

SNAKE OIL SALESMEN THAT I HAVE KNOWN.....

by William G. Winter, DVM

It's 1900, and the black medicine wagon with its curved roof, gaily-painted sideboards extolling medical claims, and pulled by two slender black horses rolls down the narrow Kansas dirt road towards the next small town. My grandpa and namesake George Twyman the "snake oil peddler" is in that wagon and the townsfolk will soon be gathered around him listening to his story and staring at the small bottle of elixir in his hand. As I sit here this morning with my coffee, I hold a faded photograph of him beside the wagon that advertised his medicines. Back then, there were many such traveling "doctors", in fact, over 500 such wagons were specifically peddling the famous Seelye's "Wasa-Tusa" patent medicines, made in Abilene, Kansas. I'm proud to say that my grandfather was one. Peddler's wagons with their tonics and potions was just about the closest thing these isolated farmers ever came to a real doctor, they were glad to try anything that might offer solace for the aches and pains from a lifetime of toil.

I want to believe that snake oil, the real stuff that is, really worked, because...well, you see, there just might be some connection to my now three decade career as a holistic vet. And, yes, I do get called all sorts of names thanks to the nostrums, herbs, and funny-sounding potions that I've been known to sell. If nothing else, belief itself is a powerful medicine and has been known to cause miracles to happen. Let's just say that I'm an optimist, I'm an advocate of any kind of hope, yes, I'm a believer.

I like to think of George Twyman as the Joel Salatin of his day, a well-read farmer with enough country boy cleverness to survive. His story is just one of those with which our country is filled, stories of the movement west, the movement to the homesteads of the prairie. It wasn't that long ago. George's parents had traveled from Kentucky (an important locale relative to snake oil as you will see in a minute) to a rough patch of land they bought sight unseen near Palestine Texas. Texas back then was, well, rough. It proved to be too rough for most Easterners, so after a few months, my great-grandmother sick with typhus fever, the Twymans built an oxen-drawn wagon for their belongings and youngin's and they walked all the way back to relatives in Missouri who took them in. The journey took three months. Missouri was where my grandfather was born and raised and where he learned about midwestern farming. As a young man, the other "gold rush", the tales of the bountiful wheat harvests coming from western Kansas, lured him and his new bride to a little whistle stop called Nashville, Kansas. The rest is history. They are buried there today.

But back to Kentucky, where my ancestors were tobacco farmers in a land surrounded by coal miners. There had been two "old maid" aunts in the family who made their own genuine snake oil by "rendering" a dead snake in a canning jar resting above the fireplace. People came from far and near to buy their snake oil. I can picture them now, in their long aprons and grey hair up in a bun; many of the women in that era and that part of the land, including my mother's granny, chewed "terbakky" and were said to be able to "hit a coal hod at 10 paces" when they spit. You do not mess with such a woman! On the shelf above the fire, the snake would slowly dissolve and the oily meat

would be replaced by a wonderful clear oil, said to cure arthritis and stiff joints. After all, the “signature” of the snake is flexibility. Did it work? I do not know, but I’d sure give a lot to have a bottle of my great, great aunt’s genuine snake oil to rub on my creaky knee right now.

Before long even Nashville Kansas had it’s own horse-and-buggy doctor who, like Doc on Gunsmoke, was known to enjoy the occasional nip. However, when someone got caught in the threshing machine, or when the baby was a’comin’ there he’d be, and that would usually be in the middle of the night, and it would probably be snowing. Of course, in those days getting a medical diploma was not all that hard, things were not standardized until much later, such that many “Doc”s either purchased a diploma or spent less than a year in school. Since doctorin’ was one of the lowest paid jobs around it didn’t necessarily attract the sharpest knives in the drawer and many were tempted to augment their income with patent medicine sales. Virtually every traveling sales wagon or tent show had their own “doctor” who extolled the scientific virtues of his particular brand of snake oil, and most travelled with a “shill” or two who would shout from the audience of their “miracle cure”. Many patent medicines had a high enough alcohol content that there were very few dissatisfied customers anyway.

Dr. A.B. Seelye of Abilene made the medicines in George Twyman’s wagon and of his over one hundred products, the flagship item was Wasa-Tusa, an 87% alcohol cure-all, used externally or internally for whatever ails you. Right after the instructions on the label for adults and children, came the dosages and indications for bloating cattle, scouring calves, or wire-cut or colicky horses. Maybe George would have never gotten into this line of work had not for the horse that reared on him breaking his back. Since he was laid up and couldn’t farm for a while, he went on the road selling the very medicines he’d used to doctor himself. He became so well-known in Kansas for peddling potions that his first-born child, my mother, was nicknamed by the Nashville doctor at her home delivery, “Wasatusa”, a name that stuck throughout her childhood.

I guess it’s safe to tell this now, but soon after his youthful career with his patent medicines, George Twyman began to sell another “medicine” to the local farmers, a pure corn-mash grown and distilled right on the farm and guaranteed to add a new limberness to the barn dance! Again those Kentucky roots came in handy as the Kansans had never tasted good whiskey like this before, pure and sweet, flavored with apricots from a grove on the farm. The revenueurs never found that copper still down in the storm cellar, nor the cache out behind the catalpa grove where the “salesmen”, one of whom was my own father, left their cash and loaded up their bootlegger jalopies.

During the Great Depression, which hit Kansas about the same time as the Great Dust-bowl, farmers were, like today, going broke. But, as I said, George Twyman was a clever one. My mother remembers when she would go with him to buy good draft horse mares, often for as little as twenty five cents a piece. Grandpa bred dozens of these cast off mares to his large Spanish Black Jacks creating large black mules that he sold to the TVA for an unbelievable \$100 each, more money than any farmer thought possible. Money he used to give all five of his children a good life and happy home.

Just the other day, I went back to reminisce at my mother's old homestead where she was raised. The house and barn are gone but the remains of the dug out silo is still there, and the pump from the windmill, as is the old storm cellar. The cellar was a ruin, but my curiosity lured me down there. Surprisingly, amid the bent and smashed copper tubing and shards of his old still, I found a sagging shelf still holding rows of dusty bottles. Watching for spiders, I carefully examined them, and to my utter amazement found two full and perfectly sealed bottles of George's corn whiskey. I was going to share them with you at the Acres meeting in December, but I tripped going up the cellar steps and broke both of them. You'll just have to take my word for it that I could still smell the scent of apricots in the warm Kansas air. I'm pretty sure of one thing, we could all use a sip of that kind of medicine right now.