

Lydia -- The Saga of a Patent Medicine

By Irma West, MD

No woman had her face on as many bottles and barns as Lydia E. Pinkham! She became part of American folk culture, inspiring poems and songs, some of which were sung at fraternity parties with endless bawdy verses. The Lydia E. Pinkham

Medicine Company of Lynn, Massachusetts operated almost a century, from 1875 to 1968, earning at its peak \$3 million annually.

Going into the patent medicine business was the last thing on Lydia's mind when she was growing up in a wealthy Quaker family with 10 older and one younger siblings. The parents

were well-educated political and religious dissidents who supported the Abolitionist, Temperance and Suffragist movements. Lydia was born in 1819 and grew into a tall, slender woman with auburn hair. She married Isaac Pinkham, who kept the family in precarious financial straits with his many failed business and farming enterprises. Four sons and a daughter joined them. As was the custom, most households grew their own medicinal herbs. Mrs. Pinkham collected a great deal of information on medicinal plants and arrived at a formula, which she prepared on the kitchen stove for her family's and neighbors' female ailments. Soon, others were beating a path to her door.

Following the panic of 1873, the bank was foreclosing on all the Pinkham property. The family was sitting around the kitchen table deciding the next move when a group of ladies from Salem came to the door to ask for Lydia's compound. Dan decided that, if women were willing to come that far for the product, there must be a market for their mother's "medicine." Thus was born the Lydia E. Pinkham Company. The whole family was involved in the enterprise, with Dan and Will skillfully marketing the product far and wide. Eventually, the next generation took it over.

The product was called a vegetable compound to distinguish it from mineral medications such as calomel (mercury), used by the "regular" doctors, which had become suspect. The compound was advertised as pleasant to taste and productive of immediate results.

In 1876, the label and trademark were registered with the United States Patent Office. The contents, a trade secret, were 8 oz. Unicorn root, 6 oz. Life root, 6 oz. Black cohosh, and 6 oz. Pleurisy root suspended in alcohol to make 100 pints (19 % alcohol). The alcohol was necessary as a solvent and preservative. All but the Fenugreek seed were native to North America. The formula (excluding

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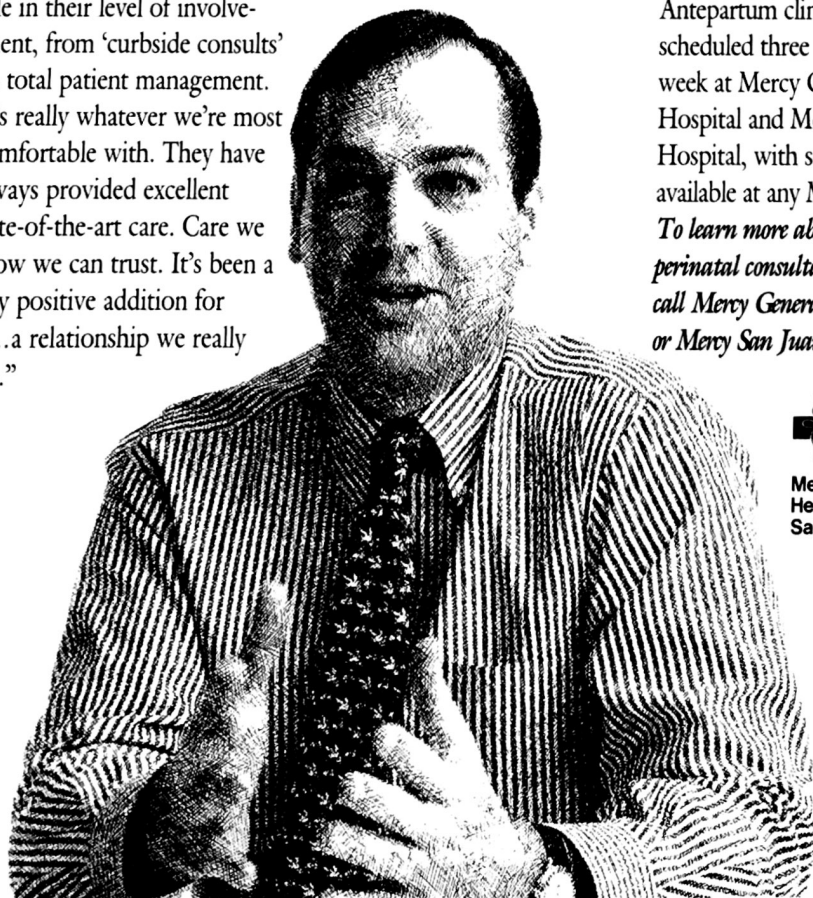
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the Fenugreek) was drawn from *Medical Dispensatory* by Dr. King, an Eclectic physician whose followers included Mrs. Pinkham. Each ingredient was recommended for a variety of female problems -- prolapsed uterus, menstrual cramps, leucorrhoea, miscarriage, uterine inflammation, labor and post-natal pain -- as well as an abortifacient. Fenugreek seed was added for good measure because of its ancient reputation as an aphrodisiac. The dose was three spoonful a day. Advertising claims to cure all female "weaknesses," though extravagant, were typical of an age without truth-in-advertising mandates.

In order to understand the long-lived popularity of Mrs. Pinkham's compound, it is helpful to review the medical climate of the day. From the turn of the century until the Civil War, orthodox medicine was heavily influenced by Dr. Benjamin Rush, who preached heroic medicine with bleeding, purging and blistering, along with harsh medications such as calomel and tartar emetic. Skepticism of this widespread treatment was expressed by a growing number of alternate medical movements. The AMA was organized in 1830 to combat the rise of these alternate practitioners, who were deemed quacks.

By the 1830s, Thomsonianism, with its system of do-it-yourself medical manuals on how to use herbal preparations, had gained wide popularity. By mid-century, it was supplanted by homeopathy, which replaced foul tasting botanicals with pleasant pills that had no side effects. Like Thomsonians, the homeopaths encouraged self-treatment. Other "natural" treatments like hydrotherapy were also popular at this time, as were diet gurus like Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg, who also encouraged self-treatment and warned against doctors. By 1857, more than 1500 patent medicines were on the market.

Secondary factors contributing to the success of Mrs. Pinkham and her ilk

were the societal and medical attitudes toward women and female sexuality at the time. Upper-and middle-class women were confined to the home and domestic duties deemed weak of mind and body, too delicate for mental activity, and victims of a host of female ailments. Mrs. Pinkham's remedy met the perceived needs of the women of her day.

In 1938, the FDA ruled Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound had no gynecological therapeutic value; the ruling was contested and further study revealed that the compound contained estrogenic material similar to those currently used in treating gynecological problems. Lydia had the last laugh on those who disparaged her medicine!

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