

The Medicine Show

By Carl Goodman

Before entertainment came directly into our living rooms by way of movies, radio, television and the Internet, there was the medicine show.

And this uniquely American, post-Civil War entertainment, nourished by the rise of patent medicines and few federal regulations, was especially popular in rural America and the small towns and cities of the South.

The shows varied from town to town and from time to time. Spectators saw acrobats, dancers, fire-eaters, snake handlers, comedians and musicians. Whatever the amusement, it was a cost-effective way of merging entertainment and merchandising. The medicine show formula of offering free entertainment to attract audiences and then using intermissions to push products is still the driving force behind radio and television in the 21st Century.

The products included a number of tonics, elixirs and nostrums with the purported powers to heal any number of ailments--from digestive and kidney problems to muscle and joint aches. They were hawked by silver-tongued pitch doctors with the power to convince even the elders in their audiences.

Remember how Aunt Bee fell under the spell of traveling medicine man Colonel Harvey on the Andy Griffith Show that aired March 11, 1963? It turned out that the "spell" was mostly alcohol-induced. When Andy came home, he found Bee and her lady friends half-cocked on the colonel's elixir and ran them all in. A few hours later, he nabbed the colonel himself for selling liquor.

As one old timer observed, "You almost always felt better after taking the medicine because after awhile you didn't feel anything."

With the corporate sponsorship of W.R. Geary & Sons, whose combination gas station and grocery store stood at the junction of U.S. 41 and Highway 56, the medicine show came to Tracy City, Tenn. And local citizens, like those elsewhere, flocked to the show. The venue was an open field behind the business and admission was free.

Popular brand soft drinks and candy bars were on sale at Geary's store and popcorn was sold in colorful boxes at the show. Supposedly, in one of those boxes was a diamond ring. Clyde Kunz, a former Tracy City resident who now lives in Murfreesboro, remembers that the popcorn "was expensive and nobody ever found a diamond ring."

His sister, Joyce Kunz Ladd of Monteagle, remembers going to the medicine show with her friend Dalpha Meeks, whose father, Leonard, took them. "I think it was early evening because there were no street lights so they did not last late at night. I don't remember any females being in the show. Seems like they (the men) stood on the back of a pick-up truck. I remember them singing and selling what I think they called Had-A-Call Medicine."



Hadacol was a patent medicine marketed as a vitamin supplement, according to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. It contained 12 percent alcohol (listed on the label as a "preservative") and was quite popular in the dry counties of the South. Hadacol was a product of a Louisiana state senator, Dudley J. LeBlanc, who was not a medical doctor but had a strong talent for self-promotion.

Barbara Mooney Myers, who grew up in Tracy City and volunteers at the Heritage Center, recalled that the medicine show hawkers were pretty slick. “They knew just when to break into the entertainment to sell you something—just like the TV commercials today.”

My memories of the medicine show are vague, but my oldest brother Robert Goodman, who lives in Goldsboro, N.C., remembers them as having lots of local color by featuring pretty baby contests and recognizing young boys who had sold the most Grit newspapers. Besides the professional musicians traveling with the shows, he recalls local artists playing spoons and hand saws.

“It was a pretty big deal—the medicine shows,” he said. “You didn’t have to pay to get in and you got to flirt with the girls away from school.”

Some musicians from the medicine show circuit, like “Daddy Stovepipe” Johnny Watson and “Beans Hambone” James Albert, were lucky enough to record their songs. A collection of these was released in October 2005 by Old Hats Records, an independent producer in North Carolina, under the title “Good for What Ails You: Music of the Medicine Shows, 1926-1937.”

The medicine shows traveled the so-called “kerosene circuit” of rural and small town America until the dawn of the 20th Century. Radio, movies and the Pure Food and Drug Act combined to render them obsolete.

Memories, however, are never obsolete. And those who recall the medicine shows that came to Tracy City will always cherish those recollections.

About the author: A freelance writer and resident of Signal Mountain, Tenn., Carl Goodman grew up in Tracy City and attended public schools there.