

Looking Back and Forward: The Upcoming Centennial of the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act



by Suzanne White Junod, Ph.D.

This is the first in a series of articles this year that will highlight some of the popular perceptions of the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act, whose Centennial will be commemorated in 2006.

In 1876, a cartoonist named Keppler who worked for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*, a popular Progressive era magazine, left steady employment to establish a new magazine he named for the elfin character in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Puck*. *Puck Magazine*—with its intricate color illustrations and cartoons gracing the front cover, centerfold, and back cover—quickly became a popular humorous journal, selling over 80,000 copies a week by the 1880s.



The Headsman

This frontispiece portrays food and drug legislation in the shadow of other Progressive era legislation already on the Congressional chopping block. Eventually, however, the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act did emerge from the shadows into one of the pre-eminent pieces of Progressive era legislation.

The serious press of the period became preoccupied with publishing exposés of the graft, corruption, price-fixing schemes, and other corporate scandals that characterized the so-called “Gilded Age.” Tiring of the seemingly endless litany of published scandals in periodicals such as *Collier's*, *McClure's*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *Life*, President Theodore Roosevelt quoted from *Pilgrim's Progress* and dubbed those journalists “muckrakers.” The apt term stuck. *Puck*, in contrast with its more high-minded counterparts, spoke most clearly to the well-informed skeptic.

The magazine opposed most presidents, including Teddy Roosevelt and Howard Taft, although it did support Woodrow Wilson in 1912. It was taken over by William Randolph Hearst and

became a Hearst publication in 1917, but it did not survive the transition and ended its popular run in 1918.

One of Keppler's cartoonists, James Wales, left *Puck* in 1881 to establish a rival publication he called *The Judge*.

Through the 1890s, *The Judge* lagged in sales behind its *Puck* competitor. As the political fervor over food, drug, and meat control gained momentum in Congress and the attention of the public, however, *The Judge*—avowedly Republican in its loyalties—began to eclipse *Puck*. Indeed, *The Judge* lasted until the Great Depression put it out of business in 1932.

Historians write that the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act was one of the highlights of the Progressive era in American history. Even the U.S. Post Office in its “Celebrate the Century” stamp series recognized that Act as one of the most noteworthy achievements of the twentieth century, when it issued a commemorative stamp in 1998. In part, this was because of the unanimity with which Americans manifested their support for this legislation.



Commonsense in the Household, PUCK (1887).

This early cartoon depiction of a housewife “under siege” from exploding bottles of catsup explains why condiments were some of the earliest successful processed foods. Catsup often fermented and was difficult to keep at home, even with the spices the housewife customarily employed. Canners, too, had difficulty producing processed catsup, and began to employ controversial coal-tar based aniline dyes to improve the appearance of the product as well as benzoate of soda and other preservatives to eliminate the fermentation that could be so “explosive.”

Dr. Junod is a Historian with the Food and Drug Administration, Rockville, MD.

Astoundingly enough, both *Puck* and *The Judge* supported its passage. Great illustrations from both magazines will provide current *FDLI Update* readers with an interesting and entertaining look at popular perceptions of the social, political, commercial, and medical issues that led Republicans, Democrats, Progressives, and independents to come together in support of federal food and drug legislation in 1906.

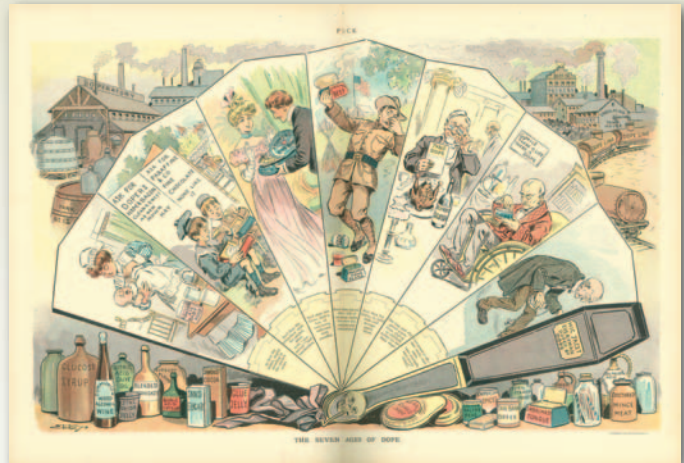
At the time the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drugs Act were enacted, railroad legislation and banking

legislation were considered both more important and more far-reaching. In the twenty-first century, and with the benefit of hindsight, it is fair to say that our modern consumer society has reaped more lasting benefits from the principles behind the 1906 food and drug legislation than from the direct regulation of the railroads and banks that originally were viewed as more essential Progressive era achievements. Δ



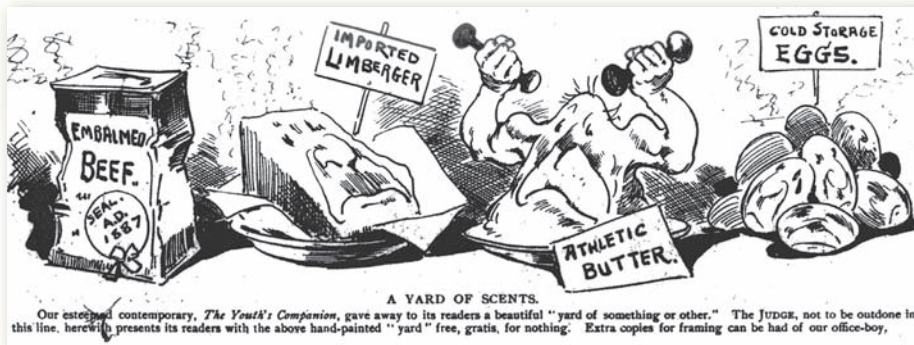
Dr. Wiley tripping up the canned food “BUSINESS” with ridiculous rulings.

Before passage of the 1906 Act, Wiley won the support of the canned good industry by emphasizing the need for “ethical” production standards. Wiley felt that if the industry would abandon its use of artificial colors and preservatives, and label its products honestly, that consumers would trust canned goods more and the industry would thrive. Soon after passage of the 1906 Act, however, continued debates over copper salts, used to green peas, and benzoate of soda and borax, used to preserve some canned foods, as well as the unlabelled substitution of glucose and saccharin for cane sugar, had commentators concerned that the costs of Wiley’s zeal could affect the canned food business.



7 Ages of Dope

This is one of the magnificently rich cartoons for which *Puck* and *The Judge* became famous. It illustrates quite clearly how pervasive the problem with addictive drugs (including morphine and opium) had become.



A Yard of Scents, THE JUDGE, Apr. 15, 1899, at 242.

This is a parody of the lovely lithographs published by other periodicals which Victorian housewives could cut out and use to adorn their homes. Instead of fragrant flowers, *The Judge* portrayed less attractive “scents”: stinky imported cheese; the so-called embalmed beef dating back to the Spanish-American war that soldiers repeatedly described as “nauseating stuff”; rancid butter which was often “reconditioned” using a number of different techniques and sold as fresh butter; and cold storage eggs which, although kept and transported by railroad, had serious quality problems as judged by the frequency with which periodicals of the day condemned them.



Vol. 52 No. 1327, Pure Food Bill Approved, THE JUDGE (Mar. 23, 1907).

This amateur cartoon, submitted by a reader, won a prize of \$2.50. It reflects popular views of the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act as, first and foremost, a “truth in labeling law.” Some manufacturers took the law seriously on this point as illustrated by a maker of “walnut hair stain” that changed the name of his product soon after passage of the act so as to omit references to the word “walnut.” Because there were no walnuts in his product, he evidently feared it would be treated as a food product under the act and made the labeling changes on his own to forestall any action against his cosmetic product.