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Good for What Ails You

A medicinal solution with a New Orleans provenance

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"We always kept a bottle of Dr. Tichenor's for mosquito bites. I used it as a mouth wash occasionally, but mostly we put it on mosquito bites and other skin irritations," said Mary "Kit" McLellan, a Slidell resident recalling summers long ago on the Northshore.

"My grandparents kept a yacht at the Lakeshore Club. The grandchildren would sleep on the deck. The mosquitoes would really swarm around 5 AM. And teenagers who ran out of beer were known to take a swig of Dr. Tichenor's back then. Of course, I didn't do that, but I had friends who did."

Just like Mississippi Roast, the slow cooker pot roast recipe of internet fame, the original formula for Dr. Tichenor's was hatched in Mississippi. Many good things and creative people migrate to New Orleans from Mississippi, but that is a story for another day.

"You can go upstairs and read about it on the second floor." said the young man on duty at the New Orleans Museum of Pharmacy. This pearl of a museum is located in the French Quarter at 514 Chartres St.

Dr. Tichenor's display occupies a minuscule space in a display cabinet that was indeed on the second floor. The sign more or less reads:

"Of all the colorful patent medicine providers in New Orleans history, perhaps the best well known as Dr. G.H. Tichenor, whose popular antiseptic is still for sale today... In 1905, he founded the Dr. G.H. Tichenor Anesthetic Company in New Orleans housed in the building located at 230 Canal Street. Although Dr. Tichenor died in 1923, it is still being manufactured; it is recommended as a mouthwash and topical anesthetic and marketed for its intense medicinal flavor."

Old advertising promoted Tichenor's as a head to toe solution for headaches, canker sores, sunburn, wounds, bruises, scalds, colic, cramps, cholera, insect bites, cramps, nausea, indigestion, bad nerves and foot evils as starters. The original was an herbal soup diluted in 70 percent alcohol. The mouthwash concentrate sold today is still 70 percent alcohol laced with extracts from peppermint and a sunflower relative used in liniments.

My investigation continued with a call to Kevin Tusa, the pharmacist who owns and operates Royal Pharmacy with his wife Lenora. This beloved French Quarter establishment at 1101 Royal St. is a one-pharmacist pharmacy run by the same family since 1935. For lagniappe, it is also a de facto pharmacy museum with talkative proprietors and no admission charge.

"In the 1950s and 1960s every family used Dr. Tichenor's. Wipe it on with a cotton swab or maybe a Q-tip to clean out an ear. It was my grandma and mother's all-purpose bobo remedy," said Tusa using the New Orleans comfort term for any minor childhood skin scrape, cut, bump, rash or bite.

"It was a southern thing mostly, and tourists would come looking for it. But since 9-11 they can't get the bottles through security. And the company doesn't advertise much. My supplier doesn't stock the toothpaste any longer. We still carry the mouthwash, a concentrate. I warn customers to make sure to dilute it before use."

Like McLellan, the primary use of Dr. Tichenor's in New Orleans memory banks is to soothe itching and irritation from mosquito bites. Besides toothpaste and mouthwash, the company also makes an antiseptic gel, a "first aid kit in a tube." Yet advertising for Dr. Tichenor's now mostly targets bad breath. Dr. Tichenor's Peppermint Mouthwash Concentrate is their signature product with the slogan "reducing harmful emissions since 1864."

The company website has pictorial endorsements from a local resident on the prowl for the ladies, a Tulane student from New York who "discovered this amazing toothpaste on the drug store shelves in New Orleans", and a guy in Venice, LA, who keeps a tube of the antiseptic gel on his shrimp boat.

George Humphrey Tichenor had roots in Kentucky and Tennessee before moving to Louisiana by way of Mississippi. He dabbled in chemistry as an artist, photographer, and businessman in Tennessee before joining the Confederate Army in 1861.

Even though he never attended any medical school, his knowledge of chemistry led to a military appointment as an assistant surgeon later upgraded to surgeon. While soldiering in Mississippi, he found a wife and worked on the formula first sold as Dr. Tichenor's Antiseptic Refrigerant.

Tichenor died of "complications of cardiorenal disease and senility" at 1917 Palmer Street in 1923. No statue or Tichenor's name graces our streetscapes. If one did, it would be a bull's eye for Take 'Em Down NOLA. Besides being a Confederate soldier, Tichenor offered his concoction for wounded Confederate soldiers. Yankee prisoners with battle wounds were out of luck. A drawing of a Confederate battle flag adorned Dr. Tichenor's bottle labels at least until the 1960s. Besides being a commander of the Louisiana division of the United Confederate Veterans, he was a devout Southern Baptist.

Company History

Company lore has Dr. Tichenor using his wound- cleaning concoction to save his own leg from amputation after being shot with a Minnie ball in 1863. According to other accounts, he accidentally shot himself in his own arm, and it was that arm wound that he self-treated. Once he teamed up with New Orleans businessman Arthur D. Parker to establish the Dr. G. H. Tichenor Antiseptic Company in 1905, sales soared. For more information: DrTichenor.com.
