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Medical Practices on the Frontier

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Many persons now past, or approaching, the age of the three score and ten years traditionally allotted to man and who grew up on the American frontier will assert that in the old days sickness was quite rare. They seem to remember that in their youth they had no aches or pains but were always strong and healthy and even declare that all other people in their home communities were the same.

Such people must either be afflicted with acute amnesia or have what the late Professor Edward Channing once referred to as "a constructive memory." While it is quite true that the American pioneers were a vigorous and hardy breed partly because the weaklings did not live long under the conditions of frontier life, they were, nevertheless, human animals and as such were subject to most diseases and ailments which afflict people today plus some additional ones that were the result of their manner of living and their lack of knowledge of the most elementary principles of hygiene and sanitation.

The practices herein described were as common in such states as Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee between 1840 and 1870 as they were in the trans-Mississippi states during a later period and prevailed to a considerable extent throughout the rural districts of the entire Mississippi Valley down to the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, traces of them may still be found in the more remote and backward communities of the southern and central portions of the United States.

In the pioneer West an entire family lived in a log cabin, sod house, dugout, or structure of rough lumber usually consisting of not more than three rooms and often of one

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or two. Even though the great majority of these frontiersmen were comparatively young people, there were often three or four children and in some cases as many as six or seven or even more. Such a small house meant crowded quarters for five to eight or nine people. In winter it was cold and draughty and yet ventilation was often poor. The family slept two or three in a bed with the windows tightly closed just as they had been throughout the day. It has been said that "the air is pure in the country because country people always sleep with the windows closed!" Certainly that was the custom in the frontier communities because in the prairie region fuel was scarce and even in the wooded areas the pioneer found it easier to close the windows than to chop more wood.

Screens for the doors and windows were unknown and flies were a perpetual plague in summer by day and in many places mosquitoes a great source of annoyance by night. A child was frequently given a leafy branch and assigned the task of "minding flies off the table" when company was present, but the guests usually felt that it was only courteous to assert that this was unnecessary and that everyone should be expected to "mind his own flies." That disease germs were frequently carried to food by flies was of course certain. A sheet of mosquito bar was frequently spread over a cradle to keep flies off a sleeping baby but many were likely to find their way beneath it. The same material was also used to prevent the entrance of mosquitoes, but few householders had a sufficient quantity to cover all windows and a "smudge" was sometimes kindled to discourage these pestiferous insects.

The water for household use came, in most cases, from a near-by spring or stream or was drawn from a shallow well. It was not always pure and in many instances must have been contaminated by the presence of colon bacilli or other germs of disease. The whole family drank from a common cup, gourd, or tin dipper, washed in a single pan, and dried their hands and faces on the same towel. The crossroads store always had a shelf in the rear equipped with a pail of water with a tin cup hanging on a near-by nail from which thirsty customers drank freely, undisturbed by any thought of the unsanitary nature of such a practice. The country school had a single water pail to accommodate thirty or forty youngsters who seemed to the teacher perpetually

thirsty. The little hotel or tavern had similar drinking arrangements and guests, after washing their hands and faces in a common basin, dried them on a "roller towel," the more fastidious ones rolling it up or down often in a vain effort to find a reasonably clean and dry spot.

Visitors to a home drank from the common dipper and used the same washbasin as did the family with the hostess making no concession except to put out a clean towel. The small son of the household filled a basin half full of water, and he and his little playmate alternately snorted into it a couple of times, dabbling a little water on the more central portion of their faces, and sometimes chanting the little couplet: "Wash together, Friends forever."

Bathing facilities were extremely meager. In summer the settler and his sons swam in the creek or pond, and in winter a washtub was filled with water every Saturday night and the children placed in it by strong-arm methods and scrubbed within an inch of their lives. If water had to be hauled or carried a long distance, the "rinse water" of the family washing was sometimes saved until evening and the youngsters bathed in it before they were put to bed.

Every family had a single comb and brush which was used by all of its members. Toothbrushes were unknown unless a hackberry root with one end chewed sufficiently to form a small mop could be so designated. It was dipped in salt and used to rub the teeth lightly or they might be polished a bit with one corner of the towel. Some men carried a gold-plated toothpick, or one made of deer bone and used it to remove particles of food from between the teeth after every meal. Chewing gum, commonly called "wax" in the South, was scarce and a single chew was passed about from mouth to mouth of three or four children sometimes for days.

When a number of boys had assembled to play ball one hot Sunday afternoon at the edge of the Cross Timbers of North Texas, one of the four Dye brothers eagerly besought his younger brother to go to the nearest well a quarter of a mile away and bring a pail of water for the benefit of the sweating, thirsty players. "Now, Walter," he pleaded earnestly, "if you'll take the bucket and bring us a bucket of nice cool water from Mr. Clark's well, I'll let you chew the wax! Monroe is chewin' it now but his hour is about up and it's my time to chew it next. Now you do that, Walter, like a good

boy, and I'll skip my turn and let you chew the wax!" Unable to resist the promise of such a reward, Walter seized the water pail and started in a lope for Mr. Clark's well.

It was not only in the home, school, store, or tavern, however, that such unsanitary practices prevailed. The idea of individual cups to be used in partaking of the Lord's Supper, had never entered the head of any churchgoer. When the time came for the sacrament, a glass of wine and a cake of unleavened bread were placed on a tray and passed up and down the rows of benches on which members of the congregation sat. Each held the bread with one hand while he broke off a fragment with the other and put it into his mouth. He then took a sip from the glass. If the little church boasted a cottage organ, the worshippers could at least get their disease germs to the strains of soft music and in a spiritual atmosphere!

Under such conditions, it is not strange that when any person acquired a communicable disease, it was not only likely to be transmitted to all other members of the family but to sweep through the entire community. Colds, flu, measles, mumps, whooping cough, scabies, sore eyes, and other contagious or infectious diseases were very common among the American pioneers. Smallpox was usually regarded as serious enough to demand the isolation of the patient though it too might occasionally reach epidemic proportions. Venereal disease was uncommon among rural settlers but by no means unknown, and tuberculosis must have taken a considerable toll of lives. Trachoma undoubtedly existed but was not known by that name but as "granulated lids." The treatment of any of the diseases named was, moreover, usually crude and quite unscientific.

The food of the average pioneer settler was abundant and substantial and of a type calculated to enable him to swing a heavy ax, hoe, or maul for hours but the character of the meals in most frontier homes would be viewed with horror by the modern dietitian. They leaned heavily towards fats and starches. Meat was plentiful but, except in the early years of the settlement of a region where game was abundant, it was usually salt pork, bacon, or ham. Fresh meat was rare in summer or, in fact at any other season except "hog killing time" in the late autumn, or upon those occasions when a neighbor killed a beef. At such times,

children, who had subsisted largely on strong "side meat" for many months, ate "not wisely but too well," often with disastrous results. Refrigeration and ice were of course unknown and food frequently spoiled in warm weather. If the family had a spring house, milk, butter, and other perishable foods were kept in it. Otherwise milk was strained into large shallow stone "crocks" and placed on a table in the cellar, along with butter wrapped in a wet cloth. A jug of butter-milk was often tied to the end of a long rope and "hung in the well" in much the same fashion as was "the moss covered bucket." Nearly every kitchen had a cupboard with sides made of wire screen or perforated tin to allow a free circulation of air without admitting flies. Dishes and food were kept in this cabinet which was commonly known as a "safe" but with a number of perpetually hungry children about, the term was something of a misnomer so far as food was concerned.

During the winter months there was a lamentable lack of fresh fruits and green vegetables. As a result many impatient youngsters could not wait for fruit to ripen but often ate green apples or watermelons. Even later when fruit was ripe they stuffed themselves to repletion with plums, peaches, berries, and grapes, as well as green corn and various types of vegetables. The result was often grave disturbance of the digestive system commonly referred to as "summer complaint." Milk was abundant in some areas but very scarce in others where even small children drank strong, black coffee.

Knowledge of what constitutes a proper diet for young children was almost wholly lacking. Babes in arms were fed mashed potatoes, cabbage, spinach, squash, pie, cake, and cookies. While so young that they had only their natural food, they usually remained reasonably healthy, but once they began to be fed such things as would tax the digestion of an adult laborer, it frequently became another story. The type of solid food given to them was probably largely responsible for the widely prevailing belief that the most dangerous period for every baby was "the second summer." In the light of modern medical science it is not surprising that infant mortality was shockingly high, but that any child lived to maturity. As a matter of fact while only the strong and healthy survived, one who lived to the sixth or seventh

year was likely not only to reach manhood or womanhood but to achieve a ripe old age.

Since hospitals were unknown all babies were brought into the world in the primitive homes often without the benefit of any further medical skill or attention than such as could be furnished by some ancient midwife commonly known as a "granny woman." Under such circumstances childbearing was a frightful ordeal accompanied by much suffering and grave danger. The cemeteries scattered about the region that was frontier half a century or more ago have many grave stones inscribed "mother and infant" which tell a tragic story.

The manner of life of the pioneer settler was such that he and the members of his family suffered many minor injuries as cuts, burns, bruises, and abrasions. The children cut their fingers or stepped on nails, thorns, or bits of broken glass. They were stung by bees, wasps, or scorpions, bitten by spiders, or occasionally by a snake, or developed boils and felons, or acquired stone bruises. A foot was sometimes cut open by an ax. Children were hurt at play and there is the old story of the small boy who came running in to tell his mother that: "Oscar got hit in the back of the head by the ball and the bawl came out of his mouth!"

Such injuries were usually of minor importance but there were some that were serious and proper methods of treating them were seldom employed. Common baking soda was put on a sting or bite of an insect while the turpentine bottle was to be found in every household and was brought out upon numerous occasions. Turpentine was applied to bruises or aching joints and sometimes was mixed with lard and rubbed on a sore throat or chest. Other common remedies for bruises, abrasions, or to reduce swelling and inflammation were goose grease, mutton tallow, gizzard oil, or snake oil. Some of these were mixed with turpentine or camphor to insure greater potency.

In addition there were poultices of infinite variety. These were made of bread and milk, onions, flaxseed, scraped beefsteak, hot salt, mustard, poke root, and a host of other substances. They were applied to a boil or "felon" to "draw it to a head" or to any wound, bruise, or sore spot. Mustard plasters were designed to relieve a soreness in the chest. A small chicken was split in halves and one-half of the warm,

quivering flesh applied to a spider bite to "draw out the poison." A snake bite was usually treated by administering a stiff drink of whisky and cutting the wound to make it bleed freely. It was then sometimes cauterized with a hot iron or by pouring a little gunpowder on it which was then ignited with a match or flaming splinter. If a child were bitten on the foot, the entire member was sometimes placed in a pail filled with kerosene.¹

In addition to these home remedies, there were various types of liniments and salves purchased at the local drug store. These were of great variety and included many preparations known by the name of their manufacturer and recommended as "good for man or beast and a sure cure for aches, pains, cuts, bruises, old sores, or burns." Also there were eye salves, eye water, "red precipity," used as a cure for itch, arnica salve, and ointments of many kinds.² Axle grease or tar was sometimes applied to cracked hands, and glycerine to chapped lips, while sweet cream was used to relieve sunburn or skin eruptions due to poison ivy.

Most pioneers had a marked fear of hydrophobia and every community sooner or later had its "mad dog scare."

¹ Indian-Pioneer Papers, University of Oklahoma, III, 340. These Papers contain 116 volumes and an index. They consist of the reminiscences of old-time Indians and early pioneer settlers of Oklahoma. The volumes average about 450 pages each of double-spaced typed material. The collection was made in 1937 and 1938 under the terms of a W.P.A. project sponsored jointly by the Oklahoma Historical Society and the Department of History of the University of Oklahoma, with Dr. Grant Foreman from Muskogee as director. Nearly 100 W.P.A. workers were employed to visit and interview old Indians and early pioneer white settlers and to secure from them statements as to their early experiences in Oklahoma. While some of the statements are quite brief, consisting of not more than three or four pages, many of them are lengthy and may run fifteen to twenty pages or even more. As fast as they were collected, the interviews were transmitted to a central office where a staff of typists under the direction of Dr. Foreman typed them and prepared them for binding, making one carbon. There are but two sets of the Indian-Pioneer Papers in existence. One is in the files of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and the other in the Frank Phillips Collection of the University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. The interviews were arranged alphabetically under the name of the person interviewed throughout the set and the post-office address of each contributor is given. The collection is a mine of information with respect to early life in Oklahoma but must be used with care with respect to dates and events.

² Fort Smith, Arkansas, *Elevator*, September 13, 1889, advertised Hunt's Cure for Itch, and *ibid.*, January 11, 1895, contains advertisements of S.S.S. for Eczema, Bucklen's Arnica Salve, Bond's Cream Eye Salve, and Ballard's Snow Liniment.

Rumors that a rabid dog had appeared in the community created intensive excitement and were carried by the "grapevine telegraph" to everyone in the neighborhood. The men promptly armed themselves with rifles and shotguns loaded with buckshot and tramped the fields and woods in search of the animal, their steps guided by reports of its having been seen at various places in the community. Most of the searchers declared that they would be less alarmed by the knowledge that a ferocious lion was loose in the neighborhood. In the meantime, the women remained close at home and tried to keep the children indoors, regaling one another with horrid tales of someone of whom they had once heard who had been bitten and some days later had gone raving mad. The victim was alleged to have had convulsions, accompanied by foaming at the mouth and an insane desire to bite anyone who came near. In his lucid moments, he was said to have earnestly begged to be put out of his misery but nobody caring to accommodate him, the unfortunate person had suffered frightfully for two or three days and at last died in great agony. The popeyed children who listened to such frightful stories were usually not difficult to keep inside the house. Few of them could have been induced to step outside even for a moment.

When the animal had at last been tracked down and dispatched, the entire community heaved a sigh of relief. Even then, however, the incident was not closed. There still remained the task of slaughtering all dogs that had been bitten or that were even suspected of having been bitten. In consequence faithful old Rover was likely to be sent to the happy hunting ground by a charge of buckshot, secretly if possible to avoid the tears and lamentations of the younger members of the household.

If by chance some person had been bitten by the rabid animal, which was seldom the case, he was immediately rushed to a "madstone" if one could be found in a radius of twenty or thirty miles. The stone which was said to have been taken from the body of a white deer was applied to the wound and if it refused to stick, it meant that there was no poison in the wound and so no cause for worry. On the other hand, if it stuck, there was no doubt but that the deadly germs of hydrophobia were present. When the faithful madstone had decided to call it a day and refused to cling longer

to the wound despite repeated applications, it was regarded as *prima facie* evidence that a complete cure had been effected. The madstone was then placed in a bowl of sweet milk and luried stories were related of how the milk curdled and became green in color from the poison that it had drawn from the wound. In any case, the patient felt safe and returned home relieved of any further concern.

Other animals than dogs were alleged to have hydrophobia in some instances and there were hair-raising stories of experiences with rabid wolves and "hydrophobia cows."³ The bite of the small striped skunk, sometimes known as a "hydrophobia cat," was alleged always to produce hydrophobia. They were dreaded even more than rattlesnakes and any person bitten by one must rush to a madstone immediately. If such a cure was not available, it was commonly believed that he might as well make his will, arrange his world affairs, and, in the words of the old story, start making a preferential list of those he expected to bite when he became mad!

The superstition with respect to the madstone was common on the frontier but was only one of many that related to the prevention or cure of ailments. A man sometimes carried a buckeye in his pocket to ward off rheumatism. A mole's foot was attached to a string and tied about a baby's neck to make cutting teeth easier. Also a small bag of asafetida was worn on a string around the neck of a child to keep away disease germs. Probably there was some justification for this practice since no one cared to go close enough to a child so equipped to transmit any germs to him! The same reasoning may have been responsible for the idea that eating large quantities of onions would prevent taking a cold.

On the frontier the use of internal medicine was quite as prevalent as was the application of salves, ointments, liniments, and plasters to relieve pain or heal minor injuries. There were some attempts to practice preventive medicine, though most of the many concoctions taken to ward off disease apparently had little or no value. In the early months of spring children were given a mixture of sulphur, molasses, and cream of tartar to purify the blood. Also they were dosed

³ Statment of J. M. Ferris, Navajoe, Oklahoma.

with sassafras tea to thin the blood and to make them fit to face the heat of summer. Tonics were of infinite variety. A quart of whisky would be put into a jug and some wild cherry bark, prickly ash berries, and sarsaparilla roots added, and the mixture allowed to stand for several days or until the medicinal properties of the various other elements had become merged with the whisky. A swallow of this taken night and morning was said to prevent malaria, tone up the system, and improve the appetite. Other forms of bitters were made of a brew of sarsaparilla roots, bitter apple, and various additional roots and herbs in order to stimulate the appetite and improve digestion. Rusty nails were put into a bottle of water and a sip of the liquid taken every day to insure plenty of iron in the blood.

As already suggested, digestive disturbances due to improper food or excessive eating were very common especially among children. A tea made of boiling the roots of a plant known as "red root," which grew abundantly in the Southwest, was often given as a remedy for diarrhea, dysentery, or "summer complaint." In fact "teas" were of as wide variety as poultices. In addition to those already named there were sage tea, pennyroyal tea, ginger tea, sarsaparilla tea, beef tea, rhubarb tea, horehound tea, and teas made from blackberry roots, oak bark, or sheep droppings. They were ladled out to children not only for digestive disorders, but also for colds, fever, or general "puniness" and a "run down condition." Commercial tea called "store tea" was widely used in some parts of the North as a beverage but on the southern frontier it seldom appeared except in cases of sickness. The same was true of lemons, rice, and oranges which in many pioneer communities were seldom purchased unless some member of the household was ill.

On the frontier, as today, children attacked by colic due to overloading the stomach with more or less indigestible foods were liberally dosed with castor oil. Appendicitis must have been fairly common but the name was unknown and it was commonly called "inflammation of the bowels." Typhoid fever, usually known as "slow fever," was also prevalent in most cases being acquired from drinking contaminated water from shallow wells. It was treated by giving the patient calomel or "blue mass" and sometimes quinine and limiting his diet to soup and soft foods.

In winter coughs, colds, bronchitis, sore throat, and pleurisy were widespread and pneumonia was by no means uncommon. Every person had his own remedy for a cold which is not too different from the situation today. Soaking the patient's feet in hot water and requiring him to drink a hot lemonade or a large cup of hot ginger tea before going to bed was almost universally regarded as the proper treatment. The masculine members of a household usually regarded a "hot whisky stew" as more effective than either the lemonade or ginger tea but in any case the patient must retire immediately and be covered with heavy blankets so that he might perspire profusely and so "sweat the cold out of his system." A favorite remedy for coughs and colds was whisky in which had been dissolved a considerable quantity of rock candy. In addition there were cough syrups of various types but the most common was made by making a strong tea of horehound leaves, adding sugar and boiling it until a thick syrup was formed. A teaspoonful of this three or four times a day was regarded as a sure cure for a cough.

Malaria was common on nearly every part of the frontier except the high arid plains. This is not surprising with no screens on the doors and windows of the homes which were often near a stream or pond that produced myriads of mosquitoes. The cause of malaria, commonly called "chills and fever," was, however, quite unknown. Some asserted that "chills" were due to eating green watermelons, excessive swimming in the creek, or merely to "being out in the night air." Just what air you were expected to be out in after dark if not "night air" nobody took the trouble to explain. The term malaria obviously means "bad air" but tradition rather than the word was responsible for the pioneer's fear. The remedy was quinine but since gelatine capsules had not yet been invented, it was hard to get it down the youngsters. Sometimes it was dissolved in coffee, or more often wrapped in a piece of soft stewed fruit and gulped down with the hope that the wrapping did not slip while it was still in the mouth. Often a quantity would be added to a quart of whisky and the mixture shaken up and a swallow taken night and morning in chill season as "preventive medicine."

In some sections of the Southern frontier chills were accepted almost as an inevitable part of life and the man who was virtually "shaking the bark off the trees" with a chill

in the late afternoon would be going about his work the following morning singing, whistling, and apparently in the best of health and spirits. In fact one individual, with that trend toward exaggeration characteristic of most pioneers, declared that in his community a man who did not have a chill every other day and an addition to his family every year would hurry to a doctor to find out what was wrong with him!

In addition to quinine, there were on the market numerous "chill tonics" some alleged to be "tasteless" which was usually another example of exaggeration. As a matter of fact, the average pioneer settler, in addition to the use of home remedies spent an astonishingly large percentage of his meager income for medicines both for external and internal use. The local drug store sold huge quantities of "liver regulator," "black draught," liver pills, or "bile beans" all advertised as a sure cure for "biliousness." Of the so-called "patent medicines" there was an infinite variety, some of which are still sold. They included *Peruna*; *Swamp Root*; *Golden Medical Discovery*; *Vegetable Compound*; *Stomach Bitters*; *Wine of Cardui*; *Beef, Iron and Wine*; *Ozomulsion*, and a host of others. Some were recommended for a single disease while others were real "omnibus remedies" alleged to be a sure cure for any or all of a dozen ailments. For infants and young children there was a wide assortment of soothing syrups, cordials, and of course, paregoric, and Castoria.

Makers of patent medicines advertised their wares widely in the weekly papers and especially in the monthly or semi-monthly household journals. Such advertisements sometimes showed the picture of a dejected-looking individual labeled "before taking" and a stalwart physical specimen tagged "after taking." Testimonials from grateful users of the remedy were often printed as: "I was run down and life was a burden but after taking only five bottles of your wonderful medicine, I am now entirely recovered."⁴ Occasionally an advertisement writer essayed verse asserting that:

Used outward or inward it never does harm
As sure as you're faithful it works like a charm

One knowing the virtue, or lack of it, of most charms and

⁴ Fort Smith, Arkansas, *Elevator*, July 15, 1887.

amulets worn by primitive peoples to ward off disease would probably agree that the statement was correct. Another widely circulated bit of blank verse designed to promote the sale of a popular child remedy was as follows:

When baby was sick, we gave her Castoria,
When she was a Child, she cried for Castoria,
When she became Miss, she clung to Castoria,
When she had Children, she gave them Castoria.⁵

The constant repetition of the name could hardly fail to impress it upon the reader and fix in his mind the perennial value of the medicine though on one occasion an over particular Victorian was heard to remark that some mention of a change in "Baby's" marital status should have been indicated prior to the last line!

Other makers of patent medicines also essayed verse in bringing their wares to the attention of the ailing public as the following:

Little spells of fever
Little chills so bland
Make the mighty graveyard
And the angel band.
A little Cheatham's Chill Tonic
Taken now and then
Makes the handsome women
And the healthy men.⁶

There is some evidence that manufacturers of so-called "patent medicines" made an earnest and concerted effort in the eighties and nineties to induce people to substitute such preparations for the old time home remedies of earlier years. Certainly the volume of advertising increased enormously no doubt in part due to the fact that the number of newspaper readers grew rapidly as many additional periodicals were established and the older ones greatly increased their circulation. Makers of numerous proprietary medicines in virtually all of these local newspapers so almost any one of them is typical of a hundred others all of which carried the same advertising matter. The Fort Smith *Elevator*, a four-page weekly periodical, in its issue of July 15, 1887, carried nine-

⁵ *Harper's Weekly* (62 vols., New York, 1857-1916), XXXII, 838 (November 3, 1888). Also Fort Smith, Arkansas, *Elevator*, January 15, 1895, and many other periodicals of this time.

⁶ Fort Smith, Arkansas, *Elevator*, September 13, 1889.

teen advertisements for as many different remedies including two on the front page. Among these medicines were Castoria, Ague Busters, Ayers Sarsaparilla, Prickly Ash Bitters, Dr. King's New Discovery (for consumption), Botanic Blood Balm, Dromgoole's English Female Bitters, Merrell's Penetrating Oil, Tansy Capsules, Shiloh's Vitalizer, and Spark's Blackberry Balsam.

Several of these had disappeared from the pages of this newspaper two years later but there were many new ones including "Malarion," "Arkansaw's Own Famous Liver Remedy," Morley's T-X-S Ague Tonic, Dr. Haine's Golden Specific to cure the liquor habit, Hunt's Cure for Itch, Clarke's Flax Salve, Syrup of Figs, and some others.⁷ Some six years later the names of most of these had vanished from the pages of the *Elevator* and had been replaced by a whole crop of new ones.

The issues of 1895 each usually carried about twenty-five patent medicine advertisements including those for Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery, Brown's Iron Bitters, Ozmantis Oriental Pills, Mother's Friend, Plantation Chill Cure, Dr. Green's Onion Syrup, Herbine, Nerve Seeds, Dr. Miles Heart Cure, Karl's Clover Root, Shiloh's Catarrh Remedy, Electric Bitters, Ballard's Horehound Syrup, and Solalium Carolinense for the cure of fits.⁸ These ads together with those of doctors and dentists occupy approximately one-fourth of some pages of the paper.

It was not only in the small town weeklies, however, that vendors of remedies and medical appliances advertised their wares. The St. Louis *Globe Democrat* carried on its front page advertisements of Nerve Beans, Swayne's Ointment, Bile Beans, and Dr. Owen's Electric Belt and Suspensory.⁹ The last named was a contraption consisting of a number of metal disks strung on a leather strap. It was worn about the waist next to the skin and was alleged to "cure rheumatic complaints, lumbago, general and nervous debility, kidney disease, nervousness, trembling, wasting of the body, etc." The electric belt proved so popular that an enterprising manufacturer designed and placed on sale an "electric ring"

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, January 11, 1895. The last named was made by a doctor in Indianapolis.

⁹ St. Louis, Missouri, *Globe Democrat*, November 29, 1890.

which when worn on the finger was guaranteed to have the same curative properties as did the cumbersome and uncomfortable belt, which was probably true. *Harper's Weekly* also advertised proprietary medicines including Dr. Scott's Electric Plaster described as "combining electro-magnetism with all of the best features of standard porous and other plasters." It was said to cure colds, coughs, chest pains; nervous, muscular and rheumatic pains; stomach, kidney, and liver pains; dyspeptic, malarial and other pains; rheumatism, gout, and inflammation," and the advertiser asserted that:

"They who suffer ache and pain,
Need suffer never more again."¹⁰

Even trade and technical journals of the 1890's carried advertisements of proprietary medicines. The monthly *National Detective and Police Review* published at Indianapolis advertised Carter's Relief for Women, Cancer Cure, and Rupture Cure.¹¹ Many of the medical preparations so widely advertised were made in New York but others were manufactured in Indianapolis, Buffalo, St. Louis, Chattanooga, and various other cities and a few were made in smaller cities and had a considerable local sale.

Most manufacturers of the patent medicines most widely distributed realized that a large part of the frontier population did not in their own language "take a paper." This was especially true of the less literate people to whom the purveyors of such preparations looked for a large part of their customers. In consequence, many such manufacturers published an almanac for distribution through the mails or local drug stores. These were of the type of the old *Farmer's Almanac* established in 1793 by Robert B. Thomas and published in recent years by Little, Brown and Company of Boston.¹² Like their ancestor, these almanacs contained a calendar, astronomical calculations, the names and characters

¹⁰ *Harper's Weekly*, XXXII, 740 (September 29, 1888).

¹¹ *National Detective and Police Review* (Indianapolis, Indiana), VI, August, 1897. Presumably the publication began in 1892. It was listed in the *Indianapolis City Directory* for 1894 and 1895 as the *National Detective* and from 1897 to 1907 as the *National Detective and Police Review*, but does not appear after 1907. It is not listed in the *Union List of Serials in Libraries of the United States and Canada* edited by Winifred Gregory.

¹² See George L. Kittredge, *The Old Farmer and His Almanack* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1920).

of the signs of the Zodiac, the dates of holidays, and much miscellaneous material including household hints, weather forecasts, recipes, advice to farmers, and jokes and anecdotes. On every page, however, the virtues of the remedy were proclaimed in type that could hardly fail to catch the reader's eye. Advertising was yet in its infancy and modern techniques of making the product offered only incidental to the picture of a dizzy blonde in abbreviated costume had not been discovered. The cover of the almanac carried a picture but it was always one designed to fix the attention of the reader upon the remedy. Sometimes it depicted St. George plainly labeled as the medicine, slaying the dragon of disease. Among the pioneers the belief was common that the Indians had much medical lore especially with respect to the curative properties of certain roots and herbs. The cover of one popular almanac pictured an Indian woman pointing to a growing plant and exclaiming to her white sister bowed down with suffering, "The Great Spirit planted it!"

Doctors, except in the towns, were few and far between and most of them had little to recommend them except imposing whiskers and an impressive bedside manner. Yet they made up for their lack of medical skill and scientific knowledge by an enormous energy and conscientious devotion to duty. In sub-zero weather, often through sleet and snow, they traveled many miles in open buggies or on horseback to relieve suffering and minister to those in need of help. They brought to many a household comfort and hope and uncomplainingly made enormous sacrifices and endured frightful hardships to give their poor best to suffering humanity. To them the people of America owe a heavy debt of gratitude.

This scarcity of physicians was obviously responsible for the rapid increase in the sale of proprietary remedies or "mail order" medical treatment. It was also responsible for the early appearance of the traveling doctor with his "medicine show," an institution which was continued well down into the twentieth century. Usually he was a somewhat corpulent individual in striped trousers, a Prince Albert coat, white shirt, and black string tie who appeared on the streets of a western village just after sundown in a large flat truck drawn by two white horses with silver mounted harness. Sitting in chairs on the truck were two or three black-faced comedians vigorously playing a violin and a banjo,

guitar, or accordion. Stopping at the most prominent street corner, these black-faced boys would burst into song and continue until a considerable crowd had gathered. Then the "Doctor" would stand and in a deep, sonorous voice begin his speech:

"Ladies and Gentlemen: I am traveling about over the country trying to bring aid to suffering humanity. We have not come out here this evening to try to sell you anything but only that we may all have a good time—" "Yum, yum," would interpose one of the comedians, "Ain't we a-gwine hab a *good time*!" "Shut up, Sam," the doctor would exclaim. "Now, folks, we are not interested in making money or selling you something but only in helping you to feel better and in curing any ailments you may have. I look at you men standing there and I can see that some of you have a dull ache in the back, and twinges of pain in your shoulders and legs." The villager who had worked at a forge all day sharpening plows, or shoeing horses, and the farmers who had hoed corn since sunrise and then dropped over to town to do an errand would look at one another and nod knowingly. It took no great stretch of imagination to make them feel the dull aches and twinges so aptly described by the wise doctor. Having planted the seed, the doctor proceeded to cultivate the crop certain of a reasonably bountiful harvest. "Now, men," he would continue, "In my laboratories at home I've worked for years hoping to find a preparation that would cure cases just like yours and at last I found it. Here it is, gentlemen, Dr. X's Marvelous Elixir. Take one tablespoonful and that dull ache will vanish as if by magic and if you'll take a dose night and morning for three weeks, I'll guarantee that it will never come back. You'll have a better appetite, feel better than ever before in your life, and be able to do a full day's work without that run-down, wornout feeling you now have. Only a dollar a bottle for anybody that wants one and you'll say it's the biggest dollar's worth you ever saw in your lives. Step right up, gentlemen, who'll be first?"

After one or two had stepped forward and rather sheepishly tendered a dollar, the contagion grew and there was likely to be a rush to exchange dollars for bottles of the Elixir. When sales began to fall off, a brief recess was held and the black-face boys played again and sang more songs while others joined the little crowd. Then sales were re-

sumed and continued until all customers had been supplied after which one of the boys mounted to the driver's seat and, with the others gaily singing and playing, the truck was driven to the camping place that had been selected just beyond the edge of town.

There were of course many variations. Some proprietors of medicine shows dispensed several remedies including liniments, salves, an "inhaler" for catarrh and colds in the head, or soap "made from the roots of the Mexican yucca." There were also traveling "corn doctors" who usually displayed a large box of corns and calluses taken from the feet of former customers. It is doubtful if the preparations sold by these itinerant shows had any curative effects but they at least gave to those who "enjoyed poor health" a new remedy to try and the entertainment features brought a little color and excitement to drab and monotonous lives.

Dentists were even more rare on the frontier than were general practitioners, though one or two could usually be found at the more important towns. They advertised extensively in the local newspapers offering their services at prices that would shock present day members of the profession. "A fine set of false teeth" was offered for eight dollars and teeth would be extracted "without pain" at twenty-five cents each.¹³ Outside the larger towns, however, people paid virtually no attention to their teeth unless one began to ache. Then a hot poultice would be applied to the jaw or a cavity stuffed with a bit of cotton soaked in laudanum or some form of "toothache drops." The loose milk tooth of a child was pulled by the father or mother with the fingers or yanked out by looping a bit of thread about it and giving a quick jerk or tying one end of the thread to the open door and suddenly closing it. The youngster was always told that if he did not put his tongue into the vacant space a gold tooth would grow there but never found it possible to test the truth of this assertion. If an adult's aching tooth could not be eased by poultices or medicated cotton, it was sometimes knocked out with a chisel or screwdriver and hammer, or pulled by means of a pair of bullet molds in the hands of a husky neighbor.¹⁴

¹³ Fort Smith, Arkansas, *Elevator*, January 11, 1895.

¹⁴ Statement of J. M. Ferris, Navajoe, Oklahoma.

A traveling dentist equipped with a small case of tools of his craft would sometimes appear in a community but he seldom did more than pull bad teeth and give some advice as to the care of those left. When an individual had very few teeth left, eating became a serious problem but many managed to struggle along with surprisingly few. There is an ancient story to the effect that one old lady at an experience meeting expressed her thanks to the Lord that she still had "two teeth left and they hit."

When false teeth became absolutely necessary, a trip was made to the nearest dentist which sometimes required a journey of two or three days. Once there, impressions were made and the patient returned home to receive his teeth two or three weeks later by mail. Naturally they seldom fit well and were usually worn in a pocket most of the time and placed in the mouth only when required for eating or when visitors appeared.

In addition to traveling doctors and dentists, spectacle salesmen also peddled their wares throughout many frontier areas and persons with failing eyesight fitted themselves with glasses by the simple method of trying on a number of pairs and choosing the one with which they could see best. There is an old story to the effect that one such salesman stopped at a country store in the Ozark Mountain region on a Saturday afternoon and, observing that nearly every man of the considerable number of loafers assembled there had a red mark across the bridge of his nose, was very hopeful of doing a big business. To his disappointment, however, he was solemnly informed that none of these men had ever worn glasses but had acquired these marks in drinking corn whisky out of a fruit jar!

While physicians and dentists were very few on the frontier, it was usually possible to obtain the services of either if the emergency were sufficiently grave but often only after considerable delay. Trained nurses, however, were unknown. Sometimes there might be found in a community a woman who would care for sick people for hire but this was unusual. Such a woman would today be called a "practical nurse" but it must be admitted that if one of these could be found on the frontier, she was as a rule, to paraphrase Voltaire, "neither practical nor a nurse." At best she was only a person with considerable experience in the sick room

who was willing to come into a home and work on a twenty-four hour shift for the duration of the emergency getting what sleep or recreation she could when relieved by relatives or friends of the patient.

Of professional nursing, however, there was virtually none. A sick person was cared for by members of his family and kindly neighbors who were always ready and willing to lend assistance. "Sitting up with the sick," was regarded as the plain duty of everyone if the need arose and some persons achieved a local reputation as humanitarians by virtue of being "so good to wait on the sick." If anyone in the community became seriously ill, it was expected that his family would notify the neighbors, and any failure to do so was regarded almost as an affront. It was only necessary to pass on the word of illness in a family to a very few. The grapevine functioned with amazing efficiency and kindly persons hastened to call to bring special dainties to tempt the patient's appetite and to offer their services to "sit up" or to aid in any other possible fashion. Usually two or three would come in each evening and do some quiet visiting as they watched from an adjoining room. During the day there were likely to be many visitors to inquire about the situation and to sit and talk with the patient unless the latter were so ill that it was deemed inadvisable to admit any "company" to the sick room.

It must be confessed that an occasional visitor to the sick might be characterized as a "Job's comforter" whose influence was far from salutary. Such a person would come in on tiptoe, seat himself by the bed, and after a long survey of the patient would shake his head sorrowfully and remark: "You must be pretty bad, Bill; I don't like your color. You look a lot like my uncle Joe did just before he passed on." If the patient protested that he felt much better than he had the day before, the visitor would again shake his head and continue: "Yes, Uncle Joe did, too. He rallied a little right at the last and then all at once went out just like a light." By the time the pessimistic individual had at last departed, the patient was likely to be in a cold sweat of fear and to feel that at any minute he might begin "picking at the cover," which among pioneer peoples was regarded as a sure sign of impending death.

Fortunately such gloomy visitors were very few. Most persons who came to call upon the sick brought not only food and flowers, and help to the overburdened family but something even more important—cheerfulness and sunshine and a breath of the pure air of the world outside. Among a people who lacked all modern facilities for the care of the suffering the kindly helpfulness of friends and neighbors robbed illness of much of its terror for the patient and his family alike. Many a person at last rose from a sick bed with a heart filled with gratitude for many favors and a spirit humbled and chastened by the knowledge that so many whom he had formerly regarded with indifference had, in his hour of need, proved themselves true and devoted friends. Undoubtedly illness often served to strengthen the bonds of friendship and helped to promote that neighborly feeling and community consciousness so characteristic of the American pioneers.

With the passing of the years, the old frontier days and ways began to disappear. Manners and customs were changing and this was as apparent in medical practices as in everything else. The coming of railroads brought in a larger population, towns grew up, and with economic advancement more physicians came in to open offices and begin a medical practice. They were, moreover, men of far more training and skill, in most cases, than had been the old-time frontier doctors. Hospitals supplied with modern equipment were established. Graduate nurses became available. The old home remedies gave way to the prescriptions of physicians and even the rage for patent medicines began to abate as scientific investigations were made proving many of them worthless. Some standard remedies are still sold but many preparations disappeared from the market and the sale of others was far less than formerly, though weekly and daily newspapers still advertise some proprietary medicines. New remedies appeared on the shelves of the pharmacies and new treatments of disease were evolved. In addition many of the ailments that had formerly afflicted the pioneers have largely disappeared.

Only in a few backward communities do the old medical practices still persist in the nature of "fossil remains" of customs that half a century or more ago were virtually universal, at least in the rural districts of most states west of

the Mississippi River and in many east of that stream. A long and intensive study of the medical practices of the American people in the West during the past three-quarters of a century and of how they have changed would undoubtedly produce a worthwhile contribution to the field of social history.