

Popular Images of Drug Adulteration



by Suzanne White Junod, Ph.D.

By the turn of the 20th century, Americans had developed an entire genre of humor encompassing and elaborating their skepticism toward patent medicines, salesmen, advertisements, and testimonials. Jokes in this and similar veins abounded: Q: “Pop, what is a skeptic?” A: “A skeptic, my son, is a person who can read a patent medicine ad without feeling that he has any of the symptoms described.” The magazine *Puck*, in particular, used repeated references to “Liddy Blink’em” to satirize patent medicines with a high alcohol content. “Liddy Blink’em” was a thinly disguised satirical reference to the ubiquitous Lydia Pinkham’s tonic.¹ Likewise, “Perusa” referred to the ever-popular “Peruna.”² Patent medicines with high alcohol content were a particular target during this period, as states such as Georgia had begun to regulate alcohol more stringently.

Bad doggerel of the period showed no particular preference for foods or drugs, treating all with equal irreverence. This versification was published a few weeks before passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act, and anticipated (prematurely, as it turned out) an early demise for the industry in favor of the “purely vegetable” patent medicines gaining in popularity. The problem, of course, was that some of the “purely vegetable” patent medicines had as much alcohol as all of the others. The 1906 Act would at least require that any alcohol in the product be listed on the label. This became a much more important issue as the temperance movement began to attract more adherents (as well as detractors).

Patent Medicynicisms

*Oh patent medicifol days,
You’re gradually growing shorter,
And moribund is now the craze
Of “80 doses for a quarter.”
We are the “Cured by Scampherb” folks,
As such we merit some attention;
We are “Before” and “After” jokes,
We are too humorous to mention.*

*How often in the daily prints
We patent medicintillated!
How often, oh how often since
The day of Liddy Blink’em dated!
At fifty cents one agate inch
The papers had (next to pure matter)
A lead pipe patentmedicinch
On printing our “Perusa” patter.*

*The wages of pat medisin
Is death, according to the sages
Also ad. Nans. And ad. Infini.,
Pat, medicine gets most the wages.
Ah well, the patent’s running out;
The ranks of devotees are thinning—
An army that was, past a doubt,
More medicined against than sinning.³*

¹ See Suzanne White Junod, “THEY’RE BAAACK” ... Lydia Pinkham, Sloan’s Liniment, and Master Violet Ray Generator et al., FDLI UPDATE, May/June, 2004, at 43.

² James Harvey Young, *PE-RU-NA: A Catarrh Cure from Columbus*, 12(6) TIMELINE 2-17 (Nov./Dec. 1995).

³ 59 PUCK no. 1524 (May 16, 1906).

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Articles in the muckraking press began to reveal many of the “secret” ingredients commonly found in products such as Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup (morphine sulphate) and the alcoholic contents of many, if not most, patent medicines. Inspired by such serious pieces as the series of articles by Samuel Hopkins Adams in *Collier’s Magazine*, which had exposed many of the tricks-of-the-trade in the patent medicine industry, these jokes, and many variations, began to appear throughout *Puck* and *Judge*.

Moonshining

The Drug Drummer: How are the patent medicine exposures affecting your business?

*The Rural Druggist: Darn bad! Ever since the foxy farmers discovered the ingredients of the leading brands, they’re making their own stuff.*⁴

Business Recovery

Druggist: “Why I owe my recovery from rheumatism to this snake-oil liniment.”

Customer: “Is that right?”

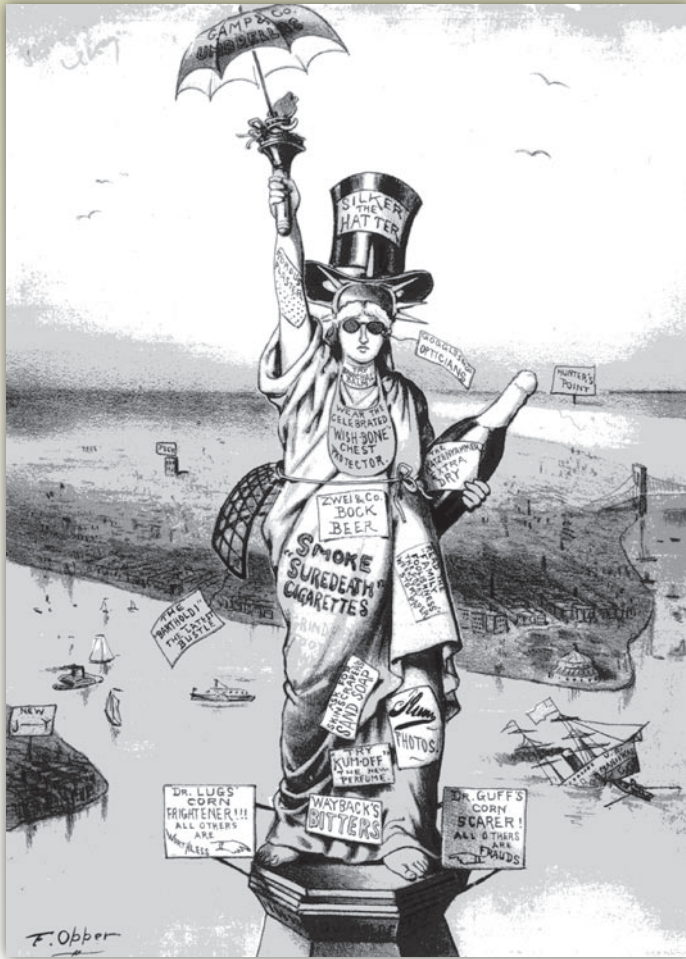
*Druggist: “Sure! I sold so much of it last summer that I was enabled to go to Florida for the winter.”*⁵ Δ

⁴ 58 PUCK no. 1494 (Oct. 18, 1905).

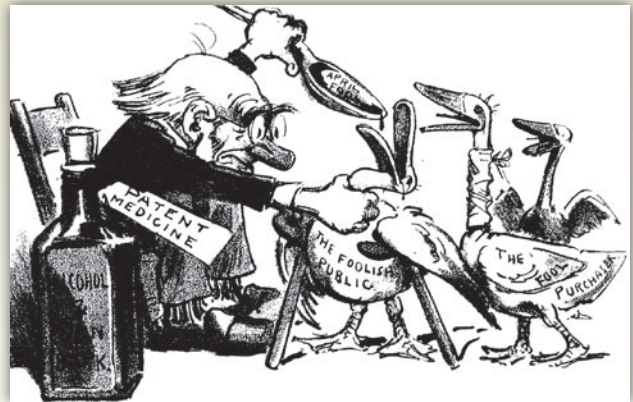
⁵ 46 JUDGE no. 1181 (June 4, 1904).



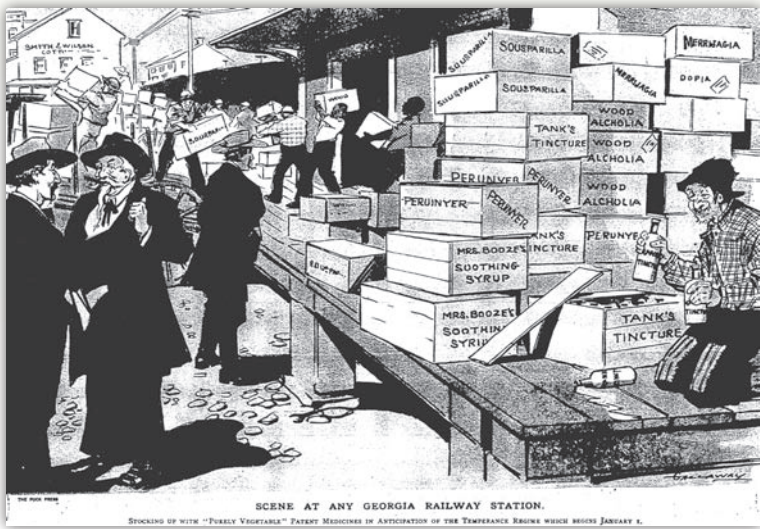
Frontispiece: Death in the Pestle. In this early lithograph from 1889, the skeleton is the mortar arising from a pestle of tonics, bitters, pills, plasters, and all manners of “cure-alls.” The skeleton has a firm grasp on both male and female customers confined in coffins labeled “Male Ass” and “Female Goose.” In the left corner, a group of assorted citizenry labeled “patrons of the patent medicine man” move down the road toward the “poor house.” In the right corner, the patent medicine man is driven in style toward the “patent medicine palace.” At top, Potters Field sports the headstone tribute to “buyers” of patent remedies, while ephemeral paper alone marks the graves of millions of “cash customers.” In stark contrast to the fragile paper documenting the “quack cemetery,” the artist renders an everlasting monument to the “seller” of patent medicines, also labeled the “millionaire medical fraud” in the top left corner.



Statue of Liberty—In this unidentified illustration from *Puck*, the magazine itself is the lone building labeled in New York City. The message is a clever variation on the theme of the ubiquitous nature of turn-of-the-century advertising for all kinds of products, not just foods and drugs. The idea that manufacturers and their advertisers would turn any public monument or public place into an outdoor advertisement for their product if given the opportunity was rendered in many different forms, but this was one of the cleverest.



Some April Fool Surprises—This 1906 cartoon from *Judge* sports the same message as “Death in the Pottle,” but by this time years later, and on the eve of passage of the 1906 Act, the message has been distilled into a simpler one. This image shows only the “Patent Medicine purveyor” playing an April Fool’s joke on “the foolish public” and the “foolish purchaser.” In part, this reflects the fact that the public itself had become more literate on the issue (note the alcohol prominently labeled on the bottle) and, in part, it reflects the growing acquaintance that readers of the magazine had with other sources of information about the patent medicine industry. Two decades later, it was no longer necessary to create an elaborate, two-page lithograph to portray the same message.



Scene at Any Georgia Railway Station—Southerners were consummate consumers of “elixirs” and liquid medications of all kinds for many years both before and after the passage of the 1906 Act. In light of new state temperance regulations that went into effect in the state of Georgia on January 1, 1908, this print from *Puck* highlights many of the turn-of-the-century patent medicines with the highest alcohol contents. Even a “hobo” denied alcohol has discovered “Tank’s Tincture” to be a suitable substitute.

A Genuine Grievance—More and more often during this period, periodicals began portraying men, patent medicines, and alcohol together, either in pubs or in drugstores, as if to underscore that those were the two options available. Previously, it was more common to see portrayals of women victimized by alcoholic patent medicines at home. Now that the issue of alcohol and medicine is out in the open for both sexes, the debate will become increasingly heated until the advent of Prohibition.

