independence). By 1875, McKinney's son had a piece about an inch square, and he claimed that while in his family's possession the "Milam stone" had saved four hundred people from hydrophobia.

Along with quack medicines and cures, there were also numerous opportunities to take advantage of the latest in technological inventions that would conquer disease, like "Electro-Magneto Devices." Even in the Republic period, there were advertisements for "Doctor Christie's galvanic belt, for the removal and permanent Cure of all Nervous diseases," "Sherwood's magnetic machine,"

"...thousands are daily quacked, out of comfort, out of health, out of their senses, and finally into their graves."

and "magnetic plaster" for malaria, guaranteed to drive "quinine from its throne." In 1848, Samuel Maverick fell and broke his shoulder. His wife, Mary, wrote: "Mr. Maverick went to Matagorda to try the galvanic battery on his still suffering shoulder, and returned the 16th much benefitted." By the late nineteenth century, both Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck were selling such batteries through their catalogs.



Phrenology Skull, Courtesy Moody Medical Library, University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.

Every new medical discovery presented opportunities for quackery. In 1895, the German, Wilhelm Roentgen invented the Xray, and by the following February, an Austin photographer, George Townsend, had made a picture of a women's hand using a fifteen minute exposure. A month later an advertisement in a Texas newspaper for "Warner's Safe Cure" implied that "X-rays of the liver and kidneys would show them clogged with impurities for which this drug was the answer."

In the 1850's, Dr. George Cupples lamented: "Charlatanism and imposture, the offspring of ignorance, reign rampant in the land; no legislative check restrains the indiscriminate and unregulated practicer of physic by unqualified persons, the incredible and destructive abuse of nostrums and secret remedies; humbug is the order of the day." Showmanship was always one of the mainsprings of medical quackery, and the patentmedicine man was a nearly ubiquitous presence in the West from the 1860's on.

was in the city."

future."

... the "Milam stone" had saved four hundred people from hydrophobia.

During that same period, an itinerant quack doctor was called in to extract the iron point of an Indian arrow from the head of one of Col. Hays' Texas Rangers. "I cannot 'stract this stranger" said the doctor, "because to do it would go nigh killing you, but I can give you a pill that will melt it in your head."

There were also doctors who might be considered quacks by contemporary standards, but in the nineteenth century were considered equally valid practicers of the numerous pseudo-sciences of the day. In New Hampshire, Samuel Thomson was one of the first people to challenge the harsh treatments associated with "heroic medi-

One of the most spectacular and popular in San Antonio was the medicine show company of Dr. J.J. Lighthall - "The Diamond King." "Selling medicines from a gaudy and attractive wagon, he would drive his showy outfit down Commerce Street and from a nailkeg throw nickels to the crowds. The most spectacular feature of all the show was the Dr. himself, blazing with what appeared to have been almost a washtub of diamonds. It was claimed that his medicine show regalia represented an outlay in excess of \$50,000 in diamonds alone. Once established on Military Plaza the crowds would soon become a jam. Everybody went to the 'medicine show' when the 'Diamond King'

Ouackery was not confined to medicine shows, and there were all sorts of men and women who professed to be doctors. In 1857, an advertisement in The San Antonio Herald announced the arrival of Madame F., the Celebrated Physician and Chiromancer, prescribing "for all disease that male or female is heir to, such as Epilepsy, Rheumatism, Bronchitis and all diseases of Lungs or Liver," in addition to "telling your fortune from the hand, which is based upon scientific principles. Charges from three to five dollars for a lady or gentleman the past, present, or

cine." Believing that disease was the result of an "excess of cold in the body," he devised a system of herbal remedies and hot baths to eliminate the cold. He patented his cures in 1813, published a book. New Guide to Health, and by the 1820's had gained over a million converts to his teachings.

... one individual had "a very bad head, all moral powers very deficient, the bumps of distinctiveness very large."

In 1840, Col. Edward Stiff wrote in an immigrant's guide to Texas: "The Thomsonians have nearly taken possession; and certainly have at hand an abundant supply of native medicine, which, when properly used will go far to remove disease." D. Groesbeck and Co. advertised in the Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register that they had Botanic Medicine for sale: "Thomsonian compounds, Cayenne, spiced bitters, number six, Scull cap, Cholera syrup, Lobelia seed, Poplar Bark, Rasberry leaves, Third Preparation, Hot Bitters, etc."

One of the more popular pseudo-sciences of this period was phrenology. It was based on the idea that a person's skull mirrored the brain, and measurements of the skull could indicate mental faculties or traits of character, i.e., whether someone was morally upright or a criminal, stupid or intelligent. Apparently inspired by the new theory, in 1838, Houstonian John Hunter Herndon and some friends (including two doctors) dug up two recently executed murderers to examine their skulls. He noted that one individual in particular had "a very bad head, all moral powers very deficient, the bumps of distinctiveness and firmness very large. No reverence, veneration, and but little perception with no comparison or ideality. His animal organs well developed." The examination fully substantiated Herndon's belief in the scientific validity of phrenology.

While ultimately rejected by the scientific community, phrenology did contribute to an enlightened view of mental illness by establishing the concept that the normal and abnormal functioning of the mind was dependent on the physical conditions of the brain. Throughout the nineteenth century mental illness often was seen as a moral failure of the individual and a social disgrace for the entire family. It was seldom openly discussed or even written about in memoirs.

When specifically mentioned, mental illness was often referred to with euphemisms. George Childress, a signer and some would say author of the Texas Declaration of Independence, committed suicide in 1843 by disemboweling himself with a bowie knife. On his death bed, he alluded to his periodic After being appointed superintendent in 1874, Dr. David Richard Wallace was appalled at the conditions and immediately implemented changes. "The first thing he did was to throw away the straight jackets. Then he said the inmates must be cleaned up and deloused. There being no running hot water he sent his wife to buy all the iron wash pots she could find. The patients were bathed, their old clothes replaced with new ones. Next Dr. Wallace said they must have something to do. A shop was opened where they



Tooth extractor, or 'toothkey,' with bone handle

bouts of depression by noting that he "suffered from the effects of an over-sensitive mind."

"He suffered from the effects of an over-sensitive mind."

During the early nineteenth century, the insane went to jail if they were violent, or were kept at home if harmless. If the family could afford it, they employed a private keeper. In Texas, public care for the mentally ill began in 1861, with the opening of the "State Lunatic Asylum" at Austin. could work with their hands and soon the therapy began to show its effects. Investigation uncovered some musicians among the patients, so a band was organized and Dr. Wallace arranged for weekly dances." For his efforts, Dr. Wallace was given the title, "Father of Modern Psychiatry in Texas."

Another aspect of Texas medicine was dentistry, although early in the nineteenth century it was not usually practiced by professionally trained dentists. In the 1840's, one commentator noted: "It seems to be common opinion that anyone can pull teeth, who has a turnkey, and sufficient physical strength to use it; accordingly, blacksmiths, barbers, and medical students are the chief operators in this line of dental surgery." Because of the massive doses of calomel routinely prescribed by physicians, (its side effects included destroying the bone around the teeth), tooth loss was very common. Dentures were made of "sea-horse" (walrus tusk) and human teeth. They used to say of a prosperous dentist: "Why he is rich, he has a whole keg of teeth."

People believed that a sore tooth had a "tooth worm" (the nerve), and if a red ant were placed in the hollow of the tooth, it would sting and kill the tooth worm, and end the pain.

People were vaguely aware of dental hygiene, and often wiped their teeth with a rag, or used toothpicks and toothbrushes. Purchased brushes were of bone and bristle and cost 25 to 50 cents in the Republic period. Peach tree limbs and other soft woods were used to produce the homemade variety. For cleaning the teeth there were also tooth powders and toothpastes. Republic President David Burnet's recipe for toothpaste consisted of myrrh, sage, and honey.

During this period there was a pervasive superstition concerning the "tooth worm." People believed that a sore tooth had a "tooth worm" (the nerve), and if a red ant were placed in the hollow of the tooth, it would sting and kill the tooth worm, and end the pain.

By the late nineteenth century, professional dentists were more common, and their equipment included chairs with cuspidors attached, and foot engines or dental drills, with laughing gas (nitrous oxide) being used an an anesthesia.

In 1857, Don Egbert Erastus, the author of <u>Information about Texas</u>, commented on the state of Texas medicine: "I would further caution new-comers who desire peace, prosperity, and health, to avoid lawyers, *doctors*, *quack medicines*, and all other unseemly monsters."

PREMIERING AT THE MUSEUM:

On March 5, 1989, the Star of the Republic Museum will present a major new exhibition, 'Wond'rous Cures Performed': Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Texas. Produced by Sherry Humphreys, the Curator of Exhibits, this exhibit will examine the mainstream 'heroic medicines' of the Texas frontier, from 'therapeutic vampirism' (bleeding), to folk remedies and patent medicines. 'Wond'rous Cures Performed' will also depict the quackery and pseudo-sciences of the times, including Thomsonian medicine, phrenology, 'electro-magneto' devices and the 'Medicine Show.' The exhibit contains a fascinating collection of artifacts, from medical instruments, such as lancets used in bleeding, and folk artifacts like a 'madstone' for curing rabies, to a dental 'toothkey' and a 'phrenology skull.'

Included in the exhibit will be a 25 minute video on the medicine show, entitled, *Prometheus Proud's Miracle Medicine Show*. Produced by the Navasota Theatre Alliance, with funding provided by a grant from the Arts Council of the Brazos Valley, the video will be performed as a live play several times in the Park Auditorium on Sunday, March 5, as part of the Texas Independence Day Celebration.

The Museum will also premier a new orientation audio-visual, *The Republic of Texas*, in the Museum theater. Bill Moyers, presently with Public Affairs Television, New York, will provide the narration. A graduate of the University of Texas, Mr. Moyers served as President Lyndon Johnson's Press Secretary in the 1960's, was a commentator on the CBS evening news, and has been responsible for several television documentaries, including 'A Walk Through The 20th Century,' and most recently, a series of interviews with the philosopher, Joseph Campbell, entitled 'The Power of Myth.' *The Republic of Texas* includes an original musical score by the historical musicologist, Charles Davis. Mr. Davis produced the music for the new IMAX movie, *The Alamo*, in San Antonio, as well as music for the commercial television movie, *Sam Houston*. Funding for the project was provided by a grant from the Meadows Foundation of and for Texas. Using a laser videodisc format and stereo sound system, this 20 minute presentation will vividly portray a dramatic period in the history of Texas.

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On Sunday, March 5, 1989, Washington-onthe-Brazos State Historical Park will officially celebrate the signing of the Texas Declaration of Independence. This year's special guest with be Mr. Clayton Moore, or '**The Lone Ranger**.' At 1:30 p.m. there will be a free concert by the Houston Pops, ending with the 'William Tell Overture' which will introduce 'The Lone Ranger.' The Navasota Theatre Alliance will perform '*Prometheus Proud's Miracle Medicine Show*' several times during the day in the Park auditorium.

In addition to the concert and play, there will be numerous other activities occurring in the Park. At 12:00 p.m., the awards ceremony for the Republic of Texas Art Contest will be held in the Museum theater. The contest is sponsored by the Museum between the fourth graders at the John C. Webb Middle School, Navasota, and the Brenham Intermediate School, Brenham. Reenactment groups, including the 'Texas Army' and the 'Brazoria Militia,' will be dressed in period costumes while demonstrating military skills, early firearm techniques, and portraying historical events. The Blinn College Concert Band and the Brenham High School Band will provide additional music. There will also be cloggers and other traditional art and craft demonstrations, along with a Texas-size birthday cake. You are welcome to join us as we wish Texas a Happy Birthday.'

Star of the Republic Museum

Last year the Museum's education programs operated at capacity levels, especially in the spring. To be sure of obtaining a tour reservation, you should schedule your visit as soon as possible. For further information on reservations or the Museum's school outreach programs, please contact the Curator of Education.

A portion of the Museum's general operating funds has been provided through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services.

EXHIBIT SCHEDULE "Wond'rous Cures Performed" March 5 through October, 1989

MUSEUM SCHEDULE Open Daily 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m

Administered by Blinn College, Brenham, Texas

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