

**Pioneer Cure-Alls:  
The Use of Home Remedies and Patent Medicines  
In Rural Saskatchewan, 1900-1930**

Prepared for  
**AWinning the Prairie Gamble@**

by Joan Champ

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**Storyline Notes for Section Two: **A**he Settler Experience@  
Component 2.1.4:  
**A**he Health Story Before 1920"**

The purpose of this research paper is to provide information for the development of the **A**Winning the Prairie Gamble@WTPG) exhibits, both within the Saskatoon branch and **A**he Saskatchewan Story@projects at the other three branches of the Western Development Museum. This introductory page provides the context for the incorporation of the story of the use of home remedies and patent medicines in the province into Section Two of the Saskatoon WTPG exhibit.

The focus of Section Two is on establishing the farm in the early years of Saskatchewan. This section deals with events, problems and issues associated with the formative years. The main feature of Section Two will be a recreated sod house. The thematic links include: the isolation and associated loneliness of the new settlers; hardship and perseverance; the importance of mechanized means of farming (in this case, the lack of); the effect of World War I on the settlers; health issues (particularly the Spanish Flu Epidemic); political organization and solidarity of farm people; early farming by Aboriginal peoples; the early prairie grain economy; the importance of religion within farm communities; and role of women in **A**winning the prairie gamble.@

The interpretation of the story of the use of home remedies and patent medicines in Saskatchewan in this component will emphasize the isolation and hardships faced by early settlers. Distance from health care providers and economic considerations meant that the pioneers had to be self-sufficient and resourceful in the face of illness or injury. Farm family caregivers, almost always women, sought medical recipes and advice from a variety of sources, including other rural women and the editors of the women's pages of farm magazines. As Norah Lewis writes, these formed **A**peer and generational support network.@

[R]egardless of cultural or ethnic background, whether newcomers or old-timers, shared common experiences of isolation, loneliness, bereavement, poverty and other problems inherent in rural life. ... Because the medical recipes came from **A**near sisters=with whom they had much in common, they tended to accept their advice as true. ... Additionally, western women had learned to be practical, and the medical recipes offered...were inexpensive, the materials were readily accessible, and the treatments were actions women could take when their children or husbands fell ill. Women believed it was better to do something and fail than to do nothing and watch their loved ones suffer.<sup>1</sup>

**Pioneer Cure-Alls:**

<sup>1</sup>Norah L. Lewis, **A**Goose Grease and Turpentine: Mother Treats the Family Illness,@n *Prairie Forum* (Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 1990), 81.

## The Use of Home Remedies and Patent Medicines in Saskatchewan

*I used a lot of home remedies. The first thing I did when I went on the homestead was pay \$10 for a doctor book. And all those little ailments children get, I took care of, because we lived 15 miles from town and travelled by horses. When you had sick children, you could kill them just by taking them on that trip.<sup>2</sup>*

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, settlers living on isolated prairie homesteads had to be resourceful when it came to health care. Medical assistance might be miles away, and roads were often impassable at certain times of the year. Treating the illness at homes saved hours of travel time and the discomfort of a trip over rough roads.

Geography was not the only factor in determining at what point the caregiver would call a doctor. Cost was also a deterrent. A 1955 pioneer survey conducted by the Saskatchewan Archives Board found that, in attempt to avoid crushing medical bills, doctors were not called until the last possible moment. **A**We only went [to a doctor] when we thought we would die if we didn't. Mrs. Morehouse wrote. She recalled that a visit from the Swift Current doctor, 75 miles away from her farm, cost her family \$50 per trip. One dollar per mile was the standard fee charged by doctors during the early 1900s, thus, the further the distance, the greater the doctor's fee. Many respondents to the questionnaire recall paying up to \$25.00 or \$30.00 per home call.<sup>3</sup>

Most pioneers brought with them to their new homes a wealth of old family cures; some included medicine, first aid supplies and even **A**doctor books in their effects.<sup>4</sup> As more and more settlers arrived in Saskatchewan bringing their traditional home remedies with them, people shared their remedies and knowledge with their neighbours until they became common knowledge.

Care of the sick and injured took place at home and was generally the task of women. Rural women found an important source of medical advice in the women's pages of weekly and monthly farm and ranch magazines such as *The Farmer's Advocate*, *The Northwest Farmer*, and *The Grain Grower's Guide*. Columnists in these magazines recommended that farm families maintain a locked chest of drugs for treating illnesses. These drugs included: spirits of camphor, spirits of turpentine, linseed (flaxseed oil), sassafras oil, olive oil, Epsom salts, laudanum,

<sup>2</sup>Rasmussen, *et al*, Mrs. Elizabeth Akitt, Edmonton, interview, 1973, quoted on 68.

<sup>3</sup>Mrs. Morehouse of Wallard, as quoted in Angela J. Boyd., *Pioneer Health; Analysis of a Survey of the Health of Saskatchewan Residents, 1878-1914*, [Regina: Occupational Health Branch, Saskatchewan Department of Public Health, 1971], 22-23.

<sup>4</sup>Many families owned either *Dr. Chase's Recipes: or Information for Everybody: An Invaluable Collection of over 1000 Recipes*, *Gardner's Household Medicine and Sick Room Guide*, or *A Doctor at Home and Nurses Guide Book*, available through Eaton's Catalogue.

bromide of sodium, Belladonna, compound of spirits of ether, morphine, essence of pepsin, boracic acid ointment, laxative salts, glycerine, vaseline, listerine, absorbent cotton and surgical linen bandages. All of these items could be purchased through Eaton's catalogue.<sup>5</sup>

Few homesteaders could afford to buy all, or any, of these medicines. Practical farm women preferred not to pay for treatment of routine illnesses such as coughs, colds, skin irritations, chilblains, rheumatism, boils and infected wounds. Instead they made use of what was available to them--the contents of their cupboards, pantries and gardens.

## Home Recipes

Pioneers often turned to farm produce and other supplies that they had on hand to provide relief for the sick (see list below). *The People's Home Library* contains a home medical book written by Dr. T.J. Ritter in 1910. In addition to providing descriptions and symptoms of diseases, Dr. Ritter included a collection of simple recipes for home remedies that could be used in the humblest home. For example: Let a quarter of a pound of cayenne pepper stand for 10 days in a pint of alcohol, the doctor's book states, And you will have one of the best liniments ever used for rheumatism.

Most home remedies were well known by the early pioneers. Warm goose grease alone, or mixed with sulphur and lard, was commonly used for chest colds or sore throats. In her reminiscences, Gladys Allen recalls:

My mother rubbed a congested chest with goose oil and to the end of her days believed in its therapeutic properties. ... She used soda for bites and cold tea leaves for burns; salt in water to gargle a sore throat; senna tea for a laxative and speckack or sulphur and molasses for a spring tonic. Above all she was always serene and after listening to our complaints, if we felt out of sorts, would invariably say, Well, we'll see how it is in the morning.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Norah L. Lewis, Goose Grease and Turpentine: Mother Treats the Family Illness, in *Prairie Forum* (Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 1990), 69-70. Lewis notes that approximately 750 chemicals or drugs in twenty-five categories, and approximately 250 patent medicines were listed for sale in Eaton's catalogue.

<sup>6</sup>Ritter, T.J., *The People's Home Medical Book; Book I of the People's Home Library* (Toronto: Imperial Publishing Co., 1919), 212; 26.

<sup>7</sup>Allen, Gladys (Billie) L., *Dew Upon the Grass* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1963), 43.

Coal oil for lamps or lanterns was used for a variety of purposes, including as cough syrup (when mixed with sugar). Again, Gladys Allen writes:

My brother Don was what Mother called a **roupy child**. He would go to bed as healthy as a trout and suddenly in the night we would hear his ominous coughing... Her cure was to give the unfortunate little fellow half a teaspoon of coal-oil, which she would take from one of the lamps. In larger doses I'm sure it would be lethal, but nevertheless it did alleviate his breathing...<sup>8</sup>

Coal oil was also used and as a cure for head lice and bed bugs. Even cow manure was utilized as a heat-providing poultice.<sup>9</sup>

### Herbal Remedies

In the 1955 pioneer survey referred to above, several respondents stated that herbal remedies were often quite reliable. Such remedies included **A** flax reed poultice for chest colds, chewed hazel bark to wrap around an injured finger, black poplar buds in lard as an ointment, and skairish root tea for a dropsy victim.<sup>10</sup> Onions were used for a variety of medicinal purposes, including in plasters and poultices. While some of these remedies had their origins in the country of origin of the homesteaders, others were learned from the Aboriginal peoples of the prairies.

My wife's baby sister had dysentery which the M.D. could not cure, and they thought she would die and then a Blackfoot squaw brought in a bunch of wild prairie flowers to steep in a tea and this cured it up promptly. I think the flowers were called **A**arrow.<sup>11</sup>

*The People's Home Medical Book* has an entire section devoted to herbal remedies. The author, Dr. Ritter, acknowledges that many of these remedies were learned from Aboriginal peoples.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Kay Flury, **A**ioneer Cure-Alls, *in Folklore* (Autumn 1985), 20-21.

<sup>10</sup>Boyd, 79.

<sup>11</sup>Mr. Bray of Wolseley, as quoted in Boyd, 78. In large doses, yarrow was also used to suppress ovulation as a form of contraception.

The book reports that the roots of Blue Bells, for example, were used by Indians to produce sweating in fevers and pleurisies; they used Bellwort for wounds, sores and snake bites; and Blue Lobelia for blood diseases.<sup>12</sup>

Knowledge gained from Canada's Native peoples about herbal-based self-treatment was frequently shared in the women's sections of farm newspapers and magazines. Letter writers using pseudonyms such as Patient Mary, and Prairie Chicken suggested recipes for cough remedies using wild violets (which when boiled with water was deemed Not bad tasting) and sage leaves (boiled with sugar and a little vinegar).<sup>13</sup>

One Indian herbal remedy that became quite widespread was Devil's Club. In 1913 Christina, a reader of the *Free Press and Prairie Farmer* from the Quesnel area of British Columbia, offered free to expectant mothers this wild root, reporting that it was used by local Indians to ease the pains of childbirth. The response was so overwhelming that, by 1915, she had started a small business, packaging and selling Devil's Club as Mrs. Feund's Compound Tea. Mrs. Beatrice Vincent, a pioneer woman who had twelve children without the assistance of a midwife or a doctor, provides the following testimonial to Christina's herb:

I saw an advertisement in the *Free Press* about Indians using herbs to cut down labor pains and they were a dollar a box. So I thought, well I'll send for a box anyway. And as soon as labor pains started I took a cupful of these herbs that was steeped in water and that took out all the labor pains.<sup>14</sup>

## Alcohol

During the pioneer period alcohol was considered a cure-all for everything. One of the most popular forms of self-medication, it was used as a preventative, a cure, or simply as a tonic. Alcohol had a soothing effect, creating the impression that something was being done. Many pioneers made use of spirits with a genuine belief in their medicinal value. Responding to the 1955 pioneer survey, Mrs. Morehouse of Wallard wrote: Our neighbour...always kept a bottle of Brandy for ailments and no one dared use it without being awfully sick and many a person was glad she had it. Mother took only Brandy and milk for 8 weeks for Typhoid.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Ritter, 307-308.

<sup>13</sup>Lewis, 73.

<sup>14</sup>Linda Rasmussen, *et al*, *A Harvest Yet to Reap; A History of Prairie Women* [Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976], 76.

<sup>15</sup>Boyd, 83.

After Prohibition came into effect in 1915, Mrs. Kennedy of Indian Head recalls:

According to the law, no alcoholic beverages could be had but by a doctor's prescription. One could get a permit signed by a J.P. , the postmaster, or a member of the R.C.M.P. It was one of the simplest things in life to get the necessary John Henry. I happen to know that on one occasion my name was used three times in one winter for a gallon of hard liquor and I was supposed to be 100% strong for temperance and all it stood for. There was more drink used under prohibition than there was after High License was the law. During prohibition every drouthy man knew where he could get the next bottle and it was generally considered a panacea for all ills. If anything went wrong in the shape of ordinary illness, soaking up as much whisky as possible was usually resorted to, and if they recovered the bottle got the credit and if they went under it was a dispensation of Providence--a nice way of placing the blame.<sup>16</sup>

### Patent Medicines

As the flow of immigrants into Western Canada increased and postal services became available from the small railroad towns, pioneers were increasingly able to add ready-made or patent medicines to their supply of health remedies. Patent medicine refers to packaged medicinal preparations--syrups, elixers, pills-- that bear distinctive, registered names. These products were not actually patented, nor was their production and advertising regulated. Manufactured mainly in the United States and marketed as the poor man's medicine, patent medicines reached their heyday around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Saskatchewan homesteaders were exposed to the wide-ranging and incredible claims for patent medicines in advertisements found in farm newspapers and magazines. For example, in January 1905, an advertisement for alerted readers that another epidemic of the Grippe was on its way. The medical men are not afraid of Grippe since Catarrhzone was introduced and claim that no one will ever catch this disease who inhales the fragrant healing vapor of Catarrhzone a few times daily. The most perfect remedy ever devised for weak and delicate women is Dr. Pierce's Favorite Prescription, reads a 1912 advertisement. It makes weak women strong, sick women well. The makers of Dr. Wood's Norway Pine Syrup claimed to cure both pneumonia and consumption (tuberculosis) with the essence and lung healing powers of the famous Norway Pine tree.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 84.

<sup>17</sup>the Grippe Coming Again, in *Western Home Monthly* (January 1905); Dr. Pierce's Favorite Prescription, in *The Northwest Farmer* (March 20, 1912); Next to Consumption there are More Deaths From Pneumonia, in *The Northwest Farmer* (February 20, 1913).

Patent medicine makers were not required to list the habit-forming ingredients on the labels of their products. Many popular products contained alcohol or narcotics such as morphine, cocaine or opium. Laudanum, for example, was a common ingredient in the so-called **A**oothing syrups<sup>18</sup> frequently administered to restless babies in pioneer times. Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound contained between 15% and 19% alcohol.<sup>18</sup> Members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) became **A**well aware that Hostetter's Bitters and Peruna might provide an unwitting or a secret tipple,<sup>19</sup> writes James Harvey Young. **A**hrough pamphlets, speeches and propaganda in schools, they battled the demon rum disguised as medicine.<sup>19</sup>

Pressure from women's magazines such as *The Ladies Home Journal* and *Colliers* led to the passage in 1906 of a new law in the United States requiring patent medicine makers to list narcotic ingredients on their product labels. Governmental control of the content of claims of patent medicines was implemented in Canada in 1909 with the passage of **A**he Proprietary or Patent Medicine Act.<sup>20</sup> These laws had little impact on the patent medicine trade, however. Manufacturers simply changed their formulas, changing ingredients at will. In addition, poisons such as arsenic and strychnine could be left off the labels. It was not until the late 1930s that tougher legislation was introduced requiring patent medicine makers to prove that their drugs were safe when taken as directed. Since the U.S. Congress passed the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act of 1938, the most obviously harmful patent medicines disappeared almost entirely from the North American market.<sup>20</sup>

Columnists in the women's sections of Canadian farm journals also warned their readers about the dangers of patent medicines. Mrs. John Fyfe, editor of the **A**mother and Home<sup>21</sup> department in *The Nor<sup>22</sup>West Farmer*, wrote the following in 1915:

<sup>18</sup>*Nostrums and Quackery; Articles on the Nostrum Evil, Quackery and Allied Matters Affecting the Public Health; Reprinted with or without Modifications from the Journal of the American Medical Association*, Arthur J. Cramp, ed. Vols. I to III (Chicago: American Medical Association, 1911; 1921; and 1936), 161.

<sup>19</sup>James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America Before Federal Regulation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 212.

<sup>20</sup>James Cook, *Remedies and Rackets; The Truth About Patent Medicines Today* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1958), 34.

We know people who always keep bottles on hand of a patent preparation, which has proven by chemical examination to consist mainly of poor whisky. The alcohol stimulates them, when the medicine is taken, and makes them feel better for a little while. Yet these are good temperance people who would never use this patent medicine if they realized that it was simply poor whisky they were drinking.

When baby gets sick, do not listen to anyone who advises dosing her. Babies and elderly people cannot stand strong drugs. Your physician will tell you the necessary treatment. But please do not give the dear helpless little baby any drug or any patent medicine except by the order of a qualified medical man. ... Care is very necessary but no drugs. Babies should never be given sleeping draughts or soothing syrups, unless by the direct orders of a physician. He will seldom give such orders. We have known cases of a child's mind being destroyed by the use of a much-advertised soothing syrup.

It seems to me that these powerful drugs, which are often real poisons, although slow ones, should not be sold to everyone for careless use. They ought to be sold only under prescription from a reliable physician. But we ought to have enough common sense not to use these drugs except when we are ordered to do so by one who understands their effects.<sup>21</sup>

With the introduction of the municipal doctor system in Saskatchewan, starting in 1916, the use of patent medicines and the practice of self-medication was substantially reduced. A local druggist interviewed in 1930, one year after the introduction of the system in his area stated:

Instead of listening to friends and neighbors, even the druggist, about minor ailments, they go to the doctor. They are not so apt to buy patent medicines which may be entirely unsuitable to their needs. I feel sure that the patent medicine business here will be greatly reduced. Patients used to try one patent medicine after another. I have less interest in selling them now.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>The Abuse of Drugs in *The Northwest Farmer*, Mother and Home Department edited by Mrs. John Fyfe (March 20, 1915), 271-2.

<sup>22</sup>As quoted in C. Rufus Rorem, *The Municipal Doctor System in Rural Saskatchewan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1931), 32.

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