

[Home Medical Practices]

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Beliefs and customs — Remedies and cures

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Informant: Charles E. Banister

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Form C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

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Subject Home Medical Practices (2nd interview)

Name and address of informant Charles E. Banister

Portland

Text:

My mother had all kinds of home remedies she used to use on the children. I don't remember what particular ailment it was for, but we took catnip tea, and sassafras tea. Turpentine and sugar was given for worms, and sometimes people were dosed with

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straight turpentine, as in the case of my brother who died of diphtheria. It was the doctor who doped him, and he gave him too much.

Turpentine and lard rubbed on the chest was wonderful for colds, and if we had no turpentine we could use coal oil or kerosene.

Among the teas were anis seed tea and Oregon Grape root tea which was used for a tonic. Tansy tea was for women's ailments—for delayed period.

Green Mountain Salve was my mother's own manufacture. She Compounded the formula and made the salve. It was verdigris in it that made it green. My sister probably has the formula now, and I will write to her for it in case you want it.

We also had several kinds of poultices, flax seed poultice, 2 bread and milk poultice, and beefsteak poultice which my mother put on me whenever I came home with a black eye. But the very best poultice for sores was the angle worm poultice. It would draw all the smart out of even a bad felon. The worms were taken alive, placed upon the sore, and wrapped around with a bandage.

For earache sometimes mother used laudanum dropped into the ear with a dropper. There were pain killer pills to be got at the store, but the usual remedy for headaches was hot or cold packs applied to the head.

For burns, she made a paste of bicarbonate of soda and water and spread it over the burned area. Too, as soon as one was burned it was always best for him to hold the burn as close to the heat as possible and quickly as possible. This would hurt something dreadful but it would draw all the fire out almost at once.

Then for colds we had onion syrup. Onions were boiled to a concentrated solution and sugar was added to sweeten it.

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Form D

Extra Comment

Comment:

Among the foremost of remedies "handed down" in the family is the tea made of dung. In the case of my grandmother the most efficaciously medicinal dung is that of the swine, the common sty-pig, which, when dried and baked in an oven and made into a tea is said to cure evils of all sorts, from the slightest indisposition to measles and smallpox. I recall several years ago when I was in Baker, Oregon that a child took sick with the measles. The grandmother procured the dung of a sheep, gave it the same treatment in the oven and made it into tea. This the child drank, being too young to know what the decoction was.

Tea of tansy is another favorite remedy, as well as teas made from various roots, barks, herbs, etc. Chittum tea, from the bark of the chittum tree, is particularly good, and if the first syllable is pronounced soft, an idea of the sort of action produced may be gained. There is still a good market for chittum bark on the drug market.

If I recall rightly, there is also a decoction of rhubarb, 2 of licorice root, of which I made the acquaintance as a small boy when visiting my aunt near Newport, Oregon.

Sulphur was always the standard for sore throat. The powdered variety is obtained, a small amount placed in a paper funnel, and the small end inserted into the sufferer's oral cavity. The administrator then blows and forces the fine powder down the victim's throat. If the patient blows or coughs first, the cure becomes a two-edged sword which strikes back at the person administering the remedy.

My grandmother used to make in large quantities a potent unguent which passed under the name of Green Mountain Salve. This stuff was green in color and it seems to me the

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principal ingredient was carbolic acid. It comes to mind that she sold this preparation and made a good deal from the sale.

Goose grease and turpentine, rubbed into the chest and back and covered with warm flannel, was a standard remedy for colds and chills. I recall hearing it said that my father's two brothers, who died when very young, were given turpentine straight, just before they died, by the family doctor.

Sulphur and honey was the prevailing spring tonic. This was equivalent to the sulphur and molasses of the East and South, only honey was more easily procured in this western region. The idea of the sweet was simply to make the concoction taste better.

Plain table salt was another good remedy for toothache, sore throat, etc. This was mixed with water, one teaspoonful to a glass of water. Vinegar or blue vitriol served to defeat the ravages of rashes, poison oak, etc. 3 Various oils were largely in use. Castor oil is almost too familiar to bear mention. Then there was sweet oil for earaches. An earfull of warm sweet oil was well calculated to ease the pain.

Poultices too were common. Chewed tobacco poultice would remove the heat from a bee sting in remarkably short order. Also a mud of spittle and dust was used on occasions of this sort. Then there was the mustard poultice, the tea-leaf poultice, and a poultice of gunpowder and milk which was used to combat ringworm. In this latter case it was sometimes customary to paint the offending "ring" with ink.

Then there was the still popular remedy of whisky, hot water, and sugar for colds; hot lemonade for the same purpose—to make the patient sweat. The idea was and largely still is, if the patient has a sickness, let him "sweat it out."

Boiled grapefruit has its curative powers for deranged stomachs, and burns were treated with unsalted lard. Baking soda was also used for stomach disorders, and still is today, when mixed with water and drunk warm.

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A so-called cure for warts was to place the head of one match upon the wart and touch it off with another, and so “burn it out.” Another less painful but longer treatment consisted of rubbing the affected part with castor oil. This has been known to clean up warts slick as a whistle.

I recall one old man who made hair tonic out of catnip, cooking down the leaves in a dark, sullen-looking mash, then straining off the liquid. He put the stuff up in pint whisky bottles, and my brother happened to catch sight of it one day and thought it was whisky. As he was only a boy and had never tasted whisky, he took one of the bottles and drank about half the contents. “Pretty good stuff,” he said with the wise air of an older boy, and wouldn't let me have any. A short time later the old gentleman came tearing out of his room, wanting to know “who in hell has been drinking my hair-tonic?”

But the favorite physic of all was good old Epsom salts. Old timers always keep Epsom salts in the medicine cabinet and toss off a dose on the least provocation. The general idea was to keep the bowels clean even if it were necessary to take off half the intestinal walls.