

SARSAPARILLA SOLDIERS (1861-1865)

“How Patent Medicine Saved the Army”

For the common soldier of the American Civil War, survival meant more than just dodging bullets and bayonets. Disease was the number one killer, but the military's medical corps was hardly equipped to administer to the everyday discomforts of the troops. Fortunately, both Johnny and Billy Yank found a friend and ally in the guise of a nomadic opportunist.

Across rural America, the “medicine show” was a popular form of entertainment since colonial times; a unique combination of divertissement and demagoguery. No hamlet was too remote for this breed of hustler with his pills and potions transported in a gaily festooned wagon.

Army camps on both sides were besieged with a myriad of maladies. The Union Army alone logged more than six million cases of malaria, typhoid, pneumonia, dysentery and diphtheria. The medicine show served up a quick fix for boredom and melancholy, as well as a remedy for every ailment a poor soldier might endure.

The entertainment might include minstrel tunes and Stephen Foster compositions, dancing, acrobatics, sword swallowing, fire eating, comic monologs, juggling, magic or fortune telling.

The huckster offered single-purpose products like Dr. Sage's Catarrh Remedy (for respiratory conditions), or “cure-all” tonics like Dr. Green's Neruva; recommended for nervousness, debility, poor blood, malaria, fever, apoplexy, St. Vitas Dance, and colic in horses.

Many patent medicines contained opium, cocaine, codeine or morphine. So widespread was their use that physicians dubbed drug addiction as the “Army Disease.” Some concoctions contained a substantial amount of alcohol (up to 50%). One of these was Dr. Warner's Sarsaparilla, prescribed for blood disorders, liver and bowel diseases, boils, pimples, cancerous and syphilitic afflictions, rheumatism, neuralgia and dyspepsia. It's ingredients were primarily sassafras root and whiskey.

The army camps weren't the only “plums” for the medicine shows. Folks back home were reminded by the huckster of the terrific hardships their husbands, sweethearts, brothers and sons were enduring in the name of liberty; how their suffering might be eased for a mere dollar, with a gift of a precious all-purpose tonic!

Despite the serious side effects of some products, many of these nostrums were actually effective, and thousands of lives were saved. Many rebel soldiers claimed they were able to combat summer lassitude and fight like “wildcats” thanks to Our Own Southern Bitters. Survivors of the Seventh New York Volunteers gave grateful testimonials to Dr. Brandreth and his All-Purpose Pills. When two-thirds of the 8th Marines were down with typhoid and dysentery, a courageous non-com (Sgt. C. P. Lord) procured a supply of Radway's Ready Remedy and saved his company.

When the war finally ended, folks regained their lives, and began moving west, as did the medicine shows. They remained popular well into the 20th Century.