

My uncle Elvis Perryman was born in 1886, and I remember him well. He farmed and raised a few cows in the blackland prairie of north-central Texas. He was a no-nonsense guy, wore a big-brimmed Stetson with his Sunday-go-to-meetin' outfit, had a peculiarly dry sense of humor, and could be a little gruff at times.

Once, in his later years, he developed a deep-chested cough he couldn't shake. He tried about everything before he happened onto a bottle of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, something Aunt Myrtle had around the house for emergencies. For those who don't recall, Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound was a patented elixir that claimed on the label to be: "A Sure Cure for Pro-lapsis Uteri or Falling of the Womb, and all Female Weaknesses, including Leucorrhoea, Painful Menstruation, Inflammation, and Ulceration of the Womb, Irregularities, and Floodings. A medicine for women. Invented by a woman. Prepared by a woman."

Now it will never be known for sure what possessed him to take a swig in the first place; maybe it was desperation or maybe he just didn't have his readin' glasses on. But after some time, he happened to be conversing with his adult grandson about his cough predicament and how that bottle of Pinkham's cured it. In the back and forth between them, Uncle Elvis sang praises about its efficacy. His grandson took a look at the bottle and discovered that its contents included a number of vegetable ingredients, including black cohosh and unicorn root, along with 20 percent grain alcohol. So the magic in the elixir was the 40 proof. Yep, that'll stop a cough.

I went through childhood with Mercurochrome, tincture of iodine, Campho-Phenique, Mentholatum ointment, borax, and paregoric in the medicine cabinet. Wounds without the severity that called for medicine were...well, you let the dogs lick it. You didn't go to town for the doctor unless there was a bone sticking out somewhere, and even then it was touch and go. Cough medicine consisted of a teaspoon of whiskey with a little honey and lemon juice. There's nothing like feeding your three-year-old with a burning throat a little whiskey at one a.m. and telling him or her to lie on his/her side. (My kids can attest.)

TALES FROM THE WASTELAND

Laudanum & Castor Oil Anyone?

Forty proof will stop a cough.

By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.



"Let me out. I'll give you a kiss." © Robin Dell'Orto

Today, most home medicine cabinets are more sophisticated. Medical science has progressed at an almost unbelievable rate since the 1950s. Long gone are many of the once-common childhood diseases like measles and mumps, and who knows how many different forms of cough medicine are available nowadays. We as a society have higher expectations for medicine and science today.

One would instinctively think that society's speedy adoption of new science would be true for every aspect of our lives. But this is not the case. The science and art of rangeland ecology and management has taken great leaps over the past 100 years. We know exponentially more now than when A.W. Sampson and Jared Smith began their work at the turn of the 20th century. In the past, federal land-management policy generally kept up with new science almost as quickly as it was discovered.

Here is an example of the progression.

In the beginning and until the 1980s we compared contemporary plant community compositions to what we understood them to be before European settlement. In the 1990s we found a better standard of comparison in a hypothetically "healthy" piece of rangeland. Most recently we have discovered an even better standard by determining what you want a piece of rangeland to provide in the future and managing toward that end. It's called *outcome-based grazing*. Similarity comparisons to presettlement conditions and current reference areas do not take into account things like invasive species and long-term weather pattern changes. Outcome-based grazing approaches do.

An attempt was made to implement new science and update BLM grazing regulations in 2006, but litigation by anti-grazing groups forced a permanent injunction against them. BLM was denied the authority to add new science and forced to return to the 1995 version, which has in large part increased invasive species' problems. It's like treating diseases with antiquated medical practices. Laudanum and castor oil anyone? Maybe some leeches?

A new Code of Federal Regulations is needed to replace the ecologically outdated 1995 version. This is one of the main objectives for newly proposed BLM grazing regulations. Our understanding of the science has evolved and it is time our public land-management policy and procedures reflect current science.

Old ecological science and medicinal remedies may have done the trick in their day, but there were side effects and unintended consequences. Laudanum (opium and grain alcohol) would absolutely kill the pain, but leave you with an addiction. Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound stopped Uncle Elvis' cough. I'm not exactly sure what side effects the black cohosh and unicorn root may have caused, but I am certain Aunt Myrtle gave him some side effects for drinking all her Pinkham's. ■

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