

History of the Comstock Patent Medicine Business and Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills eBook

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Page 1

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History
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comstock patent medicine
business
and Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills

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SMITHSONIAN STUDIES IN HISTORY AND TECHNOLOGY NUMBER 22

Cover: Changing methods of packaging Comstock remedies over the years.—Lower left: Original packaging of the Indian Root Pills in oval veneer boxes. Lower center: The glass bottles and cardboard and tin boxes. Lower right: The modern packaging during the final years of domestic manufacture. Upper left: The Indian Root Pills as they are still being packaged and distributed in Australia. Upper center: Dr. Howard's Electric Blood Builder Pills. Upper right: Comstock's Dead Shot Worm Pellets.

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History of the Comstock Patent Medicine Business and of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills

For nearly a century a conspicuous feature of the small riverside village of Morristown, in northern New York State, was the W.H. Comstock factory, better known as the home of the celebrated Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills. This business never grew to be more than a modest undertaking in modern industrial terms, and amid the congestion of any large city its few buildings straddling a branch railroad and its work force of several dozens at most would have been little noticed, but in its rural setting the enterprise occupied a prominent role in the economic life of

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the community for over ninety years. Aside from the omnipresent forest and dairy industries, it represented the only manufacturing activity for miles around and was easily the largest single employer in its village, as well as the chief recipient and shipper of freight at the adjacent railroad station. For some years, early in the present century, the company supplied a primitive electric service to the community, and the Comstock Hotel, until it was destroyed by fire, served as the principal village hostelry.

But the influence of this business was by no means strictly local. For decades thousands of boxes of pills and bottles of elixir, together with advertising circulars and almanacs in the millions, flowed out of this remote village to druggists in thousands of communities in the United States and Canada, in Latin America, and in the Orient. And Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills and the other remedies must have been household names wherever people suffered aches and infirmities. Thus Morristown, notwithstanding its placid appearance, played an active role in commerce and industry throughout the colorful patent-medicine era.

Today, the Indian Root Pill factory stands abandoned and forlorn—its decline and demise brought on by an age of more precise medical diagnoses and the more stringent enforcement of various food and drug acts. After abandonment, the factory was ransacked by vandals; and records, documents, wrappers, advertising circulars, pills awaiting packaging, and other effects were thrown down from the shelves and scattered over the floors. This made it impossible to recover and examine the records systematically. The former proprietors of the business, however, had for some reason—perhaps sheer inertia—apparently preserved all of their records for over a century, storing them in the loft-like attic over the packaging building. Despite their careless treatment, enough records were recovered to reconstruct most of the history of the Comstock enterprise and to cast new light upon the patent-medicine industry of the United States during its heyday.

The Comstock business, of course, was far from unique. Hundreds of manufacturers of proprietary remedies flourished during the 1880s and 1890s the Druggists' Directory for 1895 lists approximately 1,500. The great majority of these factories were much smaller than Comstock; one suspects, in fact, that most of them were no more than backroom enterprises conducted by untrained, but ambitious, druggists who, with parttime help, mixed up some mysterious concoctions and contrived imaginative advertising schemes. A few of these businesses were considerably larger than Comstock.

However, the Comstock company would seem to be typical of the more strongly established patent-medicine manufacturers, and therefore a closer examination of this particular enterprise should also illuminate its entire industry.

The Origin of the Business



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The Indian Root Pill business was carried on during most of its existence by two members of the Comstock family—father and son—and because of unusual longevity, this control by two generations extended for over a century. The plant was also located in Morristown for approximately ninety years. The Indian Root Pills, however, were not actually originated by the Comstock family, nor were they discovered in Morristown. Rather, the business had its genesis in New York City, at a time when the city still consisted primarily of two- or three-story buildings and did not extend beyond the present 42nd Street.

According to an affidavit written in 1851—and much of the history of the business is derived from documents prepared in connection with numerous lawsuits—the founder of the Comstock drug venture was Edwin Comstock, sometime in or before 1833. Edwin, along with the numerous other brothers who will shortly enter the picture, was a son of Samuel Comstock, of Butternuts, Otsego County, New York. Samuel, a fifth-generation descendant of William Comstock, one of the pioneer settlers of New London, Connecticut, and ancestor of most of the Comstocks in America, was born in East Lyme, Connecticut, a few years before the Revolution, but sometime after the birth of Edwin in 1794 he moved to Otsego County, New York.

Edwin, in 1828, moved to Batavia, New York, where his son, William Henry Comstock, was born on August 1, 1830. Within four or five years, however, Edwin repaired to New York City, where he established the extensive drug and medicine business that was to be carried on by members of his family for over a century. Just why Edwin performed this brief sojourn in Batavia, or where he made his initial entry into the drug trade, is not clear, although the rapid growth of his firm in New York City suggests that he had had previous experience in that field. It is a plausible surmise that he may have worked in Batavia in the drug store of Dr. Levant B. Cotes, which was destroyed in the village-wide fire of April 19, 1833; the termination of Edwin's career in Batavia might have been associated either with that disaster or with the death of his wife in 1831.

The Comstocks also obviously had some medical tradition in their family. Samuel's younger brother, John Lee Comstock, was trained as a physician and served in that capacity during the War of 1812—although he was to gain greater prominence as a historian and natural philosopher. All five of Samuel's sons participated at least briefly in the drug trade, while two of them also had careers as medical doctors. A cousin of Edwin, Thomas Griswold Comstock (born 1829), also became a prominent homeopathic physician and gynecologist in St. Louis.[1] It might also be significant that the original home of the Comstock family, in Connecticut, was within a few miles of the scene of the discovery of the first patent medicine in America—Lee's "Bilious Pills"—by Dr. Samuel Lee (1744-1805), of Windham, sometime prior to 1796.[2] This medicine enjoyed such a rapid success that it was soon being widely imitated, and the Comstocks could not have been unaware of its popularity.

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So it seems almost certain that Edwin was no longer a novice when he established his own drug business in New York City. Between 1833 and 1837 he employed his brother, Lucius S. Comstock (born in 1806), as a clerk, and for the next fifteen years Lucius will figure very conspicuously in this story. He not merely appended the designation “M.D.” to his name and claimed membership in the Medical Society of the City of New York, but also described himself as a Counsellor-at-Law.

Edwin, the founder of the business, did not live long to enjoy its prosperity—or perhaps we should say that he was fortunate enough to pass away before it experienced its most severe vicissitudes and trials. After Edwin’s death in 1837, Lucius continued the business in partnership with another brother, Albert Lee, under the style of Comstock & Co. Two more brothers, John Carlton (born 1819) and George Wells (born 1820), were employed as clerks.

[Footnote 1: *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, VII: 280.]

[Footnote 2: The Comstock brothers’ grandmother, Esther Lee, was apparently unrelated to Dr. Samuel Lee, the inventor of the Biliious Pills.]

[Illustration: *Figure 1.*—Original wrapper for Carltons Liniment, 1851.]

The partnership of Comstock & Co. between Lucius and Albert was terminated by a dispute between the two brothers in 1841, and Albert went his own way, taking up a career as a physician and living until 1876. Lucius next went into business with his mother-in-law, Anne Moore, from 1841 to 1846; after the dissolution of this firm, he formed a new partnership, also under the name of Comstock & Co., with his brother John (generally known as J. Carlton). This firm again employed as clerks George Wells Comstock and a nephew, William Henry, a son of Edwin. William Henry was to eventually become the founder of the business at Morristown.

In March of 1849, still a new partnership was formed, comprising Lucius, J. Carlton, and George Wells, under the name of Comstock & Co. Brothers, although the existing partnership of Comstock & Co. was not formally terminated. Assets, inventories, and receivables in the process of collection were assigned by Comstock & Co. to Comstock & Co. Brothers. But before the end of 1849 the partners quarreled, Lucius fell out with his brothers, and after a period of dissension, the firm of Comstock & Co. Brothers was dissolved as of August 1, 1850. On or about the same date J. Carlton and George Wells formed a new partnership, under the name of Comstock & Brother, doing business at 9 John Street in New York City, also taking their nephew, William Henry, as a clerk. Lucius continued in business at the old address of 57 John Street. As early as June 30, 1851, the new firm of Comstock & Brother registered the following trade names^[3] with the Smithsonian Institution: Carlton’s Liniment, a certain remedy for the Piles; Carlton’s Celebrated Nerve and Bone Liniment for Horses; Carlton’s Condition Powder for Horses and Cattle; Judson’s Chemical Extract of Cherry and Lungwort.

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The repetition of his name suggests that J. Carlton was the principal inventor of his firm's remedies.

Suits and Countersuits

All of the foregoing changes in name and business organization must have been highly confusing to the wide array of agents and retail druggists over many states and the provinces of Canada with whom these several firms had been doing business. And when George Wells and J. Carlton split off from Lucius and established their own office down the street, it was not at all clear who really represented the original Comstock business, who had a right to collect the numerous accounts and notes still outstanding, and who owned the existing trade names and formulas. Dispute was inevitable under such circumstances, and it was aggravated by Lucius' irascible temper. Unfortunately for family harmony, these business difficulties also coincided with differences among the brothers over their father's will. Samuel had died in 1840, but his will was not probated until 1846; for some reason Lucius contested its terms. There had also been litigation over the estate of Edwin, the elder brother.

With the inability of the two parties to reach friendly agreement, a lawsuit was initiated in June 1850 between Lucius on the one hand and J. Carlton and George Wells on the other for the apportionment of the property of Comstock & Co. Brothers, which was valued at about \$25,000 or \$30,000. Subsequently, while this litigation was dragging on, Lucius found a more satisfying opportunity to press his quarrel against his brothers. This arose out of his belief that they were taking his mail out of the post office.

On May 26, 1851, one of the New York newspapers, the *Day Book*, carried the following item:

United States Marshal's Office—Complaint was made against J. Carlton Comstock and Geo. Wells Comstock, of No. 9 John Street, and a clerk in their employ, for taking letters from the Post Office, belonging to Dr. L.S. Comstock, of 57 in the same street.

Dr. Comstock having missed a large number of letters, on inquiry at the Post Office it was suspected that they had been taken to No. 9 John Street.

By an arrangement with the Postmaster and his assistants, several letters were then put in the Post Office, containing orders addressed to Dr. Comstock, at 57 John Street, for goods to be sent to various places in the city to be forwarded to the country. The letters were taken by the accused or their clerk, opened at No. 9, the money taken out and the articles sent as directed, accompanied by bills in the handwriting of Geo. Wells Comstock. Warrants were then issued by the U.S. Commissioner and Recorder Talmadge, and two of the accused found at home were arrested and a large number of



letters belonging to Dr. C. found on the premises. J.C. Comstock has not yet been arrested. It is said he is out of the city.

These two young men have for some months been trading sometimes under the name of "Comstock & Brother", and sometimes as "Judson & Co." at No. 9 John Street.

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The same episode was also mentioned in the *Express*, the *Commercial Advertiser*, and the *Tribune*. In fact, a spirited debate in the “affair of the letters” was carried on in the pages of the press for a week. The brothers defended themselves in the following notice printed in the *Morning Express* for May 31:

Obtaining letters

Painful as it is, we are again compelled to appear before the public in defense of our character as citizens and business men. The two letters referred to by L.S. Comstock (one of which contained One Dollar only) *were both directed “Comstock & Co.” which letters we claim; and we repeat what we have before said, and what we shall prove that no letter or letters from any source directed to L.S. Comstock or Lucius S. Comstock have been taken or obtained by either of us or any one in our employ.* The public can judge whether a sense of “duty to the Post Office Department and the community”, induced our brother to make this charge against us (which if proved would consign us to the Penitentiary) and under the pretence of searching for letters, which perhaps never existed; to send Police Officers to invade not only our store, but our dwelling house, where not even the presence of our aged Mother could protect from intrusion. These are the means by which he has put himself

[Footnote 3: Receipts for these registrations were signed by the prominent librarian, Charles Coffin Jewett, later to be superintendent of the Boston Public Library for many years.]

[Illustration: *Figure 2.*—Wrapper for Oldridge’s Balm of Columbia, Comstock & Co., druggists.]

in possession of the *names of our customers; of our correspondence*; and our private and business papers.

J.C. & GEO. WELLS COMSTOCK, firm of Comstock & Brother, No. 9 John Street

Lucius, for his part, never deigned to recognize his opponents as brothers but merely described them as “two young men who claim relationship to me.”

It was the position of J. Carlton and George that as they, equally with Lucius, were heirs of the dissolved firm of Comstock & Co. Brothers, they had as much right as Lucius to receive and open letters so addressed. Moreover, since the predecessor firm of Comstock & Co. had never been dissolved, J. Carlton also shared in any rights, claims, or property of this firm. In a more personal vein, the brothers also asserted in their brief that Lucius “is not on speaking terms with his aged mother nor any one of his brothers or sisters, Nephews or Nieces, or even of his Uncles or Aunts, embracing quite a large circle all of whom have been estranged from him, either by personal difficulties with him,

or his improper conduct towards his brothers.” Lucius, in turn, had copies of his charges against his brothers, together with aspersions against their character and their medicines, printed as circulars and widely distributed to all present or former customers in the United States and Canada.

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Meanwhile the civil litigation respecting the division of the assets of the old partnership, broken down into a welter of complaints and countercomplaints, dragged on until 1852. No document reporting the precise terms of the final settlement was discovered, although the affair was obviously compromised on some basis, as the surviving records do speak of a division of the stock in New York City and at St. Louis. The original premises at 57 John Street were left in the possession of Lucius. In this extensive litigation, J. Carlton and George were represented by the law firm of Allen, Hudson & Campbell, whose bill for \$2,132 they refused to pay in full, so that they were, in turn, sued by the Allen firm. Some of the lengthy evidence presented in this collection suit enlightened further the previous contest with Lucius. He was described as an extremely difficult person: “at one time the parties came to blows—and G.W. gave the Dr. a black eye.” The action by the law firm to recover its fee was finally compromised by the payment of \$1,200 in January 1854.

The settlement of the affairs of Comstock & Co. Brothers failed to bring peace between Lucius and the others. The rival successor firms continued to bicker over sales territory and carried the battle out into the countryside, each contending for the loyalty of former customers. Letters and circulars attacking their opponents were widely distributed by both parties. As late as December 1855, more than four years after the event, Lucius was still complaining, in a series of printed circulars, about the “robbery” of his mail from the post office, although the case had been dismissed by the court.

But somehow the new firm of Comstock & Brother triumphed over Comstock & Co., for in the summer of 1853 Lucius found it necessary to make an assignment of all of his assets to his creditors. Thereafter he removed his business from John Street to 45 Vesey Street, in the rear of St. Paul’s Churchyard, but although he put out impressive new handbills describing his firm as “Wholesale Chemists, Druggists and Perfumers,” he apparently no longer prospered in the drug trade, for old New York City directories show that he shortly turned his main energies to the practice of law. Versatile as he was, Lucius entered the Union Army as a surgeon during the Civil War, and upon his return he resumed his legal career, continuing to his death in 1876. Aside from his role in the Comstock medicine business, Lucius also rates a footnote in United States political history as the foreman of the grand jury that indicted Boss Tweed in 1872.

A New Partnership Formed

The two proprietors of Comstock & Brother at 9 John Street were the brothers George Wells and J. Carlton Comstock. At the time of the events just related, their nephew, William Henry Comstock, was an employee, but not a partner, of the firm (he was the “clerk” who had removed the controversial letters from the post office). This partnership was terminated by the death on September 17, 1853, of J. Carlton Comstock, the inventor of the veterinary medicines.

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To continue the business, a new partnership, also under the name of Comstock & Brother, comprising George Wells Comstock, William Henry Comstock, and Baldwin L. Judson, was formed on October 1, 1853. Judson was the husband of Eliza, a sister of Lucius and his brothers. George contributed one half of the capital of the new firm and the other two, one quarter each; however, exclusive possession of all trademarks, recipes, and rights to the medicines was reserved to George. It is not clear precisely when Judson entered the drug business or first became associated with the Comstocks; there is some evidence that he had previously been in business for himself, as several remedies were registered by him prior to this time. Judson's Chemical Extract was registered with the Smithsonian by the Comstock firm in 1851, but Dr. Larzetti's Juno Cordial or Procreative Elixir had previously been entered by Judson & Co. in 1844. A variant of the Juno Cordial label also mentions Levi Judson (a father?) as Dr. Larzetti's only agent in America.

Besides the "new" remedies, the Comstock firm—both Comstock firms—was also selling all of the "old" patent medicines, most of them of British origin. These included such items as Godfrey's Cordial, Bateman's Pectoral Drops, Turlington's Balsam of Life, British Oil, and others. The only strictly American product that could claim a venerability somewhat approaching these was Samuel Lee's Bilious Pills, patented on April 30, 1796.

Most of the more recent remedies probably had been originated by local doctors or druggists, either upon experimentation or following old folk remedies, and after enjoying some apparent success were adopted by drug manufacturers. With rare exceptions, however, the names of the discoverers never seem to have made their way into medical history.

[Illustration: FIGURE 3.—Original wrapper for Judson's Chemical Extract of Cherry and Lungwort, printed about 1855.]

Entrance of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills

During the summer of 1855 the Comstock firm, now located at 50 Leonard Street, was approached by one Andrew J. White, who represented himself as the sole proprietor of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills and who had previously manufactured them in his own business, conducted under the name of A.B. Moore, at 225 Main Street, in Buffalo. Actually, White's main connection with this business had been as a clerk, and he had been taken in as a partner only recently. Nevertheless, the Comstocks accepted his claims—carelessly, one must believe—and on August 10, 1855, signed a contract with White for the manufacture and distribution of these pills.

The originator of these pills was Andrew B. Moore. This is clear from several legal documents, including an injunction proceeding in behalf of White and Moore in 1859, which reads in part as follows:



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The defendant Moore always had an equal right with White to manufacture the pills—and by the agreement of 21st June, 1858 Moore is (illegible) to his original right and the defendants are manufacturing under Moore's original right....

The plaintiffs (the Comstocks) by their acts have disenabled Moore from using *his own name*.... (emphasis in original).

[Illustration: FIGURE 4.—Label for Dr. Larzetti's Juno Cordial, 1844.]

[Illustration: FIGURE 5.—List of medicines offered by Comstock & Brother (predecessor of the firm which later moved to Morristown) in 1854.]

In an undated form of contract, between Moore on the one part and George Comstock, William H. Comstock, Judson, and White on the other part, the parties agree, at Moore's option, either to sell all rights and interest in Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills to him, or to buy them from him, but in the latter event he must covenant that "he will forever refrain from the manufacture or sale of any medicine called Dr. Morse's Root Pills, Moore's Indian Root Pills, or Morse's Pills, or Moore's Pills, or any other name or designation similar to or resembling in any way either thereof...."

In brief, there never was a Dr. Morse—other than Andrew B. Moore. And the Comstocks never claimed any origin of the pills in legal documents, other than their purchase from White. Subsequently, the company fabricated a lengthy history of the discovery of the pills and even pictured Dr. Morse with his "healthy, blooming family." This story was printed in almanacs and in a wrapper accompanying every box of pills. According to this version, "the famous and celebrated Dr. Morse," after completing his education in medical science, traveled widely in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, and spent three years among the Indians of our western country, where he discovered the secret of the Indian Root Pills. Returning from one of these journeys after a long absence, he found his father apparently on his death bed. But let us quote the story directly:

A number of years ago this good man was very sick. He had eight of the most celebrated doctors to attend him both night and day. With all their skill this good and pious gentleman grew worse, and finally they gave him up, saying that it was impossible to cure him and he would soon die ... In the afternoon he was taken with shortness of breath and supposed to be dying. The neighbors were sent for, the room soon filled, and many prayers were offered up from the very hearts of these dear Christian people, that some relief might be obtained for this good and pious man. While these prayers were ascending like sweet incense to the throne above, and every eye was bathed in tears, a rumbling noise was heard in the distance, like a mighty chariot winding its way near, when all at once a fine span of horses, before a beautiful coach, stood before the door,



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out of which alighted a noble and elegant-looking man. In a moment's time he entered the room, and embraced the hand of his dear father and mother. She clasped her arms around his neck and fainted away. The Doctor, surprised to see his father so nearly gone, immediately went to his coach, taking therefrom various plants and roots, which he had learned from the Red Men of the forest as being good for all diseases, and gave them to his father, and in about two hours afterwards he was much relieved.... Two days afterwards he was much better, and the third day he could walk about the room ...and now we behold him a strong, active man, and in the bloom of health, and at the age of ninety-five able to ride in one day thirty-five miles, in order to spend his birthday with this celebrated Doctor, his son.

The foregoing event was supposed to have occurred some years before 1847, as the elder Mr. Morse's ninety-fifth birthday referred to was celebrated on November 20, 1847, when he was still hale and hearty. The old gentleman was also said to be enormously wealthy, "with an income of about five hundred thousand dollars annually, and the owner of a number of fine, elegant ships, which sailed in different directions to every part of the world." Dr. Morse, who was the first man to establish that all diseases arise from the impurity of the blood, subsequently discarded his regular practice of medicine and, as a boon to mankind, devoted his entire energy to the manufacture of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills.

[Illustration: FIGURE 6.-"A Short History of Dr. Morse's Father." A copy was inserted in every box of the pills.]

This story, which was first disseminated as early as the late 1850s, was an entire fabrication. Throughout the patent-medicine era it was the common practice to ascribe an Indian, or at least some geographically remote, origin to all of these nostrums and panaceas. In the words of James Harvey Young, in his book on the Social History of Patent Medicines:[4]

From the 1820's onward the Indian strode nobly through the American patent-medicine wilderness. Hiawatha helped a hair restorative and Pocahontas blessed a bitters. Dr. Fall spent twelve years with the Creeks to discover why no Indian had ever perished of consumption. Edwin Eastman found a blood syrup among the Comanches. Texas Charlie discovered a Kickapoo cure-all, and Frank Cushing pried the secret of a stomach renovator from the Zuni. (Frank, a famous ethnologist, had gone West on a Smithsonian expedition.) Besides these notable accretions to pharmacy, there were Modoc Oil, Seminole Cough Balsam, Nez Perce Catarrh Snuff, and scores more, all doubtless won for the use of white men by dint of great cunning and valor.

[Footnote 4: Young, James Harvey, *The Toadstool Millionaires, A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation*. Princeton University Press. 1961.]



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Judson's Mountain Herb Pills, a companion product of the Indian Root Pills, had an even more romantic origin—so remarkable, in fact, that the story was embodied in a full-scale paperback novel published by B.L. Judson & Co. in 1859. According to this book, the remedy was discovered—or at least revealed to the world—by a famous adventurer, Dr. Cunard. Dr. Cunard's career somehow bore a remarkable similarity to that of Dr. Morse. He was also the scion of a wealthy family who spent much time traveling throughout the world, and in this process becoming fluent in no less than thirty languages. Eventually he encountered an Aztec princess about to be tortured and sacrificed by Navajo Indians; he interrupted this ceremony only to be captured himself, but by virtue of successfully foretelling an eclipse (happily he had his almanac with him) he won release for himself and the princess. Thereafter he led her back to her home, in some remote part of Mexico, and lived among her people for a year. As a boon for having saved the princess, he was given possession of the ancient healing formula of the Aztecs. Upon returning home Dr. Cunard, in an experience very similar to Dr. Morse's, found his mother on her death bed, but he effected an instant cure by the use of the miraculous herbs he had brought with him. The news spread, soon a wide circle of neighbors was clamoring for this medicine, and in order that all mankind might share in these benefits, Dr. Cunard graciously conveyed the secret to B.L. Judson & Co.

These stories were told entirely straightforwardly, with the intention of being believed. How widely they were actually accepted is difficult to say. In retrospect it seems extremely curious that persons as prominent, as successful, as wealthy as Dr. Morse and Dr. Cunard were never seen or heard by the public, were never mentioned in the newspapers, never ran for public office, their names never listed in any directories, biographies or encyclopedias, and in fact they were not noticed anywhere—except in the advertising material of Comstock & Co. and B.L. Judson. Perhaps such credulity was not unusual in the 1850s, before the advent of widely distributed newspapers and other means of communication, but more than fifty years later, in the early years of the present century, essentially the same version of the history of Dr. Morse was still being printed in the Comstock almanacs.

The Struggle for Control of the Indian Root Pills

The agreement of August 10, 1855, between Andrew J. White and the Comstocks established a partnership “for the purpose of manufacturing and selling Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills and for no other purpose,” the partners thereof being A.J. White as an individual and Comstock & Brother as a firm. The new partnership was named A.J. White & Co., but White contributed no money or property—nothing but the right to Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills. The Comstock firm supplied all of the tangible assets, together with the use of their existing business premises. In turn, Comstock was to receive three fourths and White one fourth of the profits. In brief, the new firm, although bearing White's name, was controlled by the Comstocks.

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It is not clear why Moore, the originator of the pills, was not taken into the new business or otherwise recognized in the agreement. As we have seen, White claimed absolute ownership of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills, but Moore evidently did not agree, for he continued to manufacture and peddle his own pills, at the same time denouncing those prepared by A.J. White & Co. under Comstock control as forgeries. Moore had previously been in business in Buffalo, at 225 Main Street, under his own name; an announcement in the 1854 Buffalo City Directory (the *Commercial Advertiser*) describes his firm as successor both to C.C. Bristol and to Moore, Liebetrut & Co. The same directory shows White as merely a clerk at Moore's place of business, although he was made a partner sometime during 1854.

Cyrenius C. Bristol, whose business Moore took over, had entered the drug trade in 1832, initially in partnership with a Dr. G.E. Hayes. In the drug field his best known preparation was Bristol's renowned sarsaparilla, and he is credited with having originated the patent-medicine almanac, along with other advertising innovations. The patent-medicine business, however, represented merely one of his wide-ranging interests; he was also a co-owner of vessels plying the Great Lakes, a publisher, and a dabbler in such occult arts as Mesmerism, Phrenology, and Morse's theory of the electric telegraph. In 1855 he appeared as the proprietor of the *Daily Republic*, and it was perhaps his growing involvement in publishing that led him to turn his drug business over to Moore.

While we know this much about Moore's antecedents, a very considerable mystery remains. If Moore was the proprietor of his own apparently prosperous drug and medicine business in Buffalo in 1854, with White as one of his clerks, how did it happen that in the following year White represented himself to the Comstocks as the sole owner of Dr. Morse's (Moore's) Indian Root Pills? And Moore, although he initially disputed this claim, left his own business in Buffalo and ultimately joined White and the Comstocks, not even in the capacity of a partner, but merely as an employee.

These events would seem, however, to date the origin of the Indian Root Pills fairly closely. Moore was already manufacturing them in Buffalo prior to White's initial agreement with the Comstocks, but as he did not mention them by name in his *Commercial Advertiser* announcement in 1854, it is a fair presumption that the pills were new at this time. But they must have caught on very rapidly to induce the Comstocks to enter a partnership with White, under his name, when he contributed only the Indian Root Pills but no cash or other tangible assets.

[Illustration: FIGURE 7.—Wrapper for Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills, A.J. White & Co., sole proprietor.]

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[Illustration: FIGURE 8.—Indian Root Pill labels: *a*, original used by Moore, the originator of the pills; *b*, initial label used by A.J. White & Co. under Comstock ownership, 1855-1857; *c*, revised label adopted by Comstocks in June 1857 after Moore changed the color of his label to blue; *d*, label adopted by Moore and White for selling in competition with the Comstocks, 1859. Obviously printed from the same plate as *c*, but with an additional signature just above the Indian on horseback; *e*, new label adopted by the Comstocks after the departure of Moore and White; *f*, label used in the final years of the business; *g*, label, in Spanish, used in final years for export trade to Latin America.]

While manufacturing the pills in Buffalo, Moore had been packaging them under a yellow label bearing a pictorial representation of the British coat-of-arms, flanked on one side by an Indian and on the other by a figure probably supposed to represent a merchant or a sea captain. The labels also described Moore as the proprietor, “without whose signature none can be genuine.” And after the formation of A.J. White & Co. and the purported transfer of Dr. Morse’s pills to it, Moore still continued to sell the same medicine and to denounce the White-Comstock product as spurious. The latter was packaged under a white label showing an Indian warrior riding horseback and was signed “A.J. White & Co.” While the color was shortly changed to blue and the name of the proprietor several times amended through the ensuing vicissitudes, the label otherwise remained substantially unchanged for as long as the pills continued to be manufactured, or for over 100 years.

The nuisance of Moore’s independent manufacture of the pills was temporarily eliminated when, on June 21, 1858, Moore was hired by A.J. White & Co.[5] and abandoned competition with them. The Comstocks, in employing him, insisted upon a formal, written agreement whereunder Moore agreed to discontinue any manufacture or sale of the pills and to assign all rights and title therein, together with any related engravings, cuts, or designs, to A.J. White & Co. As previously stated, the two Comstock brothers, Judson, and White had offered either to sell the Indian Root Pill business in its entirety to Moore, or to buy it from him. Moore’s employment by A.J. White & Co. presumably followed his election not to purchase and operate the business himself.

So far so good. The Comstocks’ claim to the Indian Root Pills through the 75 percent controlled A.J. White & Co. now seemed absolutely secure and the disparagement of their products at an end. But new dissension must have occurred, for on New Year’s Day of 1859, without prior notice, Moore and White absented themselves from the Comstock office, taking with them as many of the books, accounts, records, and other assets of A.J. White & Co. as they could carry. Forthwith they established a business of their own, also under the name of A.J. White & Co., at 10 Courtlandt Street, where they resumed the manufacture and distribution of Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills, under a close facsimile of the label already being used by the A.J. White-Comstock firm.

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These events left the Comstocks in an embarrassing position. For over three years they had been promoting the A.J. White trade name, but now they could hardly keep a competitor from operating under his own name. Their official attitude was that the old firm of A.J. White & Co. was still in existence and controlled by the Comstocks. But shortly they conceded this point tacitly when they introduced new labels for the Indian Root Pills, under the name and signature of B. Lake Judson, and advised that any accounts or correspondence with A.J. White & Co. still outstanding should be directed to the new firm of Judson.

Obviously, this state of affairs was extremely confusing to all of the customers. Judson traveled widely through the Canadian maritime provinces and prevailed upon many merchants to disavow orders previously given to the new A.J. White firm at 10 Courtlandt Street. On April 28, 1859, White and Moore, for their part, appointed one James Blakely of Napanee, Canada West, to represent them in the territory between Kingston and Hamilton “including all the back settlements,” where he should engage in the collection of all notes and receipts for the Indian Root Pills and distribute new supplies to the merchants. On all collections he was to receive 25 percent; new medicines were to be given out without charge except for freight. In his letter accepting the appointment, Blakely advised that:

I think the pills should be entered here so as to avoid part of the enormous duty. 30% is too much to pay. I think there might be an understanding so that it might be done with safety. Goods coming to me should come by Oswego and from thence by Steamer to Millport. By this route they would save the delay they would be subject to coming by Kingston and avoid the scrutiny they would give them there at the customhouse.

[Footnote 5: Moore claimed later (his affidavit of November 22, 1859) that he thought he was hired only by White personally, and did not realize that A.J. White & Co. was controlled by the Comstocks.]

[Illustration: FIGURE 9.—“To Purchasers of Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills”—a warning by James Blakely, Canadian agent for A.J. White, against the “counterfeit” pills manufactured by the Comstock firm.]

The great bulk of the notes and accounts which were assigned to Blakely for collection were undoubtedly accounts originally established with the old A.J. White & Co. and therefore in dispute with the Comstocks. But in any case, Blakely went vigorously up and down his territory, frequently crossing the paths of agents of the Comstocks, pushing the pills and attempting to collect outstanding bills owed to A.J. White & Co. by persuasion and threats. On July 2, 1860, he wrote that:

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My sales have been pretty good. Comstock Pills are put in almost every place, generally on commission at a low figure, but I get them put aside in most cases and make actual sales so they will be likely to get them back.

Meanwhile, back in New York City, the fight between the erstwhile partners went on, mostly in the legal arena. On April 14, 1859, the sheriff, at the instigation of the Comstocks, raided White's premises at 10 Courtlandt Street and seized the books, accounts, and correspondence carried away by White and Moore on January 1. Simultaneously, the Comstocks succeeded in having White and Moore arrested on a charge of larceny "for stealing on last New Year's Day a large number of notes and receipts," and in September White was arrested on a charge of forgery. Since the alleged offense took place in Pennsylvania, he was extradited back to that state. Neither the circumstances nor the disposition of this case is known, but since White claimed the right to collect notes issued by the old A.J. White & Co., it is probable that the charge arose merely out of his endorsement of some disputed note. On this occasion the Comstocks printed and distributed circulars which were headed: "Andrew J. White, the pill man indicted for forgery," and thereunder they printed the requisition of the governor of New York in response to the request for extradition from Pennsylvania, in such a way as to suggest that their side of the dispute had official sanction.

The Comstocks must also have discovered White's and Blakely's arrangement for avoiding "scrutiny" of their goods shipped into Canada, for on July 29 there was an acknowledgment by the Collector of Customs of the Port of Queenston of certain information supplied by George Wells Comstock, William Henry Comstock, and Baldwin L. Judson on goods being "smuggled into this province."

While the principal case between the Comstocks and White and Moore was scheduled for trial in December 1860, no documents which report its outcome were discovered. However, it is a fair surmise that the rival parties finally realized that they were spending a great deal of energy and money to little avail, injuring each other's business in the process and tarnishing the reputation of the Indian Root Pills regardless of ownership. In any case, a final settlement of this protracted controversy was announced on March 26, 1861, when White and Moore relinquished all claims and demands arising out of the sale of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills prior to January 1, 1859.

[Illustration: FIGURE 10.—As one episode in the contest between the Comstocks and White and Moore for control of the Indian Root Pills, the Comstocks succeeded in having White indicted for forgery and briefly lodged in jail.]

Since no copy of this agreement was found, we do not know what inducement was offered to Moore and White. However, hundreds of announcements of the settlement, directed "To the debtors of the late firm of A.J. WHITE & CO." were printed, advising that

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The controversy and the difficulties between the members of the old firm of A.J. White & Co. of No. 50 Leonard Street, New York, being ended, we hereby notify all parties to whom MORSE'S INDIAN ROOT PILLS were sent or delivered prior to January 1, 1859, and all parties holding for collection or otherwise, any of said claims or demands for said Pills, that we the undersigned have forever relinquished, and have now no claim, right, title or interest in said debts or claims, and authorize the use of the names of said firm whenever necessary in recovering, collecting and settling such debts and claims.

The announcement was signed by Andrew J. White and Andrew B. Moore.

This should have been the end of this wearisome affair, but it was not. It soon appeared that Moore had violated this agreement by concealing a number of accounts, together with a quantity of pills, circulars, labels, and a set of plates, and, in the words of Comstock's complaint, transferred them "to James Blakely, an irresponsible person in Canada West." And Blakely evidently continued to collect such accounts for the benefit of himself and Moore. However, the Comstocks also entered the scene of strife, and sometime during the summer of 1862 William Henry Comstock, then traveling in Ontario, collected a note in the amount of \$7.50 in favor of A.J. White & Co., as he had every right to do, but endorsed it "James Blakely for A.J. White & Co." Blakely, when he learned of this, charged Comstock with forgery; Comstock in turn charged Blakely with libel. Comstock probably defended his somewhat questionable endorsement by the agreement of March 26 of the previous year; in any event the case was dismissed by a Justice of the Peace in Ottawa without comment. In New York City, on November 25, the Comstocks had Moore arrested again, with White at this time testifying in their support. There was also an attempt to prosecute Blakely in Canada; his defense was that he had bought the disputed accounts and notes from Moore on March 11, 1861—a few days before the agreement with the Comstocks—and that his ownership of these notes was thereafter absolute and he was no longer working as an agent for Moore.

This controversy was still in the courts as late as April of 1864, and its final outcome is not known. But in any case, aside only from Moore's and Blakely's attempts to collect certain outstanding accounts and to dispose of stock still in their hands, the agreement of March 26, 1861, left the Comstocks in full and undisputed possession of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills. White thereafter continued in the patent-medicine business in New York City on his own; his firm was still active as recently as 1914. The subsequent history of Moore is unknown.

The Brothers Part Company

One would imagine that the three partners of Comstock & Brother would have been exhausted by litigation and would be eager to work amicably together for years. But such was not to be the case. The recovered records give notice of a lawsuit (1866) between George Comstock on the one hand and William H. Comstock and Judson on the other. No other documents relating to this case were found, and thus the precise

issue is not known, or how it was finally settled. However, it was obviously a prelude to the dissolution of the old firm.



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Letters and documents from the several years preceding this event suggest that Judson had become more prominent in the business, and that he and William H. Comstock had gradually been drawing closer together, perhaps in opposition to George. Judson, although a partner of Comstock & Brother, also operated under his own name at 50 Leonard Street and had originated several of the medicines himself. It is not clear whether the old firm of Comstock & Brother was formally dissolved, but after 1864 insurance policies and other documents referred to the premises as “Comstock & Judson.” In 1863 the federal internal revenue license in connection with the new “temporary” Civil War tax on the manufacturing of drugs[6] was issued simply to B.L. Judson & Co., now located, with the Comstocks, at 106 Franklin Street.

[Footnote 6: The “temporary” tax placed upon drug manufacture as a revenue measure during the Civil War remained in effect until 1883.]

[Illustration: FIGURE 11.—This announcement, sent to all customers of the Indian Root Pills, marked the final termination of the long dispute between two firms, both named A.J. White & Co., and both of whom claimed ownership of the pills.]

During this period Judson and William Henry Comstock became interested in a coffee-roasting and spice-grinding business, operated under the name of Central Mills, and located in the Harlem Railroad Building at the corner of Centre and White Streets. Possibly George objected to his partners spreading their energies over a second business; in any case, dissension must have arisen over some matter. On April 1, 1866, balance sheets were drawn up separately for B.L. Judson & Co. and Comstock & Judson; the former showed a net worth of \$48,527.56 against only \$5,066.70 for the latter. Both of these firms had a common bookkeeper, E. Kingsland, but the relationship between the firms is not known.

On April 25, Judson and William H. Comstock sold their coffee-roasting business to one Alexander Chegwidde, taking a mortgage on the specific assets, which included, besides roasters and other machinery, a horse and wagon. But if this had been a factor in the controversy among the partners, the sale failed to end it, for we find that on December 21, 1866, George W. obtained an injunction against William Henry and Judson restraining them from collecting or receiving any accounts due the partnership of B.L. Judson & Co., transferring or disposing of any of its assets, and continuing business under that name or using any of its trademarks. Unfortunately, we have no information as to the details of this case or the terms of settlement, but we do find that on February 1, 1867, the law firm of Townsend, Dyett & Morrison rendered a bill for \$538.85 to B.L. Judson and William H. Comstock for “Supervising and engrossing two copies of agreement with George W. Comstock on settlement” and for representing the two parties named in several actions and cross actions with George.

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This settlement, whatever its precise character may have been, obviously marked the termination of the old partnership—or, more properly, the series of successor partnerships—that had been carried on by various of the Comstock brothers for over thirty years. William Henry, the former clerk and junior partner—although also the son of the founder—was now going it alone. Before this time he had already transferred the main center of his activities to Canada, and he must have been contemplating the removal of the business out of New York City.

After this parting of the ways, George W. Comstock was associated with several machinery businesses in New York City, up until his death in 1889. During the Draft Riots of 1863 he had played an active role in protecting refugees from the Colored orphanage on 43rd Street, who sought asylum in his house at 136 West 34th Street.[7]

Dr. Morse's Pills Move to Morristown

In April 1867, the home of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills and of the other proprietary remedies was transferred from New York City to Morristown, a village of 300 inhabitants on the bank of the St. Lawrence River in northern New York State. This was not, however, the initial move into this area; three or four years earlier William H. Comstock had taken over an existing business in Brockville, Ontario, directly across the river. No specific information as to why the business was established here has been found, but the surrounding circumstances provide some very good presumptions.

The bulk of the Comstocks' business was always carried on in rural areas—in “the backwoods.” Specifically, the best sales territory consisted of the Middle West—what was then regarded as “The West”—of the United States and of Canada West, *i.e.*, the present province of Ontario. A surviving ledger of all of the customers of Comstock & Brother in 1857 supplies a complete geographic distribution. Although New Jersey and Pennsylvania were fairly well represented, accounts in New York State were sparse, and those in New England negligible. And despite considerable travel by the partners or agents in the Maritime Provinces, no very substantial business was ever developed there. The real lively sales territory consisted of the six states of Ohio, Indiana,

[Footnote 7: *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, IV:500.]

Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa, which accounted for over two thirds of all domestic sales, while Canada West contributed over 90 percent of Canadian sales. More regular customers were to be found in Canada West—a relatively compact territory—than any other single state or province. The number of customers of Comstock & Brother in 1857 by states and provinces follows:



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Alabama	12
Arkansas	1
Connecticut	3
Delaware	5
D.C.	1
Florida	5
Georgia	15
Illinois	415
Indiana	298
Iowa	179
Kansas Ter.	1
Kentucky	21
Louisiana	7
Maine	2
Maryland	21
Massachusetts	5
Minnesota Ter.	6
Mississippi	8
Missouri	32
Michigan	194
New York State	88
New York City	3
New Jersey	212
New Hampshire	1
North Carolina	9
Ohio	179
Pennsylvania	192
Rhode Island	2
South Carolina	5
Tennessee	21
Texas	1
Virginia	30
Wisconsin	303
New Brunswick	15
Nova Scotia	19
Canada East (Quebec)	7
Canada West	434
Total United States	2,277
Total Canada	475

The concentration of this market and its considerable distance from New York City at a time when transportation conditions were still relatively primitive must have created many problems in distribution. Moreover, the serious threat to the important Canadian



market imposed by White and Moore, although eventually settled by compromise, must have emphasized the vulnerability of this territory to competition.

It was also probable that the office in lower Manhattan—at 106 Franklin Street after May 20, 1862—was found to be increasingly congested and inconvenient as a site for mixing pills and tonics, bottling, labeling, packaging and shipping them, and keeping all of the records for a large number of individual small accounts. A removal of the manufacturing part of the business to more commodious quarters, adjacent to transportation routes, must have been urgent.

But why move to as remote a place as Morristown, New York, beyond the then still wild Adirondacks? It is obvious that this location was selected because the company already had an office and some facilities in Brockville, Canada West.

William H. Comstock must have first become established at Brockville, after extensive peregrinations through Canada West, around 1859 or 1860. During the dispute between A.J. White and Comstock & Judson, Blakely, the aggressive Canadian agent, had written to White, on September 1, 1859, that he had heard from “Mr. Allen Turner of Brockville” that the Comstocks were already manufacturing Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills at St. Catherines. Evidently the Comstocks thought of several possible locations, for on July 2 of the following year Blakely advised his principals that the Comstocks were now manufacturing their pills in Brockville. Two years later, in November 1862, when Blakely sued William H. Comstock

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for the forgery of a note, the defendant was then described in the legal papers as “one Wm. Henry Comstock of the town of Brockville Druggist.” And in July 1865, Comstock was writing from Brockville to E. Kingsland, the bookkeeper in New York City, telling him to put Brenner—the bearer of the letter—“in the mill.” Comstock had apparently taken over an existing business in Brockville, as receipts for medicines delivered by him describe him as “Successor to A.N. M'Donald & Co.” Dr. McKenzie's Worm Tablets also seem to have come into the Comstock business with this acquisition.

This did not mean a final move to Brockville for William H. Comstock; for several years he must have gone back and forth and was still active in New York City as a partner of his brother and of Judson. We have seen that he subsequently went into partnership with Judson in the purchase of the coffee-roasting business. In December 1866, he was a defendant in the lawsuit initiated by his brother George, when he was still apparently active in the New York City business. Nevertheless, he apparently shifted the center of his activities to the Brockville area about 1860, relinquishing primary responsibility for affairs in New York City to his brother and to Judson.

[Illustration: FIGURE 12.—Label for Victoria Hair Gloss, Comstock & Brother, 1855.]

We now find the Comstock business established at Brockville. Exactly why a second plant was built at Morristown, right across the river, is again a matter for conjecture. It is a fair assumption, however, that customs duties or other restraints may have interfered with the ability of the Canadian plant to supply the United States market. Thus, facilities on the other side of the border, but still close enough to be under common management, must have become essential. In an era of water transportation, Morristown was a convenient place from which to supply the important middle western territory. Ogdensburg was the eastern terminus of lake boats, and several lines provided daily service between that point and Buffalo. The railroad had already reached Ogdensburg (although not yet Morristown) so that rail transportation was also convenient. And the farms of St. Lawrence County could certainly be counted upon to supply such labor as was necessary for the rather simple tasks of mixing pills and elixirs and packaging them. Finally, the two plants were directly across the river from each other—connection was made by a ferry which on the New York side docked almost on the Comstock property—so that both could easily be supervised by a single manager. In fact, if it had not been for the unusual circumstance that they were located in two different countries, they could really have been considered as no more than separate buildings constituting a single plant.

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Surviving receipts for various goods and services show that the move to Morristown was carried out in March or April of 1867. Although the Morristown undertaking was obviously regarded as a continuation of the New York business, it was operated by William Henry Comstock as the sole proprietor for many years, and the terms of any settlement or subsequent relationship with Judson are unknown. A “Judson Pill Co.” was subsequently established at Morristown, but this was no more than a mailing address for one department of the Comstock business. What happened to Judson as an individual is a mystery; like Moore, he quietly disappears from our story.

It is also puzzling that no record of the transfer of land to Mr. Comstock upon the first establishment of the pill factory in Morristown in 1867 can be found. The earliest deed discovered in the St. Lawrence County records shows the transfer of waterfront property to William Henry Comstock “of Brockville, Ontario,” from members of the Chapman family, in March 1876. Additional adjoining land was also acquired in 1877 and 1882.

The Golden Era

With the establishment of the Comstock patent-medicine business at Morristown in 1867, this enterprise may be said to have reached maturity. Over thirty years had passed since William Henry’s father had established its earliest predecessor in lower Manhattan. Possession of Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills was now unchallenged, and this and the other leading brand names were recognized widely in country drug stores and farmhouses over one third of a continent. No longer did the medicines have to be mixed, bottled, and packaged in cramped and dingy quarters above a city shop; spacious buildings in an uncongested country village were now being used. No further relocations would be necessary, as operations exceeded their capacity, or as landlords might elect to raise rents; the pill factory was to remain on the same site for the following ninety years. And the bitter struggles for control, perhaps acerbated because of the family relationship among the partners, were now a thing of the past. William H. Comstock was in exclusive control, and he was to retain this position, first as sole proprietor and later as president, for the remainder of his long life.

The patent-medicine business as a whole was also entering, just at this time, upon its golden era—the fifty-year span between the Civil War and World War I. Improved transportation, wider circulation of newspapers and periodicals, and cheaper and better bottles all enabled the manufacturers of the proprietary remedies to expand distribution—the enactment and enforcement of federal drug laws was still more than a generation in the future. So patent medicines flourished; in hundreds of cities and villages over the land enterprising self-proclaimed druggists devised a livelihood for themselves by mixing some powders into pills or bottling some secret elixir—normally

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containing a high alcoholic content or some other habit-forming element—created some kind of a legend about this concoction, and sold the nostrum as the infallible cure for a wide variety of human (and animal) ailments. And many conservative old ladies, each one of them a pillar of the church and an uncompromising foe of liquor, cherished their favorite remedies to provide comfort during the long winter evenings. But of these myriads of patent-medicine manufacturers, only a scant few achieved the size, the recognition, and wide distribution of Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills and the other leading Comstock remedies.

[Illustration: FIGURE 13.—Comstock factory buildings, about 1900.]

[Illustration: FIGURE 14.—Wrapper for Longley's Great Western Panacea.]

Of course, the continued growth of the business was a gradual process; it did not come all at once with the move to Morristown. Even in 1878, after eleven years in this village, the Comstock factory was not yet important enough to obtain mention in Everts' comprehensive *History of St. Lawrence County*.^[8] But, as we have seen, additional land was purchased in 1877 and 1882, obviously bespeaking an expansion of the enterprise. In 1885, according to a time book, the pill factory regularly employed about thirty persons, plus a few others on an occasional basis.

Mr. Comstock, from his residence across the river in Brockville, was the manager of the business; however, the operations were under the immediate charge of E. Kingsland, former chief clerk of the Judson and Comstock offices in New York City, who was brought up to Morristown as superintendent of the factory. E. Kingsland was a cousin of Edward A. Kingsland, one of the leading stationers in New York City, and presumably because of this relationship, Kingsland supplied a large part of Comstock's stationery requirements for many years. Kingsland in Morristown retired from the plant in 1885 and was succeeded by Robert G. Nicolson, who had been a foreman for a number of years. Nicolson, a native of Glasgow, Scotland, was brought to America as a child, first lived at Brockville, and then came to Morristown as foreman in the pill factory shortly after it was established. He was succeeded as superintendent by his own son, Robert Jr., early in the present century.

The great majority of the employees of the pill factory were women—or, more properly, girls—in an era when it was not yet common-place for members of the fair sex to leave the shelter of their homes for paid employment. The wage rates during the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s were \$3 to \$5 a week for girls and \$7 to \$12 a week for men; the last-named amount was an acceptable rate at that time for a permanent and experienced adult man. The factory management of this era was joyously unaware of minimum wages, fair employment laws, social security, antidiscrimination requirements, fair trade, food and drug acts, income taxes, and the remaining panoply of legal restrictions that

harass the modern businessman. Since only a few scattered payroll records have been recovered, Comstock's maximum employment during the Morristown period is not known, or just when it was reached. In a brief sketch of the Indian Root Pill business, however, Mrs. Doris Planty, former Morristown town historian, mentions a work force of from "40 to 50" around the turn of the century.

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In 1875, twenty years after its original projection, the Utica & Black River Railroad finally came through the village, bisecting the Comstock property with a right-of-way thirty-six feet wide and dividing it thereafter into a “lower shop,” where the pills and tonics were made, and the “upper shop,” where the medicines were packaged and clerical duties performed. The superintendent and his family lived above the upper shop in an apartment; it was in the spacious attic above this apartment that the records of the business, in a scattered and ransacked condition, were found. Inasmuch as the first recorded sale of land to Comstock occurred in March 1876, almost simultaneously with the arrival of the railroad, it is a fair surmise that the second building was put up about this time.

The coming of the railroad also put a station almost at the doorstep of the factory, and thereafter many shipments came and went by rail. The company’s huge volume of mailings, often ten or fifteen bags a day, was also delivered directly to the trains, without going through the local post office. For some years, however, heavy shipments, including coal for the factory’s boilers, continued to come by ship. The Brockville ferry also operated from a dock immediately adjacent to the railroad station; one end of the station was occupied by the United States Customs House.

Almost from the time of its arrival in Morristown, the Black River Railroad operated a daily through Wagner Palace Sleeping Car from New York City via Utica and Carthage, and service over the same route was continued by the New York Central after it took over the North Country railroads in 1891. This meant that Mr. Comstock, when he had business in New York City, could linger in his factory until the evening train paused at the station to load the afternoon’s outpouring of pills and almanacs, swing aboard the waiting Pullman, and ensconce himself comfortably in his berth, to awaken in the morning within the cavernous precincts of Grand Central Station—an ease and convenience of travel which residents of the North Country in the 1970s cannot help but envy. The daily sleeping car through Morristown to and from New York City survived as long as the railroad itself, into the early 1960s, thus outlasting both of the Comstocks—father and son.

[Footnotes 8: Or perhaps Mr. Comstock merely failed to pay for an engraved plate and to order a book; these county histories were apparently very largely written and edited with an eye to their subscribers.]

The pills were originally mixed by hand. In the summer of 1880 the factory installed a steam engine and belt-driven pill-mixing machinery. At least one rotary pill machine was purchased from England, from J.W. Pindar, and delivered to Comstock at a total cost (including ocean freight) of L19-10-9—about \$100. One minor unsolved mystery is that a bill for a second, identical machine made out to A.J. White—with whom Comstock had not been associated

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for twenty years—is filed among the Comstock records; it can only be surmised that at this time Comstock and White were again on good terms, the memories of lawsuits, arrests, and prosecutions long since forgotten, and Comstock either ordered a machine in behalf of White or perhaps agreed to take one off his hands. At the time of this expansion, certain outbuildings and a dock for the unloading of coal were erected adjoining the lower building. During 1881 an underwater telegraph cable was laid between Morristown and Brockville, allowing immediate communication between the two Comstock factories.

With the advent of the electrical age, around the turn of the century, the Comstock factory also installed a generator to supply lighting, the first in the locality to introduce this amenity. The wires were also extended to the four or five company-owned houses in the village, and then to other houses, so that the company functioned as a miniature public utility. Its electric lines in the village were eventually sold to the Central New York Power Corporation and incorporated into that system. Steam heat was also supplied to the railroad station and the customs house, and the company pumped water out of the river to the water tower on the hill above Pine Hill Cemetery, following the installation of the public water system.

In 1908, Comstock built a large hotel across the street from the upper factory; sitting part way up the hill and surrounded by a wide veranda, it represented a conspicuous feature in the village and dominated the waterfront scene until its destruction by fire in 1925. The Comstock family, in 1910, also built a town hall and social center for the village. Adjacent to the lower shop a large boathouse was erected to shelter Mr. Comstock's yacht, the *Maga Doma*, a familiar sight on the river for many years.

[Illustration: FIGURE 15.—The village of Morristown from the waterfront. Railroad depot, Comstock Hotel, and pill-factory buildings located left of center.]

In any large city, of course, a factory employing, at most, forty or fifty workers would have passed unnoticed, and its owner could hardly expect to wield any great social or political influence. In a remote village like Morristown, things are quite different; a regular employer of forty persons creates a considerable economic impact. For two generations the Indian Root Pill factory supplied jobs, in an area where they were always scarce, and at a time when the old forest and dairy industries were already beginning to decline. But the recital of its close associations with the village makes it clear that the pill factory was more than a mere employer; for ninety years it provided a spirit that animated Morristown, pioneered in the introduction of utilities and certain social services, linked the village directly with the great outside world of drug stores and hypochondriacs, and distinguished it sharply from other, languishing St. Lawrence County villages. One may wonder whether Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills really did

anyone any good. They certainly did heap many benefits upon all citizens of Morristown.



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[Illustration: FIGURE 16.—Depot, Comstock Hotel, and factory buildings (at right), about 1910.]

While there was only a single Comstock medicine business, operated as a sole proprietorship until 1902, Comstock found it convenient to maintain several dummy companies—really no more than mailing addresses—for some years after the move to the North. Thus, in Morristown was to be found, at least in business and postal directories, besides the Comstock company itself, two other proprietary manufacturers: Judson Pill Co. and E. Kingsland & Co.

The Judson Pill Co. preserved the name of Comstock's former partner, while use of the name E. Kingsland perhaps flattered the vanity of the former chief clerk and later plant superintendent. The major Kingsland product was Chlorinated Tablets, a sure cure for coughs, colds, hoarseness, bronchial irritation, influenza, diphtheria, croup, sore throat and all throat diseases; these were especially recommended by Dr. MacKenzie, Senior Physician in the Hospital for Diseases of the Throat (was there any such hospital?) in London, England. The Kingsland pills were also popularized under the name of Little Pink Granules.

Over on the Canadian side of the river, where another plant approximately the same size as the Morristown facilities was in operation, the Comstock Company had assimilated the Dr. Howard Medicine Co. Dr. Howard's leading remedies were his Seven Spices for all Digestive Disorders and the Blood Builder for Brain and Body. The latter, in the form of pills, was prescribed as a positive cure for a wide array of ailments, but like many other patent medicines of the era, it was hinted that it had a particularly beneficial effect upon sexual vitality.

They have an especial action (through the blood) upon the SEXUAL ORGANS of both Men and Women. It is a well recognized fact that upon the healthy activity of the sexual apparatus depend the mental and physical well-being of every person come to adult years. It is that which gives the rosy blush to the cheek, and the soft light to the eye of the maiden. The elastic step, the ringing laugh, and the strong right arm of the youth, own the same mainspring. How soon do irregularities rob the face of color, the eye of brightness! Everyone knows this. The blood becomes impoverished, the victim PALE. This pallor of the skin is often the outward mark of the trouble within. But to the sufferer there arise a host of symptoms, chiefest among which are loss of physical and nervous energy. Then Dr. Howard's BLOOD BUILDER steps into the breach and holds the fort. The impoverished Blood is enriched. The shattered nervous forces are restored. Vigor returns. Youth is recalled. Decay routed. The bloom of health again mantles the faded cheek. Improvement follows a few days' use of the pills; while permanent benefit and cure can only reasonably be expected when sufficient have been taken to enrich the Blood.

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Before the Blood Builder pills were taken, all their users were advised to have their bowels thoroughly cleansed by a laxative medicine and, happily, the company also made an excellent preparation for this purpose—Dr. Howard’s Golden Grains. While the good doctor was modern enough—the circular quoted from was printed in the 1890s—to recognize the importance of the healthy activity of the sexual apparatus, such a suggestion should not be carried too far—so we find that the pills were also unrivaled for building up systems shattered by debauchery, excesses, self-abuse or disease. Along with the pills themselves was recommended a somewhat hardy regimen, including fresh air, adequate sleep, avoidance of lascivious thoughts, and bathing the private parts and buttocks twice daily in ice-cold water.

[Illustration: FIGURE 17.—Card used in advertising Kingsland’s Chlorinated Tablets.]

A few years after their initial introduction, Dr. Howard’s Blood Builder Pills somehow became “electric”—this word surrounded by jagged arrows prominently featured on the outer wrapper—although the character of the improvement which added this new quality was not explained anywhere. The literature accompanying these remedies explained that “in the evening of an active, earnest and successful life, and in order that the public at large might participate in the benefit of his discoveries,” Dr. Howard graciously imparted to the proprietors the composition, methods of preparation, and modes of using these medicines. In other words, he was obviously a public benefactor of the same stamp as Dr. Morse and Dr. Cunard—although by the final years of the century, the old story about the long absence from home, the extended travels in remote lands, and the sudden discovery of some remarkable native remedy would probably have sounded a trifle implausible.

Putting the Pills Through

Given the characteristics of the patent-medicine business, its most difficult and essential function was selling—or what the Comstocks and their representatives frequently described in their letters as “putting the pills through.” During the full century within which Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills and their companion remedies were distributed widely over North America and, later, over the entire world, almost every form of advertising and publicity was utilized. And it is a strong presumption that the total costs of printing and publicity were much larger than those of manufacture and packaging.

Initially, the selling was done largely by “travelers” calling directly upon druggists and merchants, especially those in rural communities. All of the Comstock brothers, with the exception perhaps of Lucius, seem to have traveled a large part of their time, covering the country from the Maritime Provinces to the Mississippi Valley, and from Ontario—or Canada West—to the Gulf. Their letters to the “home office” show that they were frequently absent for extended periods, visiting points which at the very dawn of the railroad era, in the 1840s and 1850s, must have been remote indeed. In the surviving letters we find occasional references to lame horses and other vicissitudes of travel, and

one can also imagine the rigors of primitive trains, lake and river steamers, stagecoaches, and rented carriages, not to mention ill-prepared meals and dingy hotel rooms.

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Judson seems to have handled Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. J. Carlton Comstock, who died in 1853, covered the South and in fact maintained a residence in New Orleans; prior to the opening of the railroads, this city was also a point of entry for much of the West. George Wells Comstock made several extensive tours of the West, while William Henry spent much of his time in Canada West and, as we have seen, lived in Brockville after 1860. Andrew J. White spent most of his time traveling after he joined the firm in 1855; Moore also covered Canada West intensively, briefly for the Comstocks and then in opposition to them.

Besides the partners themselves, the several successor Comstock firms had numerous agents and representatives. As early as 1851, during the dispute between Lucius and his brothers, it was stated in a legal brief that the partnership included, besides its manufacturing house in New York City, several hundred agencies and depots throughout every state and county in the Union. This assertion may have stretched the truth a bit, as most of the agents must have handled other products as well, but the distribution system for the pills was undoubtedly well organized and widely extended. Several full-time agents did work exclusively for the Comstocks; these included Henry S. Grew of St. John's, Canada East, who said he had traveled 20,000 miles in three years prior to 1853, and Willard P. Morse in the Middle West, whose signature is still extant on numerous shipping documents.

While personal salemanship always must have been most effective in pushing the pills—and also useful in the allied task of collecting delinquent accounts—as the business grew the territory was far too vast to be covered by travelers, and so advertising was also used heavily. Hardly any method was neglected, but emphasis was always placed upon two media: almanacs and country newspapers.

Millions of the almanacs poured out of the small Morristown railroad station. In the early years of the present century, for which the record has been found, from July until the following April shipments of almanacs usually ran well in excess of one million per month. At various times they were also printed in Spanish and in German; the Spanish version was for export, but the German was intended primarily for our own “native” Germans in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and elsewhere throughout the Middle West.

Around the turn of the century, the patent-medicine almanac was so common that one could walk into any drug store and pick up three or four of them. Credit for the origination of the free patent-medicine almanac has been ascribed to Cyrenius C. Bristol, founder of the firm which Moore later took over and therefore an indirect predecessor of the Indian Root Pills. Whether or not this is strictly accurate, it is known that Bristol's Sarsaparilla Almanac was being printed as early as 1843 and by 1848 had expanded into an edition of 64 pages.



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[Illustration: FIGURE 18.—German circular for Judson's Mountain Herb Pills.]

The Comstocks were almost as early. The first date they printed almanacs is not known, but by 1853 it was a regular practice, for the order book of that year shows that large batches of almanacs, frequently 500 copies, were routinely enclosed with every substantial order. Over their entire history it is quite reasonable that somewhere in the vicinity of one billion almanacs must have been distributed by the Comstock Company and its predecessors. As a matter of fact, back in the 1850s there was not merely a Comstock but also a Judson almanac. One version of the latter was the "Rescue of Tula," which recounted Dr. Cunard's rescue of the Aztec princess and his reward in the form of the secret of the Mountain Herb Pills. In the 1880s, Morse's Indian Root Pill almanac was a 34-page pamphlet, about two thirds filled with advertising and testimonials—including the familiar story of the illness of Dr. Morse's father and the dramatic return of his son with the life-saving herbs—but also containing calendars, astronomical data, and some homely good advice. Odd corners were filled with jokes, of which the following was a typical specimen:

"Pa," said a lad to his father, "I have often read of people poor but honest; why don't they sometimes say, 'rich but honest'?"

"Tut, tut, my son, nobody would believe them," answered the father.

Before 1900 the detailed story of the discovery of Dr. Morse's pills was abridged to a brief summary, and during the 1920s this tale was abandoned altogether, although until the end the principal ingredients were still identified as natural herbs and roots used as a remedy by the Indians. In more recent years the character and purpose of Dr. Morse's pills also changed substantially. As recently as 1918, years after the passage of the Federal Food and Drug Act of 1906, they were still being recommended as a cure for:

Biliousness
Dyspepsia
Constipation
Sick Headache
Scrofula
Kidney Disease
Liver Complaint
Jaundice
Piles
Dysentery
Colds
Boils
Malarial Fever
Flatulency



Foul Breath
Eczema
Gravel
Worms
Female Complaints
Rheumatism
Neuralgia
La Grippe
Palpitation
Nervousness

Further, two entire pages were taken in the almanac to explain how, on the authority of “the celebrated Prof. La Roche of Paris,” appendicitis could be cured by the pills without resort to the surgeon’s knife.

Besides the almanacs, almost every known form of advertising in the preradio era was employed. Announcements were inserted in newspapers—apparently mostly rural newspapers—all over the country; the two remedies pushed most intensively were the Indian Root Pills and Judson’s Mountain Herb Worm Tea. The latter always bore a true likeness of Tezuco, the Aztec chief who had originally conferred the secret of the medicine upon Dr. Cunard. Besides the Mountain Herb Worm Tea, there were also Mountain Herb Pills; it is not clear how the pills differed from the tea, but they were recommended primarily as a remedy for

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Diarrhoea Dropsy Debility Fever and Ague Female Complaints Headaches Indigestion
Influenza Inflammation Inward Weakness Liver Complaints Lowness of Spirits Piles
Stone and Gravel Secondary Symptoms

with particular stress upon their value as a “great female medicine.” Besides the major advertisement of the pills, consisting of an eight-inch column to be printed in each issue of the paper, smaller announcements were provided, to be inserted according to a specified monthly schedule among the editorial matter on the inside pages. Sample monthly announcements from the Judson Mountain Herb Pills contract used in 1860 were:

JANUARY

THE GREAT FEMALE MEDICINE

The functional irregularities peculiar to the weaker sex, are invariably corrected without pain or inconvenience by the use of Judson’s Mountain Herb Pills. They are the safest and surest medicine for all the diseases incidental to females of all ages, and more especially so in this climate. Ladies who wish to enjoy health should always have these Pills. No one who ever uses them once will ever allow herself to be without them. They remove all obstructions, purify the blood and give to the skin that beautiful, clear and healthful look so greatly admired in a beautiful and healthy woman. At certain periods these Pills are an indispensable companion. From one to four should be taken each day, until relief is obtained. A few doses occasionally, will keep the system healthy, and the blood so pure, that diseases cannot enter the body.

MARCH

DISEASES OF THE CHEST AND LUNGS

These diseases are too well known to require any description. How many thousands are every year carried to the silent grave by that dread scourge Consumption, which always commences with a slight cough. Keep the blood pure and healthy by taking a few doses of JUDSON’S MOUNTAIN HERB PILLS each week, and disease of any kind is impossible. Consumption and lung difficulties always arise from particles of corrupt matter deposited in the air cells by bad blood. Purify that stream of life and it will soon carry off and destroy the poisonous matter; and like a crystal river flowing through a desert, will bring with it and leave throughout the body the elements of health and strength. As the river leaving the elements of fertility in its course, causes the before barren waste to bloom with flowers and fruit, so pure blood causes the frame to rejoice in strength and health, and bloom with unfading beauty.

[Illustration: FIGURE 19.—Card used in advertising Judson’s Mountain Herb Pills.]

Any person who read the notices for both medicines carefully might have noticed with some surprise that the Mountain Herb Pills and the Indian Root Pills were somehow often recommended for many of the same diseases. In fact, the Mountain Herb Pills and the Indian Root Pills used identical text in explaining their effect upon several disagreeable conditions. Always prominent in this advertising were reminders of our fragile mortality and warnings, if proper medication were neglected, of an untimely consignment to the silent grave.

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Unfortunately, newspapers in the South had been utilized extensively just on the eve of the Civil War, and it undoubtedly proved impossible to supply customers in that region during the ensuing conflict. However, other advertising was given a military flavor and tied in with the war, as witness the following (for 1865):

GENERAL ORDERS—No. 1

Headquarters

Department of this Continent and adjacent Islands

Pursuant to Division and Brigade orders issued by 8,000 Field Officers, “On the Spot”, where they are stationed. All Skedadlers, Deserters, Skulkers, and all others—sick, wounded and cripples—who have foresaken the cause of General Health, shall immediately report to one of the aforesaid officers nearest the point where the delinquent may be at the time this order is made known to him, and purchase one box of

JUDSON'S
MOUNTAIN HERB PILLS

and pay the regulation price therefor. All who comply with the terms of this order, will receive a free pardon for past offences, and be restored to the Grand Army of General Health.

A. GOOD HEALTH
Lieutenant-General

By order
Dr. Judson,
Adjutant-General

Sold by all dealers.

Twenty years later, when the Civil War had passed out of recent memory and Confederate currency was presumably becoming a curiosity, Comstock printed facsimiles of \$20 Confederate bills,[9] with testimonials and advertisements upon the reverse side; it can be assumed that these had enough historical interest to circulate widely and attract attention, although each possessor must have felt a twinge of disappointment upon realizing that his bill was not genuine but merely an advertising gimmick.

[Footnote 9: These facsimile bills were registered as a trademark at the United States Patent Office. In his registration application, Mr. Comstock described himself as a citizen of the United States, residing at Morristown, N.Y.—although he had served three terms as mayor of Brockville, Ontario, prior to this time.]



Back in the 1850s, the Comstock Company in lower Manhattan had an advertising agent, one Silas B. Force, whose correspondence by some unexplained happenstance was also deposited in the loft of the Indian Root Pill building in Morristown, even though he was not an exclusive agent and served other clients besides the Comstocks. One of these was Dr. Uncas Brant, for whom Force had the following announcement printed in numerous papers:

AN OLD INDIAN DOCTOR WHO HAD made his fortune and retired from business, will spend the remainder of his days in curing that dreadful disease—CONSUMPTION—FREE OF CHARGE: his earnest desire being to communicate to the world his remedies that have proved successful in more than 3,000 cases. He requires each applicant to send him a minute description of the symptoms, with two Stamps (6 cts) to pay the return letter,



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in which he will return his *advice prescription*, with directions for preparing the medicines &c. *The Old Doctor* hopes that those afflicted will not, on account of delicacy, refrain from consulting him because he makes *No Charge*. His sole object in advertising is to do all the good he can, before he dies. He feels that he is justly celebrated for cure of Consumption, Asthma, Bronchitis, Nervous Affections, Coughs, Colds, &c.

Address

DOCT. UNCAS BRANT
Box 3531, P.O., New York

This type of an apparently free diagnosis of medical ills, prompted solely by the benevolence of some elderly or retired person, was a familiar petty swindle around the middle of the last century. The newspapers carried many such announcements from retired clergymen, old nurses, or Indian doctors, frequently persons who had themselves triumphed over dread diseases and had discovered the best remedies only after years of search and suffering, always offering to communicate the secret of recovery to any fellow sufferer. The victim would receive in reply a recipe for the proper medicine, always with the advice that great care must be taken to prepare it exactly as directed, and with the further advice that if the ingredients should not prove to be conveniently available the benevolent old doctor or retired clergyman could provide them for a trifling sum. Invariably, the afflicted patient would discover that the ingredients specified were obscure ones, not kept by one druggist in a hundred and unknown to most of them. Thus, he would be obliged, if he persisted in the recommended cure, to send his money to the kindly old benefactor. Frequently, he would receive no further reply or, at best, would receive some concoction costing only a few cents to compound. The scheme was all the safer as it was carried on exclusively by mail, and the swindler would usually conclude each undertaking under any given name before investigation could be initiated.

Besides participating in such schemes, Force apparently devoted a large part of his energy in collecting accounts due him or, in turn, in being dunned by and seeking to postpone payment to newspapers with whom he was delinquent in making settlement.

Other forms of advertising employed over the years included finely engraved labels, circulars and handbills, printed blotters, small billboards, fans, premiums sent in return for labels, a concise—very concise—reference dictionary, and trade cards of various sorts. One trade card closely resembled a railroad pass; this was in the 1880s when railroad passes were highly prized and every substantial citizen aspired to own one. Thus, almost everyone would have felt some pride in carrying what might pass, at a glance, as a genuine pass on the K.C.L.R.R.; although it was signed only by “Good



Health” as the general agent, entitled the bearer merely to ride on foot or horseback and was actually an advertisement of Kingsland’s Chlorinated Tablets. Another card played somewhat delicately but still unmistakably on the Indian Root Pills’ capacity to restore male virility. This card pictured a fashionably dressed tomcat, complete with high collar, cane and derby, sitting somewhat disconsolately on a fence as the crescent moon rose behind him, with these reflections:



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How terribly lonesome I feel! How queer,
To be sitting alone, with nobody near,
Oh, how I wish Maria was here,
Mon dieu!
The thought of it fills me with horrible doubt,
I should smile, I should blush, I should wail,
I should shout,
Just suppose some fellow has cut me out!
Me out!

And underneath the lesson is given:

Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills
The Best Family Pill in use

[Illustration: FIGURE 20.—A trade card advertising Kingsland's Chlorinated Tablets, which closely resembled a railroad pass.]

Testimonials submitted voluntarily by happy users of the pills were always widely featured in the almanacs, newspaper advertisements, and handbills. Although the easy concoction of the stories about Dr. Morse and Dr. Cunard might suggest that there would have been no hesitation in fabricating these testimonials, it is probable that they were genuine; at least, many have survived in the letters scattered over the floor of the Indian Root Pill factory. In some cases one might feel that the testimonials were lacking in entire good faith, for many of them were submitted by dealers desiring lenient credit or other favors. Witness, for example, the following from B. Mollohan of Mt. Pleasant, Webster County, West Va., on April 16, 1879:

Pleas find here enclosed Two Dollars & 50 cts \$2 50 cts for which pleas place to my credit and return receipt to me for same. I cant praise your Dr Morse pill two high never before in all my recolection has there bin a meddison here that has given such general satisfaction. I hope the pills will always retain their high standing and never bee counterfeited.... I could sell any amt Pills allmost if money was not so scarce. I have to let some out on credit to the Sick and Poor & wait some time though I am accountable to you for all I recd & will pay you as fast as I sell & collect ... I have about one Doz Box on hand.

Mollohan's complaint about the shortage of money and the long delay in collecting many accounts reflected a condition that prevailed throughout the nineteenth century. Money was scarce, and the economy of many rural communities was still based largely on the barter system, so that it was very difficult for farmers to generate cash for store goods. Consequently, country storekeepers had to be generous in extending credit, and, in turn, manufacturers and jobbers had to be lenient in enforcing collection.

Not all of the storekeepers could write as neatly and clearly as Mollohan. The following letter, quoted in full, from Thomas Cathey of Enfield, Illinois, on January 23, 1880, not merely presented a problem relating to the company's policy of awarding exclusive territories but offered considerable difficulty in deciphering:



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mr CumStock der ser i thaut i Wod rite yo u a few lineS to inform you that i was the fir St agent for you pills in thiS Settlement but th as iS Several agent round her and tha ar interfer With mee eSpeSly William a StavSon he liveS her at enfield he Wanted mee to giv him one of you Sur klerS So he Wod be agent but i Wodent let hi m hav hit an he rote to you i SupoSe an haS got a Suplye of pills an ar aruning a gant mee he iS Sell ing them at 20 centS a box i Want you to St op him if you pleeSmr CumStock i Sent you too dollars the 21 p leeS Credet my a Count With hit mr. Cumsto Ck i Want you to Send mee Sum of you pam pletS i Want you to Send mee right of three tow nShipS aS i am Working up a good trad her i wan t indin Cree an enfield an Carnie tonnShipS rite Son aS poSSible an let me know whether you will let me have thoSe townShipS or not for my territory i Sold a box of pills to melven willSon his gir l She haS the ChilS for three yer and he tride eve n thang he cood her wan nothing never dun her eny good one box of you pills brok them on her tha ar the beSt pills i ever Saw in my life tha ar the beSt medeSon for the ChillS i ever Saw an rumiteS i am giting up a good trad i Want you to Send me Sum of you pampletS i want you to Stop theSe oth er agentS that iS botheran me an oblige you rite Son.

enfield
White Co.
illS

thomaS Cathey

Sadly, we do not know how the company handled Mr. Cathey's request for sole representation in three Illinois townships.

After the pills achieved wide recognition and other methods of publicity, chiefly the almanacs, were well established, newspaper advertising was terminated. An invitation to agents (about 1885) declared that

For some years past they have not been advertised in newspapers, they being filled with sensational advertisements of quack nostrums got up for no other purpose than catch-penny articles ...

The Indian Root Pills obviously claimed a more lofty stature than other, common proprietary remedies. The exclusive representation scheme was also a partial substitution for newspaper advertising; the company was aggressive in soliciting additional agents—aiming at one in every town and village—and then in encouraging them to push the pills by offering prizes such as watches, jewelry, and table utensils.[10]

[Footnote 10: In connection with this offer the pills were priced to agents at \$2 per dozen boxes—\$24 per gross—and were to be retailed at \$3 per dozen—25c per box. Other agreements, however, probably intended for more substantial dealers, specified a price of \$16 per gross for the Indian Root Pills.]

[Illustration: FIGURE 21.—Cover for booklet used as a circular describing the Indian Root Pills.]



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What were the ingredients of the Indian Root Pills and the other Comstock preparations? Originally, the formulas for the various remedies were regarded as closely held secrets, divulged only to proprietors and partners—and not even to all of them—and certainly never revealed to the purchasers. But despite this secrecy, charges of counterfeiting and imitating popular preparations were widespread. In many cases, the alleged counterfeits were probably genuine—to the extent that either of these terms has meaning—for it was a recurrent practice for junior partners and clerks at one drug house to branch off on their own, taking some of the secrets with them—just as Andrew B. White left Moore and joined the Comstocks, bringing the Indian Root Pills with him.

In the latter years, under the rules of the Federal Food and Drug Act, the ingredients were required to be listed on the package; thus we know that the Indian Root Pills, in the 1930s and 1940s, contained aloes, mandrake, gamboge, jalap, and cayenne pepper.

Aloe is a tropical plant of which the best known medicinal varieties come from Socotra and Zanzibar; those received by the Comstock factory were generally described as Cape (of Good Hope) *Aloe*. The juice *Aloes* is extracted from the leaves of this plant and since antiquity has been regarded as a valuable drug, particularly for its laxative and vermifuge properties. *Mandrake* has always been reputed to have aphrodisiac qualities. *Gamboge* is a large tree native to Ceylon and Southeast Asia, which produces a resinous gum, more commonly used by painters as a coloring material, but also sometimes employed in medicine as a cathartic. *Jalap* is a flowering plant which grows only at high altitudes in Mexico, and its root produces an extract with a powerful purgative effect. All of these ingredients possessed one especial feature highly prized by the patent-medicine manufacturers of the nineteenth century, *i.e.*, they were derived from esoteric plants found only in geographically remote locations. One does find it rather remarkable, however, that the native Indian chiefs who confided the secrets of these remedies to Dr. Morse and Dr. Cunard were so familiar with drugs originating in Asia and Africa.[11] The Indians may very well have been acquainted with the properties of jalap, native to this continent, but the romantic circumstances of its discovery, early in the last century seem considerably overdrawn, as the medicinal properties of jalap were generally recognized in England as early as 1600.

Whether the formula for the Indian Root Pills had been constant since their “discovery”—as all advertising of the company implied—we have no way of knowing for sure. However, the company’s book of trade receipts for the 1860s shows the recurring purchase of large quantities of these five drugs, which suggests that the ingredients did remain substantially unchanged for over a century. For other remedies manufactured by the company, the ingredients purchased included:



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Anise Seed
Black Antimony
Calomel
Camphor
Gum Arabic
Gum Asphaltum
Gum Tragacanth
Hemlock Oil
Horehound
Laudanum
Licorice Root
Magnolia Water
Muriatic Acid
Saltpetre
Sienna Oil
Sulphur
Wormseed

It is not known where the calomel (mercurous chloride) and some of the other harsher ingredients were used—certainly not in the Indian Root Pills or the Mountain Herb Worm Tea—for the company frequently incorporated warnings against the use of calomel in its advertising and even promised rewards to persons proving that any of its preparations contained calomel.

Less active ingredients used to supply bulk and flavor included alcohol, turpentine, sugar, corn starch, linseed meal, rosin, tallow, and white glue. Very large quantities of sugar were used, for we find that Comstock was buying one 250-pound barrel of sugar from C.B. Herriman in Ogdensburg approximately once a month. In the patent-medicine business it was necessary, of course, that the pills and tonics must be palatable, neutralizing the unpleasant flavor of some of the active ingredients; therefore large quantities of sugar and of pleasant-tasting herbs were required. It was also desirable, for obvious reasons, to incorporate some stimulant or habit-forming element into the various preparations.

[Footnote 11: Actually, the formula for the Indian Root Pills would seem to have corresponded closely with that for “Indian Cathartic Pills” given in *Dr. Chase’s Recipes*, published in 1866. These were described as follows:

Aloes and gamboge, of each 1 oz.; mandrake and blood-root, with gum myrrh, of each 1/4 oz.; gum camphor and cayenne, of each 1-1/2 drs.; ginger, 4 oz.; all finely pulverized and thoroughly mixed, with thick mucilage (made by putting a little water upon equal quantities of gum arabic and gum tragacanth) into pill mass; then formed into common sized pills. Dose: Two to four pills, according to the robustness of the patient.]



A register of incoming shipments for the year 1905 shows that the factory was still receiving large quantities of aloes, gamboge, mandrake, jalap, and pepper. One new ingredient being used at this time was talc, some of which originated at Gouverneur, within a few miles of the pill manufactory, but more of it was described as "German talc." The same register gives the formulas for three of the company's other preparations. One of these, the *Nerve & Bone Liniment*, was simply compounded of four elements:

3 gal. Turpentine 2 qts. Linseed Oil 2 lbs. Hemlock 2 lbs. Concentrated Amonia.

The formula for the *Condition Powders* (for horses and livestock) was far more complex, consisting of:

4 lbs. Sulphur 4 lbs. Saltpetre 4 lbs. Black Antimony 4 lbs. Feongreek Seed 8 lbs. Oil Meal 1-1/2 oz. Arsenic 2 oz. Tart Antimony 6 lbs. Powdered Rosin 2 lbs. Salt 2 lbs. Ashes 4 lbs. Brand (Bran-?).

The name of the third preparation was not given, but the ingredients were:



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1 oz. Dry White Lead 1 oz. Oxide of Zinc 1/2 oz. Precipitated Chalk 3 oz. Glycerine
Add 1 lb. Glue.

[Illustration: FIGURE 22.—A partial list of remedies offered for sale by Lucius Comstock in 1854, shortly after the separation of the old company into the rival firms of Comstock & Co. and Comstock & Brother.]

Originally, Comstock and its predecessor firms marketed a large number of remedies. In 1854, Comstock & Company—then controlled by Lucius Comstock—listed nearly forty of its own preparations for sale, namely:

Oldridge's Balm of Columbia
George's Honduras Sarsaparilla
East India Hair Dye, colors the hair and not the skin
Acoustic Oil, for deafness
Vermifuge
Bartholomew's Expectorant Syrup
Carlton's Specific Cure for Ringbone, Spavin and Wind-galls
Dr. Sphon's Head Ache Remedy
Dr. Connol's Gonorrhoea Mixture
Mother's Relief
Nipple Salve
Roach and Bed Bug Bane
Spread Plasters
Judson's Cherry and Lungwort
Azor's Turkish Balm, for the Toilet and Hair
Carlton's Condition Powder, for Horses and Cattle
Connel's Pain Extractor
Western Indian Panaceas
Hunter's Pulmonary Balsam
Linn's Pills and Bitters
Oil of Tannin, for Leather
Nerve & Bone Liniment (Hewe's)
Nerve & Bone Liniment (Comstock's)
Indian Vegetable Elixir
Hay's Liniment for Piles
Tooth Ache Drops
Kline Tooth Drops
Carlton's Nerve and Bone Liniment, for Horses
Condition Powders, for Horses
Pain Killer
Lin's Spread Plasters
Carlton's Liniment for the Piles, warranted to cure
Dr. Mc Nair's Acoustic Oil, for Deafness



Dr. Larzetti's Acoustic Oil, for Deafness
Salt Rheum Cure
Azor's Turkish Wine
Dr. Larzetti's Juno Cordial, or Procreative Elixir
British Heave Powders

All of the foregoing were medicines for which Lucius claimed to be the sole proprietor—although it is improbable that he manufactured all of them: several of them were probably identical preparations under different labels. In addition to these, he offered a larger list of medicines as a dealer. Brother J. Carlton Comstock must have been the main originator of medicines within the firm; he seems to have specialized largely in veterinary remedies, although the liniment for the piles also stood to his credit. Despite Lucius' claim to sole proprietorship of these remedies, the departing brothers also manufactured and sold most of the identical items, adding two or three additional preparations, such as Dr. Chilton's Fever and Ague Pills and Youatt's Gargling Oil (for animals). Aside from J. Carlton Comstock and Judson, the originators of most of the other preparations are cloaked in mystery; most of them were probably entirely fictitious. Admittedly, William Youatt (1776-1847), for whom several of the animal remedies were named, was an actual British veterinarian and his prescriptions were probably genuine, but whether

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he authorized their sale by proprietary manufacturers or was himself rewarded in any way are questions for speculation. The versatile Dr. Larzetti seems to have experimented both with impotency and deafness, but his ear oil—a number of specimens of which were still on hand in the abandoned factory—was identical in every respect with Dr. McNair's oil, as the labels and directions, aside only from the names of the doctors, were exactly the same for both preparations. In fact, some careless printer had even made up a batch of circulars headed "Dr. Mc Nair's Acoustic Oil" but concluding with the admonition, "Ask for Larzetti's Acoustic Oil and take no other." Presumably simple Americans who were distrustful of foreigners would take Mc Nair's oil, but more sophisticated persons, aware of the accomplishments of doctors in Rome and Vienna, might prefer Larzetti's preparation.

[Illustration: FIGURE 23.—Dr. McNair's and Dr. Larzetti's acoustic oil apparently were identical in every respect. Labels and directions, with the difference only of the doctors' names, were quite obviously printed from the same type.]

As the century moved along, the Comstock factory at Morristown reduced the number of remedies it manufactured, and concentrated on the ones that were most successful, which included, besides the Indian Root Pills, Judson's Mountain Herb Pills, Judson's Worm Tea, Carlton's Condition Powders, Carlton's Nerve & Bone Liniment, and Kingsland's Chlorinated Tablets. At some undisclosed point, Carlton's Nerve & Bone Liniment for Horses, originally registered with the Smithsonian Institution on June 30, 1851, ceased to be a medicine for animals and became one for humans. And sometime around 1920 the Judson name disappeared, the worm medicine thereafter was superseded by Comstock's Worm Pellets. Long before this, Judson had been transposed into somewhat of a mythical character—"old Dr. Judson"—who had devised the Dead Shot Worm Candy on the basis of seventy years' medical experience.

During the final years of the Comstock business in Morristown, in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, only three items were manufactured and sold: the Indian Root Pills, the Dead Shot Worm Pellets and Comstock's N & B Liniment.[12] The worm pellets had been devised by Mrs. Hill, "an old English nurse of various and extended experience in the foundling hospitals of Great Britain."

Besides its chemicals and herbs, the Comstock factory was a heavy consumer of pillboxes and bottles. While the company advertised, in its latter years, that "our pills are packaged in metal containers—not in cheap wooden boxes," they were, in fact, packaged for many decades in small oval boxes made of a thin wooden veneer. These were manufactured by Ira L. Quay of East Berne, New York, at a price of 12c per gross. The pill factory often must have been a little slow in paying, for Quay was invariably prodding for prompt remittance, as in this letter of December 25, 1868:



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Mr Wm h comstock

Dear sir we have sent you one tierce & 3 cases of pill boxes wich we want you to send us a check for as soon as you git this for we have to pay it the first of next month & must have the money if you want eney moure boxes we will send them & wait for the money till the first of april youres truly

Quay & Champion

Quay continued to supply the boxes for at least fifteen years, during which his need for prompt payment never diminished. Comstock also bought large quantities of bottles, corks, packing boxes, and wrappers. Throughout the company's long existence, however, more frequent payments were made to printers and stationers—for the heavy flow of almanacs, handbills, labels, trade cards, direction sheets, and billheads—than for all the drugs and packaging materials. In the success achieved by the Indian Root Pills, the printing press was just as important a contributor as the pill-mixing machine.

The Final Years

When William Henry Comstock, Sr., moved the Indian Root Pill business to Morristown, in 1867, he was—at age 37—at least approaching middle life. Yet he was still to remain alive, healthy, and in direct charge of the medicine business for more than half a century longer. And the golden era of the patent-medicine business may be said to have coincided very closely with Mr. Comstock's active career—from about 1848 to 1919.

[Footnote 12: However, additional items were manufactured by the Dr. Howard Medicine Co., affiliated with the Comstock factory in Brockville. Also, during World War II the company accepted an Army contract for the manufacture and packaging of foot powder.]

[Illustration: FIGURE 24.—In its final years the Comstock factory discontinued most of its old remedies and concentrated upon the three most successful: Comstock's Dead Shot Worm Pellets, Comstock's N. & B. Liniment, and Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills.]

While no schedule of sales, net income, or financial results are available, the fragmentary records make it obvious that the business continued to flourish beyond World War I, and long after the passage of the first Food and Drug Act—in 1906. The almanacs were still printed as recently as 1938; while the labels and other advertising matter abandoned their ornate nineteenth-century style and assumed a distinctly modern aspect—to the extent of introducing comic-style picture stories, featuring the small boy who lacked energy to make the little league baseball team (he had worms), and the girl who lacked male admirers because of pimples on her face (she suffered from irregular elimination). Sales volume of the Morristown factory, however, apparently did reach a peak early in the present century—perhaps around 1910—and began a



more rapid decline during the 1920s. During this same period the geographical character of the market shifted significantly; as domestic orders dropped off, a very substantial foreign business, particularly in Latin America, sprang up. While this did not compensate fully for the loss of domestic sales, it did provide a heavy volume that undoubtedly prolonged the life of the Indian Root Pill factory by several decades.

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William Henry Comstock, Sr., who first came to Brockville in 1860, at a time when the struggle with White for the control of the pills was still in progress, married a Canadian girl, Josephine Elliot, in 1864; by this marriage he had one son, Edwin, who lived only to the age of 28. In 1893 Comstock married, for a second time, Miss Alice J. Gates, and it is a favorable testimony to the efficacy of some of his own virility medicines that at age 67 he sired another son, William Henry Comstock II (or "Young Bill") on July 4, 1897. In the meanwhile, the elder Comstock had become one of the most prominent citizens of Brockville, which he served three terms as mayor and once represented in the Canadian parliament. Besides his medicine factories on both sides of the river, he was active in other business and civic organizations, helped to promote the Brockville, Westport & Northwestern Railway, and was highly regarded as a philanthropist. Although he lived well into the automobile age, he always preferred his carriage, and acquired a reputation as a connoisseur and breeder of horses. As remarked earlier, his steam yacht was also a familiar sight in the upper reaches of the St. Lawrence River.

The medicine business in Morristown was operated as a sole proprietorship by Comstock from the establishment here in 1867 up until 1902, when it was succeeded by W.H. Comstock Co., Ltd., a Canadian corporation. St. Lawrence County deeds record the transfer of the property—still preserving the 36-foot strip for the railroad—from personal to corporate ownership at that time.

Comstock—the same callow youth who had been charged with rifling Lucius' mail in the primitive New York City of 1851—came to the end of his long life in 1919. He was succeeded immediately by his son, William Henry II, who had only recently returned from military service during World War I. According to Mrs. Planty, former Morristown historian, "Young Bill" had been active in the business before the war and was making an inspection of the company's depots in the Orient, in the summer of 1914, when he was stranded in China by the cancellation of transpacific shipping services and was therefore obliged to cross China and Russia by the Transiberian Railway. This story, however, strains credulity a trifle, as the journey would have brought him closer to the scene of conflict at that time, and he was, in any event, only 17 years old when these events are supposed to have occurred.

The decline of the patent-medicine business was ascribed by Stewart Holbrook in his *Golden Age of Quackery* to three main factors: the Pure Food and Drug Acts; the automobile; and higher standards of public education. All of these were, of course, strongly in evidence by the 1920s, when William Henry Comstock II was beginning his career as the head of the Indian Root Pill enterprise. Nevertheless, the Morristown plant was still conducting a very respectable business

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at this time and was to continue for some four decades longer. The Comstock enterprise never seemed to have been much embarrassed by the muckraking attacks that surrounded the passage of the Federal Food and Drug Act of 1906. Aside from the enforcement of these measures by the energetic Harvey Wiley, the two most effective private assaults upon the patent-medicine trade probably were the exposures by Samuel Hopkins Adams in a series of articles in *Collier's* magazine in 1905-1906, under the title, "The Great American Fraud," and the two volumes entitled, *Nostrums and Quackery*, embodying reprints of numerous articles in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* over a period of years. Both sources named names fearlessly and described consequences bluntly. But the Comstock remedies, either because they may have been deemed harmless, or because the company's location in a small village in a remote corner of the country enabled it to escape unfriendly attention, seemed to have enjoyed relative immunity from these attacks. At least, none of the Comstock remedies was mentioned by name.[13] To be sure, these preparations—or at least those destined for consumption within the United States—had to comply with the new drug laws, to publish their ingredients, and over a period of time to reduce sharply the extensive list of conditions which they were supposed to cure. Nevertheless, it seems probable that the general change in public attitudes rather than any direct consequences of legislative enforcement caused the eventual demise of the Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills.

[Illustration: FIGURE 25.—Comstock packaging building (upper floor used as residence for manager—note laundry) at left, hotel at right. Ferry slip directly ahead. About 1915.]

Foreign business began to assume considerable importance after 1900; shipments from Morristown to the West Indies and Latin America were heavy, and the company also listed branches (perhaps no more than warehouses or agencies) in London, Hongkong, and Sydney, Australia. Certain of the order books picked up out of the litter on the floor of the abandoned factory give a suggestion of sales volume since 1900:

[Footnote 13: Dr. William's Pink Pills, also headquartered in Brockville, were not so fortunate, as they were mentioned disparagingly in both the *Collier's* and *American Medical Association* articles. Among numerous proprietary manufacturers who protested, blustered, or threatened legal action against *Collier's*, the Dr. Williams Co. was one of only two who actually instituted a libel suit.]

SALES OF DR. MORSE'S INDIAN ROOT PILLS

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gross				
				Estimated
				Dollar
Domestic	Foreign	Total	Amount	
-----+-----+-----				
1900	—	—	6,238	100,000
1910	5,975	—	—	96,000
1920	3,243	—	—	52,000
1930	—	1,893	—	30,000
1941	316	—	—	5,000

The foregoing data show sales of the Indian Root Pills only; this was by far the most important product, but the factory was also selling Worm Pellets, Judson’s Pills (up to 1920), and N & B Liniment. Also, this tabulation excludes sales in quantities less than one gross, and there were actually many such smaller orders. Only physical shipments were shown in the records recovered, and the dollar volume is the author’s computation at \$16 per gross, the price which prevailed for many years. Through 1900 there was only a single order book; beginning prior to 1910, separate domestic and foreign order books were introduced, but most of them have been lost. On the assumption that there was a fair volume of foreign sales in 1910, total sales must have continued to climb through the decade then ending, but by 1920 domestic sales—and probably total sales—had dropped materially. The number of employees, apparently about forty at the peak of the business, had dropped to thirteen according to the 1915 paybook but recovered slightly to sixteen in 1922. These fragmentary data suggest that the Morristown branch of the Comstock enterprise probably never grossed much over \$100,000, but in an era when \$12 or \$15 represented a good weekly wage and the clutching grasp of the income-tax collector was still unknown, this was more than adequate to support the proprietor in comfort and to number him among the more influential citizens of the district. It is not known how Morristown sales compared with those of the Brockville factory, but it may be assumed that the company utilized its “dual nationality” to the utmost advantage, to benefit from favorable tariff laws and minimize the restrictions of both countries. The Morristown plant supplied the lucrative Latin American trade, while during the era of Imperial preference, Brockville must have handled the English, Oriental, and Australian business.

[Illustration: FIGURE 26.—In its final years the Comstock advertising assumed a modern guise. Depicted here is the N. & B. Liniment (originally registered with the Smithsonian as Carlton’s Celebrated Nerve and Bone Liniment for horses, in 1851).]

For many decades—from 1900 at least up into the 1930s—a number of very large shipments, normally 100 gross or more in single orders, were made to Gilpin, Langdon

& Co., Baltimore, and to Columbia Warehouse Co. in St. Louis, important regional distributors.

Many substantial orders were also received from legitimate drug houses, such as Lehn & Fink; Schieffelin & Co.; Smith, Kline & French; and McKesson & Robbins. Curiously, A.J. White & Co. of New York City also appears in the order book, around 1900, as an occasional purchaser. Among the foreign orders received in 1930 the United Fruit Company was, by a wide margin, the largest single customer.



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Pills destined for the Latin American market were packaged alternatively in “glass” or “tin,” and were also labeled “Spanish” or “English,” as the purchasers might direct. Spanish language almanacs and other advertising matter were generally inserted in the foreign parcels, along with many copies of “tapes”—the advertisements of the worm pills conspicuously illustrated with a horrifying picture of an enormous tapeworm.

Sales volume began to decline more precipitously in the 1930s, and the Morristown factory was no longer working even close to capacity. The domestic order book for 1941 shows sales of the Indian Root Pills, in quantities of one gross or more, of only 316 gross. The Royal Drug Co. of Chicago gave one single order for 44 gross, and Myers Bros. Drug Co. of St. Louis bought 25 gross in one shot, but otherwise orders in excess of five gross were rare, and those for one gross alone—or for one half gross, one fourth gross, or one sixth gross—were far more common. The number of orders was still substantial, and the packing and mailing clerks must have been kept fairly busy, but they were working hard for a sharply reduced total volume. Some stimulus was provided for the factory during the war years by a military contract for foot powder, but the decline became even more precipitous after the conflict. The Comstock Hotel was destroyed by fire in 1925, never to be rebuilt. And by the late 1940s the once-busy railroad bisecting the factory property—the old Utica & Black River—had deteriorated to one lonely train crawling over its track in each direction, on weekdays only, but still carrying a New York City sleeping car. The 1950 order book reveals a business that had withered away to almost nothing. Once again, as in 1900, both foreign and domestic sales were recorded in a single book, but now foreign sales greatly outstripped the domestic. In fact, a mere 18 gross of the pills were sold—in quantities of one gross or more—in the domestic market in that year, contrasting sadly with nearly 6,000 gross in 1910. Even the Henry P. Gilpin Co. of Baltimore, which at one time had been ordering 100 gross or more every month or six weeks, took only a meager four gross during the entire year. There were a large number of very small shipments—such as four boxes of pills here, or a bottle of liniment there—but these did not aggregate very much and gave the appearance of merely accommodating individual customers who could no longer find their favorite remedies in their own local drug stores.

The foreign business—chiefly in the West Indies, Puerto Rico, and South America—was still fairly substantial in 1950, amounting to 579 gross of the Indian Root Pills, but this was far from compensating for the virtual disappearance of the domestic market. At the old price of \$16 per gross—which may no longer have been correct in 1950—the Morristown factory could not have taken in a great deal more than \$10,000—hardly enough to justify its continued operation. In any case, it was obviously only the foreign business that kept the plant operating as long as it did; without that it would probably have closed its doors 20 years earlier.

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A number of customers were, however, faithful to the Comstock Company for very many years. Schieffelin & Co. and McKesson & Robbins were both important customers way back in the 1840s, and their favor had been an object of dispute in the split between Lucius and the other brothers in 1851. Schieffelin still appeared frequently in the order books up to the 1920s; during the final years McKesson & Robbins was by far the largest single domestic customer. A number of other firms—John L. Thompson Sons & Co. of Troy, N.Y.; T. Sisson & Co. of Hartford, Conn.; and Gilman Brothers of Boston, Mass.—appear both in the 1896 and the 1950 order books, although unfortunately the quantities taken had fallen from one or two gross at a shot in the earlier year to a mere quarter gross or a few dozen boxes by 1950.

Toward the end, in the late 1950s, employment in the factory dropped to only three persons—J.M. Barney (foreman), Charles Pitcher, and Florence Cree—and they were only doing maintenance work and filling such few orders, mostly in quantities of a few dozen boxes only, that came to the factory unsolicited. Gone were the days of travelers scouring the back country, visiting country druggists, and pushing the pills, while simultaneously disparaging rival or “counterfeit” concoctions; gone were the days when the almanacs and other advertising circulars poured out of Morristown in the millions of copies; long since vanished were the sweeping claims of marvelous cures for every conceivable ailment. In these final days the Indian Root Pills, now packaged in a flat metal box with a sliding lid, were described modestly as the Handy Vegetable Laxative. And the ingredients were now printed on the box; nothing more was heard of Dr. Morse’s remarkable discovery gleaned during his long sojourn with the Indians of the western plains.

[Illustration: FIGURE 27.—The pill-mixing building, about 1928 (building torn down in 1971).]

Although the records disclose nothing to this effect, it is a fair premise that the Comstock family often must have considered closing the Morristown plant after World War II and, more particularly, in the decade of the 1950s. Such inclinations may, however, have been countered by a willingness to let the plant run as long as a trickle of business continued and it did not fall too far short of covering expenses. The last few surviving employees were very elderly, and their jobs may have been regarded as a partial substitute for pensions. This view is evidenced by an injury report for George Clute, who suffered a fit of coughing while mixing pills in January 1941; he was then 77 years old and had been working in the factory for 34 years. The final paybooks show deductions for Social Security and unemployment insurance—specimens of vexatious red tape that the factory had avoided for most of its existence.

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The decision to close the Morristown factory was finally forced upon the family, on May 15, 1959, by the death of William Henry Comstock II—“Young Bill”—who had been president of the company since 1921. Like his father, “Young Bill” Comstock had been a prominent citizen of Brockville for many years, served a term as mayor—although he was defeated in a contest for a parliamentary seat—was also active in civic and social organizations, and achieved recognition as a sportsman and speedboat operator.

[Illustration: FIGURE 28.—The packaging and office building at left, depot in center, and Comstock Hotel at right. Canadian shore and city of Brockville (location of another Comstock factory) in background.]

The actual end of the business came in the spring of 1960. The frequency and size of orders had dropped sharply, although the names of many of the old customers still appeared, as well as individuals who would send one dollar for three boxes of the pills. These small shipments were usually mailed, rather than going by express or freight, as formerly. The very last two shipments, appropriately, were to old customers: One package of one-dozen boxes of pills on March 31, 1960, to Gilman Brothers of Boston, and two-dozen boxes to McKesson & Robbins at Mobile, Alabama, on April 11. And with this final consignment the factory closed its doors, concluding ninety-three years of continuous operation in the riverside village of Morristown.

Very little of this story remains to be told. Mrs. Comstock became president of the company during its liquidation—and thus was a successor to her *father-in-law*, who had first entered the business as a clerk, *119 years earlier*, in 1841. The good will of the company and a few assets were sold to the Milburn Company of Scarborough, Ontario, but the Comstock business was terminated, and the long career of Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills brought to a close. The few superannuated employees were assured of protection against all medical expenses, by the company or by the Comstock family, for the rest of their lives. A few years later the associated Canadian factory standing in the heart of Brockville was torn down; during its lifetime that community had grown up around it, from a village to a flourishing small city. The buildings in Morristown were sold to other parties and left to stand untenanted and forlorn for years. The upper (packaging) building, from which the records were recovered, remains in fair condition and may yet be renovated for some further use. The lower (pill-mixing) building, after standing derelict and at the point of collapse for many years, was finally torn down in 1971. The hotel, a large water tank behind the factory, and the combination depot and customs house have all vanished from the scene. The shed where the Comstocks kept their yacht has been maintained and still shelters several boats, but the ferry slip just below the factory

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steps is now abandoned, and no longer do vessels ply back and forth across the river to connect Morristown and Brockville. The railroad only survived the passing of the factory by a year or two and is now memorialized by no more than a line of decaying ties. The main highway leading westward from Ogdensburg toward the Thousand Islands area has been straightened and rerouted to avoid Morristown, so that now only the straying or misguided traveler will enter the village. If he does enter he will find a pleasant community, scenically located on a small bay of the St. Lawrence River, commanding an enticing view of the Canadian shore, and rising in several stages above the lower level, where the factory once stood; but it is a somnolent village. No longer do river packet steamers call at the sagging pier, no longer do trains thread their way between the factory buildings and chug to a halt at the adjacent station. No longer do hope-giving pills and elixirs, or almanacs and circulars in the millions, pour out of Morristown destined for country drugstores and lonely farmhouses over half a continent. Only memories persist around the empty ferry slip, the vanished railroad station, and the abandoned factory buildings—for so many years the home of the distinguished Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills.

Bibliography

The principal source of information for this history of the Comstock medicine business comprises the records, letters, documents, and advertising matter found in the abandoned pill-factory building at Morristown, New York. Supplemental information was obtained from biographies, local and county histories, old city directories, genealogies, back files of newspapers, and materials from the office of the St. Lawrence County Historian, at the courthouse, Canton, New York.

Two standard histories of the patent-medicine era in America are:

Holbrook, Stewart H. *Golden Age of Quackery*. New York City: Macmillan Co. 1959.

Young, J.H. *The Toadstool Millionaires, A Social History of Patent Medicines in America Before Federal Regulation*. Princeton University Press. 1961.

Early in the present century, during the "exposure" of the patent-medicine industry, two principal critical works also were published, each highly specific and naming names fearlessly:

Adams, Samuel Hopkins. *The Great American Fraud*. Serially in *Collier's Magazine* in 1905-1906. (Reprinted in book form, 1906.)



American Medical Association. *Nostrums and Quackery*. Chicago: American Medical Association Press. (Reprints from the *Journal of the American Medical Association*: volume I, 1911; volume II, 1921; volume III, 1936.)

Recently two books have appeared, which are largely pictorial, essentially uncritical, and strive mainly to recapture the colorfulness and ingenuity of patent-medicine advertising.

Carson, Gerald. *One for a Man, Two for a Horse*. 128 pages. New York City: Doubleday and Co. 1961.



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Hechtlinger, Adelaide. *The Great Patent Medicine Era*. New York City: Grosset and Dunlap. 1970.

A highly recommended source of information on the very early history of patent medicines in America is:

Griffenhagen, George B., and James Harvey Young. Old English Patent Medicines in America. *United States National Museum Bulletin 218, Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology*, paper 10: 155-183 1959.

DR. MORSE'S PILLS LIVE ON

Although the original Comstock enterprise has been dissolved and all of its undertakings in North America terminated, as has been related herein, Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills and Comstock's Worm Tablets are still being manufactured and sold—by the W.H. Comstock Company Pty. Ltd., in Australia. This concern, originally a subsidiary of the Canadian company, is headed by the former branch manager for the Comstocks, who acquired the rights for Australia and the Orient following the dissolution of the Brockville company. Distribution is also carried out from this source into New Zealand, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Packaging and directions are now modern, the pills being described as "The Overnight Laxative with the Tonic Action," but a reproduction of the old label and the facsimile signature of William Henry Comstock, Sr., are still being portrayed. Thus, the Indian Root Pills have been manufactured continuously for at least 115 years and the Comstock business, through the original and successor firms, has survived for nearly 140 years.