

A Short History of Medicine: II

It didn't take long for Americans to cultivate their own patent medicines. The numbers and types of medications grew steadily in the decades leading up to the Civil War. The patent medicine trade was very lucrative, encouraging many enterprising individuals to launch their own brands. Balm of America was a typical American patent medicine, produced by Boston pharmacist Thomas Hollis in the 19th century.

During the Civil War, the United States taxed patent medicines along with matches, playing cards, perfumes and other proprietary articles to fund the war effort and repay military debt. From 1862 to 1883, the United States required tax stamps on such. The government returned to patent medicine taxation during the Spanish American War (1898-1902), using a distinctive "battleship" stamp.

The second half of the 19th century is considered to be the golden age of American patent medicines. Rapid increases in industry and manufacturing, urban living, advertising in national newspapers and magazines, and the absence of drug regulation all contributed to a boom in the production and consumption of patent medicines. Many people turned to patent medicines out of fear and distrust of contemporary medical practices. This was the period of "heroic medicine," in which extreme techniques such as bloodletting and the use of harsh purgatives and emetics were often employed by physicians. Working before the advent of germ theory at the end of the 19th century, regular physicians had few therapies that could compete with the patent medicine industry's promise of easy health in a bottle.

Patent medicines were aggressively marketed. Manufacturers developed distinctive trademarks and packaging for their products and created memorable advertising campaigns.



Unique and sometimes charming, many trademarks became instantly recognizable.

Patent medicine makers were pioneers in the use of such advertising techniques as solicitation through the mail, the provision of free samples and promotional trinkets, national newspaper campaigns, outdoor signage, and testimonials. Popular patent medicine almanacs offered abundant advertising for the sponsoring companies' products. Giveaways, such as a matchbook style needle and thread case, were also used to boost sales.

Prior to 1906, patent medicine manufacturers made any therapeutic claims for their products that they wished. In 1905 and 1906 Collier's magazine ran a series of influential articles by Samuel Hopkins Adams entitled "The Great American Fraud," which exposed many of the deceitful and unsafe methods practiced by patent medicine manufacturers. Such exposes helped to promote the first federal Food and Drug Act, signed into law by President Theodore Roosevelt on June 30, 1906. The act was amended in 1912, and an even stronger Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act passed in 1938. These laws required drug labeling to include a list of ingredients and prohibited manufacturers from making false and misleading claims.

Despite dramatic changes in medical knowledge and federal regulation in the past 100 years, self-medication continues to be popular. No longer referred to as "patent medicines," over-the-counter products today offer an enormous array of choices without requiring the consultation of a physician. Manufacturers continue to rely on extensive advertising, employing many of the methods pioneered by patent medicine marketers over 100 years ago.

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