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LYDIA E. PINKHAM : AMERICAN ENTREPRENEUR

Written and Photographed by June Grayson

Ed Gabrielse knows where babies come from. His mother told him. Babies come from a bottle of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, advertised to women - appropriately enough - as a "baby in every bottle."

"We're talking serious business," Gabrielse says, only partially in jest. "In its heyday at the beginning of the Twentieth century, this company sold over two million of bottles

of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound a day. Because of my mother's life-long enthusiasm for this medicine, I have only respect for her opinion about how crucial this product was for her own good health."

Do not think that Gabrielse is a country bumpkin. He is in the financial services industry in Chicago. Previously, he taught communications at the University of Northern Iowa.

A friend bought him samples of Lydia E. Pinkham products from an Iowa drugstore that was going out of business. In 1965, Gabrielse found some advertising pamphlets for patent medicines, including some of the Lydia E. Pinkham company, at an antique store. "To me, these are absolutely fascinating to read. Understand that according to my mother I am here today due entirely to the efficacy of this wonderful woman's products."

The Pinkham compounds were part of the patent-medicine era of American history. The first medicine patent in the United States was issued in 1796 to Samuel Lee, Jr., of Connecticut, for "Bilious Pills." Other products soon appeared, guaranteeing to cure anything from worms, malaria, and dropsy to female complaints. One product guaranteed to cure all pain of every kind. No claim was too great, no advertisement too extravagant,

for a needful and gullible public.

The invention of the printing press in Europe in the fifteenth century disseminated herbal knowledge from every ancient culture throughout Europe. American colonists brought their own remedies and the plants they came from to their new homes and they learned the medicinal uses of over 150 native American plants from American Indians. Modern medicine as we know it today did not begin until the Twentieth century. Viewed in that context, the famous Lydia E. Pinkham products might even have been effective medical aids for their time.

Pinkham, who lived from 1819 to 1883, was a successful Massachusetts patent medicine proprietor who claimed that her nostrum could cure any female complaint from nervous collapse to sterility. Evidently, she first made her remedy for herself but freely shared it with friends and neighbors. When the fame of her product spread to women of neighboring towns, the family decided to go into the business of bottling and selling the compound.

Pinkham wrote the advertising handbills which her sons distributed in nearby communities. One of her most effective slogans was, "Only a woman can understand woman's ills." Her picture appeared in newspaper advertisements promoting her

products. Her face became one of the best-known faces in the country. Women hailed her as the "savior of her sex." Her likeness even appeared on women's tombstones.

Women needed a savior in the Nineteenth century. Doctors were scarce. Hospitals were even scarcer. Infant mortality was high. The greatest cause of death in young women was childbirth. Most women, when they received any medical care at all, received it from their female relatives and friends. Every little community had it's gifted "granny women", midwives, and healers with their knowledge of herbal medicine.

Who can take offense at what Pinkham wrote in one of her pamphlets? "We possess the most marvelous machine in the world, the human body. We shall have no other in this world. Let us give it the little attention it requires. Let us follow the Seven Rules of Health:

Rule 1. Get all the fresh air and sunshine you can.

Rule 2. Drink six glasses of pure water every day.

Rule 3. Eat balanced meals.

Rule 4. Keep clean inside and outside.

Rule 5. Work hard and play hard.

Rule 6. Sleep eight hours every night.

Rule 7. Be cheerful."

In ads and pamphlets, Pinkham invited women to write to her for help. She established a Department of Advice with an all-female staff to answer the hundred letters a day she reported receiving. She published a free facts-of-life manual for women describing the female reproductive system from puberty through childbirth through menopause.

Testimonials from grateful users appeared in every ad:

"I was so rundown, weak, nervous, and so tired out that I cried all of the time. Now I have taken ten bottles of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound and I never felt better in my life."

"I have a baby girl who is bright as a dollar. We owe everything to your medicine and I will speak a good word for it to all who will listen."

"I was in poor health for years and doctors could not help. After five bottles of your compound and using your Sanative Wash (a douche preparation), I passed a polyp the size of a hen's egg, saving me from an operation."

Scoffers say that any benefit from this or any other patent

medicine of its day was due to their high alcoholic content, ranging from seventeen to fifty percent alcohol. By contrast, beer contains only five percent, claret eight percent, and champagne nine per cent alcohol. Yet the ingredients listed on the package can be found in plant remedy dictionaries: Jamaica dogwood, pleurisy root, black cohosh, life root, licorice, dandelion, and gentian. The 13% Ethyl alcohol was used only as a solvent, of course.

The Indians called black cohosh "squawroot" and used it to treat women's problems. Between 1820 and 1936, the plant was listed in the U.S. Pharmacopoeia as a sedative, for rheumatism, and to promote menstruation. Licorice was used as a laxative, to promote the expulsion of phlegm, and to mask the taste of other bitter herbs. Pleurisy root was used to treat bronchitis, pneumonia, rheumatism, and consumption, as well as dysentery. Dogwood is an old Indian remedy for fever; dandelion relieved heartburn; gentian was used as a digestive tonic.

The passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in the United States in 1909 presaged the end of the patent medicine era. Yet modern medicine, pharmacy, and surgery grew out of that era. Though most modern medicines are now synthetic compounds, who can forget that aspirin came from the willow tree, digitalis from the

foxglove plant, and Vitamin C from the use of citrus fruits to treat scurvy. But if Lydia Pinkham deserves any credit, she won't get it from modern medicine.

Charles Brown, registered pharmacist and owner of a St. Charles drugstore says, "Even if a plant proves to have medical benefits, science will extract the active ingredient of that plant and make it synthetically. Then when it appears for medical use, it is known by its chemical name and most of us will never know where it came from or how it was discovered."

Brown remembers that Pinkham products were still on a druggist's shelves until the last 15-20 years. Now they have faded away into history.

But Gabrielse remembers. After all, he is here, isn't he?

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