

Mother Gray's Sweet Powders

by Lynne Belluscio

I recently purchased on E-bay a small advertising piece for Mother Gray's Sweet Powders. The feet on the bottom walk along as you push it on the table. It was made for Allen S. Olmsted's proprietary medicine company.

Olmsted was born in LeRoy in 1856 and graduated from Cornell University in 1879. He became associated with Orator Woodward (who later owned Jell-O) and the two young men manufactured and marketed a target ball made of plaster of Paris, a forerunner of the clay pigeon for trap shooting. The two men went their separate ways.

Orator Woodward established the O.F. Woodward Medicine Company and Olmsted established Allen's Foot-Ease. Olmsted's first factory was on the second floor over the Wilcox Drug Store on Main Street.

In 1903, Olmsted moved to Buffalo, but continued his business in LeRoy. In 1911, he purchased the old Union Free School building and LeRoy House. He moved all medicine production into the school building (now the Jell-O Gallery) and leased the LeRoy House to the Union Free School as a house for the superintendent of schools. Olmsted manufactured Allen's Oregon Herbs, The Foot-Ease Sanitary Corn-Pad (Orator Woodward manufactured the Raccoon Corn Plasters), Pope's Blood and Liver medicine, Knock A Cold pills,

and Allen's Discovery for Piles.

We have other advertising pieces in the collection with little walking feet that advertised Allen's Footease. According to our files, Mother Gray's Sweet Powder was marketed by Allen Olmsted before he introduced Foot-Ease. A printed advertising piece says that Mother Gray was a nurse in the Children's Home in New York City. For many years she treated children with her own remedy. It was used for fever, constipation and headache, but was used mostly to treat worms. The symptoms included a "sallow complexion, dark circles around the eyes, offensive breath, headache, flushed cheeks, feverishness, itching at the nose and rectum, gnawing pains at the stomach and bowels, great appetite and at times none at all; tired feeling, constipation and diarrhea, disturbed sleep, grinding of the teeth, muttering talk and a hacking cough, cramping pains and convulsive fits, frequent sour stomach and vomiting, bleeding at the nose at regular intervals and palpitations of the heart are often the result of irritation produced by the presence of worms."

Only 25 cents a box would cure all these ailments. "these powders are so easy and pleasant to take and so effective in their action that mothers who once use them always tell other mothers about them. Mother Gray's Sweet Worm Powders act on the liver, cleanse the stomach, move

the bowels, positively remove worms and are harmless as milk." People sent in their testimonials that were printed in the advertising. From Bellvale, New York, Yalesville, Connecticut, Buffalo, New York, Mt. Clemens, Michigan and Dunkirk, New York, mothers extolled the virtues of Mother Gray's Powders.

The box included the ingredients. The laxatives: Calomel (mercurous chloride) and mandrake (Harry Potter take note). The non-laxative ingredients were licorice, sulphur, slippery elm, bicarbonate of soda, anise and sugar (thus the "sweet" powders.) The calomel, also known as mercurous chloride, was the active ingredient. It was used as a diuretic and purgative. Although toxic, it was less dangerous than mercuric chloride.

Calomel was also an active ingredient in teething powders and was used in Britain until 1954. Unfortunately it caused mercury poisoning if used regularly. Calomel was also used in cosmetics as soaps and skin lightening creams, but these preparations are now illegal.

Mandrake is a plant that has long been associated with legends and mystic spells. It is poison-



ous. (Perhaps that is what killed the worms!) It was said that when you pull mandrake out of the ground it screams – thus the episode in Harry Potter. What all of this indicates, is that if I ever find an envelope of Mother Gray's Powders in our collection, it should be thrown away.

Because we're as eager to celebrate this special July 4th as you are, we will be

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