

Peruvian Bark and Paregoric

by Lynne Belluscio

The brass plate on the top of the medicine chest is engraved, Herman LeRoy, New York. It is presumed to be the traveling medicine chest of Jacob LeRoy's father.

Inside are glass bottles and porcelain jars that at one time held the medicines and chemicals that were used in the early 19th Century to provide relief for a wide variety of illnesses. It is a wonder that anyone survived the medicines. Many were toxic. Some were poisonous. And if you didn't suffer from the illness, you might certainly suffer from the cure.

This was a time when the humoral pathology formulated in Greece by Hippocrates in the 4th Century was still in favor. The health of a person depended on the balance of the four humors, blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Medicines and medical practices attempted to balance the humors by bleeding, sweating and purging. Once the humors had been balanced, then it was important to rebuild the body with tonics.

Herman's trunk of medicines was probably assembled specially for him by a druggist or physician. It was not a pre set collection of medicines. A hand written list is pasted inside the cover. Not all of the words are legible. However, with the help of the internet I have identified many of the medicines: Antimonial wine was made by dissolving tartar emetic in sherry wine and was used as an expectorant for adults and a sedative for children. Elixor vitriol was a reddish brown liquid with a very aromatic odor which was made by mixing sulphuric acid, rectified spirit oil, cinnamon and ginger. It had a pleasant taste and was used topically as an astringent. Taken in small doses it produced night sweats and helped with the loss of appetite due to epidemic dysentery.

Essence of Peppermint was used for stomach upset and chills. Oil of Cloves was used for sore teeth, sinus infections, mouth sores and was a mild topical aesthetic. Spirit of Hartshorn was made from the distillation of the

horns of deer and other animals. It was an ammonia solution and was an aromatic stimulant (used when someone fainted) and would be mixed with oil for a liniment.

Dover's Powder was named for Dr. Thomas Dover an 18th Century English physician. It was a traditional medicine for colds and fevers. Bulbous Oxalis was eaten by sailors to avoid scurvy and were a source of vitamin C. The leaves and flowers are sour and contain oxalic acid and eaten in large quantities can be toxic. Tartar Emetic is antimony potassium tartrate and is a poisonous, odorless powder that was used as an emetic and expectorant. It was also used to produce sweats and was considered a very harsh drug with toxic side effects.

Calomel is a yellowish white powder that is odorless and was used to treat cholera and dysentery and was considered to be a sedative for the mucous membranes. Calomel was a mercury based medicine which in other forms was used to treat tuberculosis and syphilis. Blistering Ointment was probably made from Spanish fly and was used on the skin to produce blisters that would draw "harmful" toxins to the surface. Peruvian Bark was a remedy for malaria because it was made from the bark of a tree that contained quinine. The tree was indigenous to the Western Andes in South America and was described by the Jesuit priests who worked in Peru, thus it was also called Jesuit's powder. The Dutch and English harvested the bark on plantations in Java, Ceylon and India and the medicine was processed in Germany.

Epsom Salts are magnesium sulfate and were added to a warm water bath to sooth and provide relief from itching, shingles and herpes. It was also a mild laxative. (I also discovered that it is used to coagulate tofu!) It was first prepared from mineral springs in Epsom, England.

Rochelle Salts were first prepared by the apothecary Pierre Seignette of La Rochelle, France. Also known as Seignette's salts it was used as a purgative (and was also used in the process of silver-



ing mirrors). Arrow Root was derived from the roots of the Marantha Arundinacea plant grown in Brazil. It was easily digested and was helpful in complaints of the bowels. It was used to mitigate the effects of the bites of the scorpion and the black spider and was said to arrest the spread of gangrene. The name, arrowroot, was derived from the belief of the Awauk Indians that it would draw toxins from poison arrows.

Tincture of Rhubarb was not made from the edible plant that is known to all of us. Rather it was made from the China Rhubarb

plant. It was a mild cathartic and a botanical laxative. One source mentioned that it was used externally on burns. Laudanum was an opiate and was used for pain relief. The list also included Extract of Lead, Tincture of Iron, Paregoric (which I remember as a kid, as treatment for diarrhea. I still remember the strong smell and the unbearable taste. It was taken off the market in the United States because it was an opium based drug, but was still sold in Canada for a while. It really worked, but my mom always laced it with peppermint.)

LeRoy Historical Society

Chicken Barbecue

Sunday, October 26th

Trigon Park, Le Roy

11:30 am Til Sold Out!

Tickets \$8.00

Take Out Dinners Only

10/19