“A History of Snake Oil Salesmen” by Lakshmi Gandhi

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'A History Of 'Snake Oil Salesmen'

The main purpose of the author in this article is to explain the history of the evocative phrase “Snake Oil Salesman”. How it begins, and how it remolded into being defined as "a quack remedy or panacea." The author also emphasis on how a Chinese remedy used since ages transforms in a way to maximise profits by the capitalists.

The article starts by defining the phrase “Snake Oil Salesman” and adds how it is perceived as the image of a seedy profiteers trying to exploit an unsuspecting public by selling it fake cures. Additionally, the author also quotes the definition of this phrase from the Oxford English Dictionary as “a quack remedy or panacea."

Moreover, the author writes down how the phrase ‘Snake Oil Salesman’ has been the favorite go-to phrase for the politicians. The author gave many examples where politicians like ‘Kentucky Sen’, ‘Mitch McConnell’, ‘Barack Obama’ and organizations like ‘Natural Resources Defense Council Action Fund’ used this phrase depicting how unreliable or overpromising their opponents were.

Moving further, the author tells the true history of the “Snake Oil” and tells how the 1800s saw thousands of Chinese workers arriving in the USA as labourers and because they worked very hard the medicine they brought with them – The Snake Oil helped them immensely to reduce inflammations, treating arthritis and bursitis. Seeing how effective the Snake Oil was, many American workers too started using the Snake Oil as a remedy.

However, it was not long after, this legitimate medicine becomes a symbol of fraud. During the latter half of 19th century ‘patent medicines’ were at a high rise and many Americans wondered how could they make their own snake oil in the United States itself? Because of the lack of Chinese water snakes in the American landscape, many healers began using rattlesnakes to make their own version of the Snake oil.

Clark Stanley aka The Rattlesnake King published a pamphlet in 1897 about how he (a former cowboy) learned about the healing power of rattlesnake oil from Hopi medicine man. In 1893, he created a huge stir at the World’s Exposition in Chicago, where he took a live snake a slicked it open and created the ‘Stanley’s Snake Oil’ in front of a large gathering.

But the ‘Stanley’s Snake Oil’ came with two major problems:

First, the Rattlesnake oil was far less effective than the original Chinese Snake oil. (About one-third less effective than the original Chinese Snake Oil.)

Second, the Stanley’s Snake Oil didn’t contain any snake oil at all. After an investigation it was found out that the oil only contained mineral oil, beef fat, red pepper and turpentine and not even a single drop of Snake Oil.

It was after this point the Snake Oil became a symbol of fraud and the Snake Oil Salesman became stock character in American Westerns. In 1927 ‘Stephen Vincent Benet’ in his poem and in 1956 ‘Eugene O’Neill’ in his play used this phrase to depict someone who did fraudulent activities.

After finding out that Clark Stanley was a fraud and misguided people, he was fined $20, and he didn’t dispute the charges.

The most important ideas coved by the author in this article are:

1. The Snake Oil has a great history from Chinese culture then being imported and used in the American culture.
2. The phrase Snake Oil Salesman has now been converted and perceived as “a quack remedy or panacea." And is used by many politicians.
3. In the latter half of the 19th century the Snake oil started to be produced by many local Americans as patent medicines and lacked the main ingredient the Snake oil.
4. One of the leading people, in this fraudulent case was Clark Stanley, who used Rattlesnake instead of the original Chinese water snake for production of the oil.
5. Later, after an investigation it was found out that the Stanley’s Snake oil didn’t even contain a single drop of Snake oil, and he was fined $20.