



Folk medicine once prevailed in Chatham

Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



Historical Association's museum in the Court House, I noticed some medical packages for humans and for farm animals listed exactly the same ingredients.

In Bynum people continued to rely on older women to deliver babies, dispense herbal remedies, and dress wounds or burns. A notable one of these "grannys" as they were known was Mrs. Ida Jane Smith. She was a mill worker who moved to Bynum in the early 1920's. Mrs. Smith specialized in folk medicine, but sometimes treated ill patients along with Dr. Chapin at the request of her neighbors. The local folk felt that the two worked as a partnership, but considered Ida Smith the senior partner. A local woman whose daughter had bronchial pneumonia summoned both Dr. Chapin and Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith mixed turpentine, lard and camphor together and greased the child's entire body. The doctor good naturedly told Ida Smith,

"You doctor the outside and I'll doctor the inside."

Slippery elm bark was boiled and the resulting slimy water was used to help someone pass a swallowed foreign object such as a nail.

Joe Burke, a retired school principal, told of his father's homemade remedy made from "white lightning" and catalpa gum which was allowed to ferment. When administered on a spoonful of sugar, it could cure upset stomachs, constipation and toothaches.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, improved roads, the University affiliated clinics, the advent of antibiotics and the arrival of Dr. Mathiesen all helped to bring improved medical care to Chatham's once isolated communities.

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rub it with a piece of gravel which was then wrapped in a cloth and thrown in the fork of a road. A person who picked up the gravel and unwrapped it was supposed to get the wart while the original afflicted one would be cured.

More often folk medicine utilized a long list of botanical material based on many years of trial and observation.

A reliance on folk medicine continued so long for a couple of reasons, a major one being economic. In the early part of the twentieth century not very many Chatham residents could afford adequate medical treatment. This was not the result of excessive charges by the doctor, but rather householder's ability to pay. Farmers could sometimes pay in produce, but in the mill villages the people looked after one another, using home remedies before calling for a doctor.

Another reason for using folk medicine was a cultural attitude which sometimes viewed doctors with fear and mistrust. The doctors spoke in different terms and used new medications unknown to the locals who firmly believed that their old folk medicine worked. A Mr. Gatis broke his collar-bone and a doctor told the family that he'd have to put him to sleep. The distraught family thought that their daddy was going to be euthanized like a severely injured animal.

By the 1920's and 1930's, people in the Bynum area began to accept the patent medicines which often listed ingredients close to the folk medicines they knew. A few years ago when I set up an exhibit about old time country medicine in the Chatham County

Well into the first several decades

of the twentieth century, many families in Chatham —both rural tenants and residents of mill villages such as Bynum — relied on folk medicine to treat illness and injuries. These treatments were based on many observations and habits

accumulated over the years, but sometimes had little direct relation to current medical practices. Remarkably, they were sometimes effective.

One belief was that the body's fluids had to be purified if a person was to remain healthy, hence the use of various water soluble powders and herbs to "purify the blood."

Another practice relied on the belief that an ailment could be removed and magically transferred to another person. Someone afflicted with a wart would

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