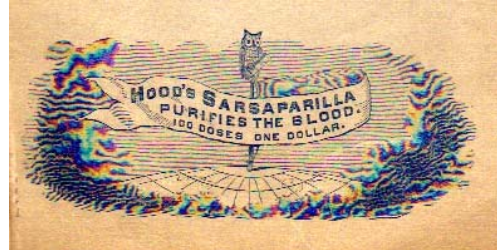


# “The Medicine Show”

With colorful names and extravagant claims, “patent medicines” sold widely in the United States in the late 1800s. The popular cure-alls of pills and syrups were advertised in every newspaper with bold woodcuts extolling the miraculous benefits of Hood’s Sarsaparilla to purify the blood, Cuticura Soap to prevent “disfiguring humours,” or Chaulmoogra, “the East India Cure” that promised relief for every ailment this side of the grave.

In small cities like San Diego, the medicines were often sold in traveling shows that featured entertainment as a prelude to a presentation from a “pitch doctor.” Troupes of singers would sometimes entertain from street corners to attract business.



An “enterprising vender” of patent medicines enticed potential customers in February 1887 with a concert and minstrel show at Leach’s Opera House on D Street (Broadway). “There are some very good singers in the company,” the *Union* reported. The next month the newspaper noted that a band of medicine vendors had arrived to “enliven the city” with its musical instruments and “very good quartet singing.”

Apparently some acts wore thin; in April the *Union* announced that the “gang of patent medicine vendors who have inflicted street concerts upon the city every night for two past weeks,” would be departing the town on the steamer that afternoon. Either to control a growing nuisance or to profit from the medicine shows, the City Trustees passed an ordinance in June 1887 that imposed license fees on the “patent medicine men” with penalties of up to \$400 for non-compliance.

—COMMENCING—  
Tuesday, October 9, 1894.

Dr. Franz C. A. Goerss

—THE—  
GERMAN \* SPECIALIST.



The Lame Will Walk!  
The Blind Will See!!  
The Deaf Will Hear!!!

Teeth Extracted Free of Charge and Painless  
Every Evening on the Platform.

A GRAND COMPANY OF ENTERTAINERS!  
Brass Band and Orchestra!

Come Early and Avoid the Rush.

General admission to adults free. Reserved  
seats, 10 cents. Positively no boys or girls  
admitted except to reserved seats. 00-01

One of California’s more successful pitch doctors was Dr. Franz Goerss, “the German Specialist.” Goerss had emigrated from Europe sometime in the 1850s and began practicing medicine in Michigan in the 1889. When state authorities discovered Goerss’ claim of a medical degree from the University of Erlangen in Bavaria was fraudulent, the “doctor” hurriedly fled west.

In the next few years, Goerss’ medicine show traveled throughout California, appearing in Sacramento, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Using rented halls and theaters, Goerss attracted crowds with singers, a brass band and an orchestra. Admission was ten cents, though sometimes free.

His most profitable “medicine” was an amber bottle labeled “Dr. Goerss-Chaulmoogra-the East India Cure.” Based on a tree oil from Malaysia, the remedy promised “positive cures for all diseases” and came with an extraordinary money-back guarantee. Goerss presented each buyer with sight draft for \$1 from the Chaulmoogra Medicine Company of Lansing, payable from the Central Michigan Savings Bank. Unsatisfied customers would merely return a notarized statement to the bank to receive their refund.

In June 1894, San Diego real estate agent Homer G. Taber mailed a notarized statement, declaring that the Chaulmoogra he purchased from Dr. Goerss had failed to cure his catarrh, even though he used it according to directions: “two tablespoons every morning and night for the last three months.” Like all other requests—and there were many—Homer Taber’s refund was denied by the bank, which had never heard of the Chaulmoogra Medicine Company.



Chaulmoogra was also the featured product of the traveling Vivian de Monte Variety Company, which came to San Diego in early 1896. From a big tent set up on the corner of Sixth and B Streets, a “Doctor Clark” pitched his “marvelous Indian remedy” for several weeks. They did a booming business, remembered Bert Hensley, a 20-year-old, at the time. Moreover, “it was a mighty good show.”

For an admission fee of ten cents, customers saw a vaudeville-style show with tumbling and acrobatic acts, singing, and short plays. But “nothing could exceed the impressive dignity of the ‘doctor,’” Hensley recalled. “He was a large, portly man and always wore evening clothes. He could throw as much importance into his recital of the origin and transcending merits of Chaulmoogra as the president might make in an address to Congress.”

As the doctor hawked his medicine, “three husky gymnasts” passed through the crowd with armfuls of bottles. “Sold out, Doctor; more of the Chaulmoogra!” became the slogan with us boys.”

Not everyone was as pleased with the Chaulmoogra show as young Hensley. The City Council considered a new licensing ordinance to protect the town against any future “infliction” of the tent shows. Reporting that the last show took \$18,000 out of San Diego, the *Union* decided “the only benefit derived from the money was a thorough knowledge of certain nostrums and warmed-over jokes.”

The patent medicine era would come to end with President Theodore Roosevelt’s signing of the Pure Food and Drugs Act in 1906. Within two years, the makers and sellers of pseudo medicines were being prosecuted in federal courts.

Ironically, Chaulmoogra would survive the era and become a respected pharmaceutical. Until it was replaced by sulfone drugs in the 1940s, Chaulmoogra oil therapy was the treatment of choice for leprosy.

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