

MRS. PINKHAM'S MAGIC CURE

I've often heard that a lady had to be discrete about ladies' illnesses, and especially if she liked to take a nip or two from the bottle to help her cope. Her armoire that held all of her lovely dresses and hats might also be a haven/hiding place for a special elixir! The following story about Mrs. Pinkham will show you that at least one woman in the late 1800's, was not afraid to speak of such things.

Have you ever heard of Mrs. Pinkham's Magic Cure? Lydia Pinkham's home remedies made her rich, and turned her into a celebrity. She was a feminist who also happened to be a Victorian lady with a "man's head" for business. Born on February 9, 1819, in Lynn, Massachusetts, her parents believed that women could and should become competent businesswomen. In 1843, at the age of 24, she launched an informal debating society, The Freeman's Institute. Progressive Victorians, those who held "advanced" opinions on political issues like women's rights, often tended to be drawn to new ideas in other areas as well, from abolition to nutrition, what we now call alternative medicine, as well as other topics.

Lydia had always been interested in the teachings of the naturopaths, who taught that most patients would recover from illness or accident if nature was left to do its work without any interferences. For years she had been concocting her own herbal teas and potions. She believed that these, in conjunction with proper diet and sufficient exercise, could produce a sound body strong enough to resist disease. Her secret formula for the elixir was a vegetable compound and consisted of various quantities of true unicorn root, false unicorn root, life root, black cohosh, pleurisy root, and fenugreek seed. These herbs were dried and ground, soaked and softened in dilute alcohol.

In 1875, Lydia Estes Pinkham began cooking up this recipe on her kitchen stove. Her children helped bottle it, and her son Dan, devised a label bearing the image of his mother's kindly face. Lydia, at the age of 56, was about to be transformed from an unknown Massachusetts' homemaker into a celebrity and a brand name!

Many Americans had no access to, money for, or faith in doctors. When they were ill or in pain, they trusted their health to one of the hundreds of bottled cure-alls that were available in stores, from travelling peddlers, or by mail. By the standards of the day, Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound was mild and safe. But like anything new, it needed more than word-of-mouth advertising. Local people had already sampled her elixir and were singing its praises. To get the word out she needed publicity in newspapers and magazines.

Lydia began advertising in Boston newspapers in 1876. She invited women who were feeling weak and listless to try a bottle to two of her compound and write her with their comments or questions. This simple idea turned out to be a stroke of genius. Letters began pouring in, and they almost always glowed of enthusiasm. The letters kept pouring in. . . 100,000 a year on the average! No question, however, trivial, was ignored. And, because of the delicate nature of the topics, the company made the promise, which became part of their advertisements, that letters would be "received, opened, read, and answered by women only!"

Had Lydia Pinkham really produced a miracle cure for women's health problems? Many modern physicians now recommend herbal remedies for some of the same symptoms that Lydia's customers took them for. However, it's also likely that the amount of alcohol in her mixture made its contribution to a patient's well-being. Women who never would have walked into a saloon, or even considered sipping a drink at home to calm their nerves, could turn to Lydia's potion without

guilt. If they were soon feeling no pain, it's no wonder. In its heyday, Lydia cooked up her remedy strong. . . it was 17.9 percent alcohol, or 35.8 proof!

Contributed by Renée Plata