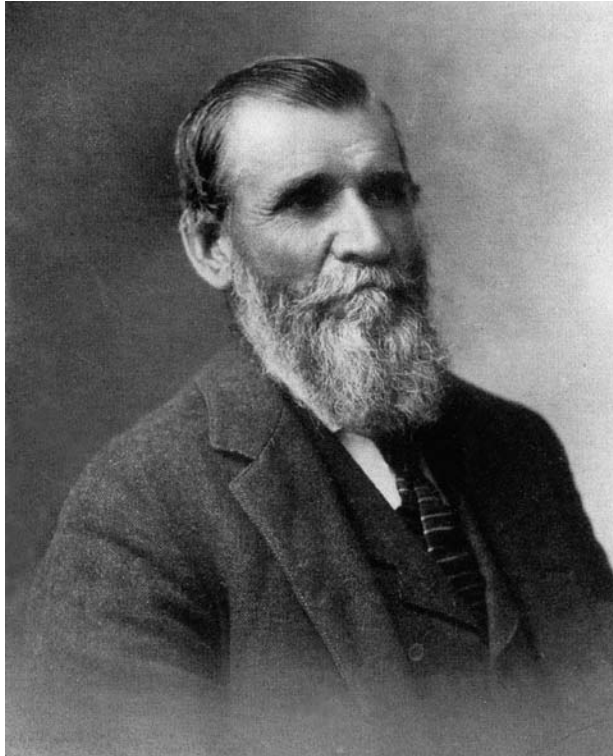


“Frontier Medicine”

The personal record books of San Diego pioneers are often a surprising source of contemporary lore. Business ledgers--sometimes used like personal filing cabinets—recorded everything from commercial activities and receipts, to family history and kitchen recipes.



Luman H. Gaskill. *Courtesy Mountain Empire Historical Society.*

San Diego pioneer Luman H. Gaskill started such a ledger book in 1863. His *Book of Records of the Buffalo Gold and Silver Mining Company* began as an account book for a mining company in the Sonoma Valley. Gaskill’s mining adventure was short-lived but he found better luck running a store in Petaluma with his brother Silas. After a few years the brothers moved south, settling in the Milquetay Valley east of San Diego in 1868. The Gaskills would soon change the name of the town they founded to Campo.

The brothers ran a successful store in Campo--the scene of a famous gun battle on Dec. 4, 1875. A gang of bandits crossed the border from Mexico and raided the store. The Gaskills routed the gang but were wounded—Luman seriously. They recovered and later replaced their wood frame store with a fortress structure that is preserved today as Campo Stone Store.

Gaskill kept his ledger book handy, writing entries for several decades. Luman would serve as the town storekeeper, banker, marshal, justice of the peace, dentist, and doctor. His book would become a remarkable compendium of folk remedies and household notes, as well as store receipts and accounts.

In erratic cursive handwriting, Gaskill noted the means for making soap, blue ink, silver polish, glue, and cement. Hints included everything from "how to detect Spurious Greenbacks" to how to "Break a Dog from Sucking Eggs." His ledger advised that to tenderize beef one should parboil the meat in vinegar; to rid the house of cockroaches pulverized borax would do the trick; to fight insects on plants and vegetables a dusting of sulphur flour “will kill them for sure.”

He even described a novel “Canadian way” for measuring a tree's height:
walk from the tree looking at it from time to time Between your knees with your Back towards the tree & as soon as you are able to see the top of the tree in this way your distance from the root is Equal to the high.

Reflecting the hazards of a frontier life, Gaskill recorded his remedy “to cure a fresh wound”:
Take some live coals on a shovel, and sprinkle on some brown sugar and let the smoke go on the sore and hold the wound over the smoke until it is well smoked and the pain will leave very shortly.

To cure rattlesnake bite—certainly a useful backcountry skill—Gaskill advised:
*Rub the wound full of Gunpowder
and then Pour on a good Charge on the top
Put fire to it and burn it
That will Cure it on all dum Brutes.*

Gaskill’s particular interest seemed to be medicinal cures. Collecting ideas from his neighbors and the Native Americans of the region, he wrote down scores of folk remedies using common herbs, kitchen spices, liquor, tobacco, and gunpowder.

Wood creosote (not to be confused with tar creosote used as a preservative) was a popular ingredient for many medicines. More commonly used as a disinfectant, Gaskill found oral uses for the greasy liquid. Canker sores could be cured with a mouth rinse made from “10 drops of Creasoot in a glass of Watter.” For “soar throat” pain he recommended:

*Take 30 drops or teaspoons
full of Creasoot put it in
1 pint of Watter wash the throat
3 or 4 times a day it ~~wont hurt to~~
~~swallow some~~*

Suspiciously, the last line in the remedy is lined through in the *Book of Records*; perhaps someone had discovered that *swallowing* the creosote wasn’t such a good idea.

Modern-day dentists might tremble at Gaskill’s suggestions for dental care. To make one’s own “Tooth powder” Luman advised a pulverized combination of “2 Parts Cuttle fish bone and 1 part Peruvian Bark.” For toothpaste he recommended equal parts of Castile soap and camphor, thickened with equal parts of powdered chalk and charcoal.

“Instant Relief” of toothache could be obtained from a piece of cotton saturated with ammonia.

But serious pain called for stronger medicine:

*Take a ½ Sheet of Brown Paper & twist it
Up like a lamp liter & place the small
End in the Cavity in the tooth then Set the other
End a fire & hold it in as long as Posibal.*

Fire was also useful for earache:

*take a common sized onion
and roast it take the out side
until the center will go in the Ear
Slip it in the Ear as hot as possibal*

The *Book of Records* is filled with remedies for a cough—particularly the “croup” that afflicted children:

*take Strong Vinegar 1 qt
Put in a large mouth Bottle and*

*Put in 3 hole Eggs not Break them
And when the Vinegar Eats them up
then ad 1 pt Honey take a swallow
When Ever you feel a tickling in your throat.*

To cope with the fever and chills of the flu season Gaskill had several ideas. A potion made from nutmeg and alum dissolved in vinegar made a curative drink for “when the Chill Comes.”

His treatment for “Fever and Ague” called for equal parts “Horse Pepper and Cyene Pepper” mixed in strong brandy. “Commence Drinking as soon as the fever comes,” Gaskill advised. “Two or three Good Drams will generally cure the worst of cases.”

“Doctor” Gaskill would eventually give up the frontier life and move to the city after 1900. After living for a time in San Diego, he moved to Whittier, where he died on May 3, 1914, at age 71. His *Book of Records* would be preserved by his granddaughter Lois Gaskill MacKechnie, who donated the volume to the San Diego Historical Society in the 1970s.

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