



PATENT MEDICINES

The term “patent medicine” is wrong. They were not patented. They were not medicines. They consisted of vegetable extracts, chemicals, alcohol and addictive drugs. The term “patent medicine” came from 17th century England. The British Crown granted “Letters of Patent” to manufacturers who provided medicines to the royal family. Soon, anyone could apply for a “Letter of Patent” to make and sell remedies to the public. This practice came to North America in the 17th and 18th centuries.

By 1865, the patent medicine industry in the United States was big business. Most patent “cures” contained 15% to 75% alcohol. Many manufacturers added morphine, cocaine or heroin as painkillers. There were no laws that required manufacturer’s to prove their outrageous claims. No laws required them to list ingredients on their labels. By 1900, there were 1,000,000 patent medicines for sale in the United States. Newspapers were a key factor in their popularity.

Literacy in the United States rose after the Civil War. Newspapers also grew rapidly. In 1900, patent medicine manufacturers invested over twenty million dollars per year in newspaper advertising. The largest patent medicine companies formed “The Proprietary Association of America.” It required newspapers to sign “Contracts of Silence” containing “Red Clauses.” These ended advertising contracts if any state passed a law that restricted or prohibited the manufacture or sale of patent medicines. As a result, newspapers did not speak out against the false claims and damaging effects of patent medicines.

The “Medicine Show” was another popular advertising method. A traveling troupe of performers provided entertainment that would attract a crowd. When a group had assembled, a self-proclaimed “Professor” or “Doctor” appeared to proclaim the healing properties of his particular medicine. Shills in the audience would come forward to be “healed” by taking a spoonful of the “cure.” This supposedly “proved” its effectiveness. Medicine shows flourished in the Midwest and the South between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I.

The vast majority of patent medicines were harmful to a person’s health or did nothing at all. Their end began when journalist Samuel Hopkins Adams exposed the dangerous ingredients and harmful effects of patent medicines in a *Collier’s Magazine* series entitled, “The Great American Fraud.” These articles combined with Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, led to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which opened the door to eliminating unlabeled or unsafe ingredients and to the prohibition of misleading advertising.