

Good For What Ails You



Dating back to colonial America and reaching its peak of popularity in the 19th century, “magic elixirs” were sold with the promise that they could cure just about every ailment known to mankind. In the 1800s, snake-oil salesmen would travel from town to town, selling their questionable and highly unregulated patent medicines to unsuspecting citizens. Some examples include “Morley’s Liver & Kidney Cordial,” “Grove’s Tasteless Chill Tonic,” and Dr. Potter’s “Chock-A-Saw-Sagwa Tonic.” Oftentimes, these “medicines” contained alcohol, cocaine, or heroine which may have relieved pain but were also highly addictive, all but assuring a strong repeat customer base for the salesman.

It is amazing to find any that have survived and continue to exist. And yet, there is at least one.

In 1826, as a reward for a kindness done to one of their chieftains, the Creek Indians bequeathed to Captain Irwin Dennard of Perry Georgia the formula for a treasured remedy made from swamp sumac from Alabama, Queen’s Delight (a root from South Georgia), and sumac from North Georgia. Dennard sat on the formula for a few decades but eventually passed it onto Charles Swift who partnered with Henry J Lamar, the great grandfather of my grand aunt. Henry suggested moving to Atlanta to take advantage of the transportation benefits of the railroads to be found there as they grew their new company.

Marketing the formula as SSS Tonic (the three S's stood for Swift's Southern Specific) the owners claimed that it was an effective treatment for dyspepsia, cancer and syphilis. In the 1950s, singer Eddy Arnold made a commercial touting its ability to enrich the blood with iron. The original formula of roots and herbs has not significantly changed since its early days although it is now fortified with iron and vitamins.

SSS Tonic continues to be sold today. In 1997 it earned nine million dollars in annual sales and is still paying dividends to some of our family members, or so I'm told.

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