A Balm in Gilead

by John M. Hyde

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, there appeared a "balm—menthol-based salve—which, like that in Gilead, ministered to the soul as well as to the body. It was called "Mentholatum." Its founder, a bankrupt businessman from Wichita was convinced that his product would "sell itself" once it had been introduced to customers. Relying on local druggists to make the introduction rather than on mass advertising or extravagant claims for its healing powers, he succeeded in making Mentholatum a nationally known product within a decade of its appearance on the market. His good fortune brought with it, however, a crisis in his personal life whose resolution was a commitment to give away the wealth which had suddenly come to him. His life came to be devoted to that purpose, and inevitably, Mentholatum became associated in the popular mind with the philanthropy of its founder. Like the balm in Gilead, it healed the wounds both of the body and of the spirit.

Born in Lee, Massachusetts, in 1848, the founder of Mentholatum was named by his parents Albert Alexander, was known to his family as Bert, and was addressed by his contemporaries in a more formal manner as Mr. A. A. Hyde. In 1865 he left his boyhood home to follow his brother to Leavenworth, Kansas. There he was employed as a bank clerk until 1872 when his employer decided to send him to the recently established town of Wichita to assist in the opening of a new bank. A raw, frontier town at the time of his arrival, Wichita had gained notoriety—and prosperity—as the terminus of the cattle drives up the Chisholm Trail. Upon his arrival, Hyde entered into the life of the community, which was to be his home for the rest of his life, and by 1885 he was an officer of the Kansas National Bank, a member of the board of education, a leader of the First Presbyterian Church, and the father of a growing family. Referred to in the local press as a "square-toed man of pronounced convictions," he seemed an unlikely victim of the speculative real estate "levee" which was to strike Wichita at this time.

But catch the fever he did. In 1887 he resigned from the bank and began to devote all his energies to the real estate market. As a symbol of his success, he built an imposing home on a rise to the east of town which he assumed would soon be reached by the expanding population and would become a highly desirable residential area which he named rather ostentatiously "Brooklyn Heights." But before these expectations could be realized, the "boom" collapsed and with it the fortune which at least on paper Hyde had accumulated. "Instead of being worth $100,000," he said in later years, "I found myself busted, and $100,000 in debt." Some means of supporting his family and repaying his debts had to be found.

With Wichita's economy and population in decline and with money in short supply, Hyde's options were limited. His choice, therefore, was a modest one at the outset. In September 1889, he entered into partnership with two men who had recently arrived in the city—Walter B. Binkley and Clayton K. Smith. Each partner contributed $200 to the new venture which was to produce and sell toilet soap and was to be known as the Yucca Company. Binkley was responsible for the

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2. As a candidate for mayor of Wichita in 1883, Hyde was described as a "square-toed man of pronounced convictions on the liquor traffic." See Wichita City Eagle, March 22, 1883.
The Four Plants of the Mentholatum Company With an Annual Output of More Than 20 Million Packages of Mentholatum

All of the MENTHOLATUM factories are sunlit, sanitary and spotless, thus providing the most healthful and agreeable surroundings for employees. The machines and equipment are of the most modern type and every facility provided to insure a uniform high quality product. It is very interesting to see the crystals of Menthol taken from hermetically sealed cans and compounded with other ingredients in the glass-lined tanks. Most agreeable odors fill the factories where MENTHOLATUM is put in jars, tubes, and finally boxed and packed for distribution to all parts of the world.

The company welcomes visitors to its plants, and competent guides are assigned to show every phase of the making of MENTHOLATUM.

Although based in Wichita, the company expanded its production facilities beyond the state of Kansas. Pictured, at top, is the 1889 "original home" of the business in Wichita. Following right to left are the Buffalo, New York, plant, built in 1919; plant near London, England, built in 1923; the Bridgeburg, Canada, plant, built in 1914; and "The Home of Mentholatum" in Wichita, built in 1909.
original product sold by the company and from which it took its name. He had developed a method of converting the oily pulp produced by the root of the yucca plant and known for its cleansing power into fine quality soap. The third partner, Clay W. Smith, was A. A. Hyde’s brother-in-law. Educated at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, he brought to the partnership the expertise of a trained pharmacist.

The new partners immediately began to develop a line of merchandise to be manufactured and sold by the company. Because of his knowledge of soapmaking, Binkley was able to produce a range of yucca-based soaps, from “brown,” which was slightly colored by the bark, to “white” with bark entirely removed and “sandalwood” with a perfumed base. He also developed specialty soaps for eczema, for shaving, and for cleaning teeth (known as “tooth soap”). Other products offered by the company were unrelated to soap or to the yucca plant. These included “sticky fly paper, Quick Corn Cure, silver polish,” and a cough remedy known as “Vest Pocket Cough Specific.”

The Cough Specific was Clayton Smith’s contribution to the Yucca Company’s products. As a trained pharmacist, he had been putting up a special prescription, which his old family doctor in Aiken, South Carolina, had sent to him from time to time, for throat trouble. Smith proposed to his partners that they ask the doctor’s permission to prepare and sell the prescription as one of the company’s products. The permission was granted, and the new product, which was called “Vest Pocket Cough Specific,” appeared on the market.

The name referred to the size and shape of the bottle which was a small, narrow container, rectangular in shape, and designed to fit into a “vest pocket” to be easily accessible in time of distress. Relief was promised not only for coughs, asthma, “tickling in throat” and other respiratory ailments, but also for “flatulency, sour stomach, sea sickness, sick headache, hiccoughs, etc.” A few drops of the syrup could be placed directly on the tongue or diluted in a tablespoon of water. It was especially recommended for public speakers. A local minister praised its effectiveness in stopping “a fit of coughing instantly” and urged his fellow preachers to test the product. It must have seemed to the partners that preachers provided a ready market for the product, especially in an era of hour-long sermons.

The most distinctive quality of Vest Pocket Cough Specific was the use of menthol as a base for the product. Although menthol was certainly known to pharmacists at this time as a by-product of the peppermint plant, it was associated in the popular mind with its national, rather than natural, origins. The Japanese had long been aware of menthol’s soothing qualities and had used it in treating burns and inflammations. Japan therefore became the chief source of supply for menthol which, in turn, came to be thought of as a distinctively Japanese remedy. It was this association of Japan and menthol in the popular imagination that the Yucca Company would later use in selling its products.

The day-to-day operation of the company was conducted by the three men, each contributing his particular skill to the enterprise. A. A. Hyde, drawing on his experience as a banker, was the business manager and bookkeeper, Binkley and Smith contributed their expertise in the development of the company’s products and also served as salesmen for these products. They traveled throughout Kansas, the Indian Territory (Oklahoma), and as far afield as Texas and Colorado, visiting the local druggists and introducing them to the company’s line of merchandise. It was in Mulvane, Newton, Caldwell, Wellington, and all the little prairie towns visited by Binkley and Smith that the Yucca Company began its close relationship with local druggists upon which the business was to be built. Wichita remained the heart of the enterprise. The company supplied the city’s hotels, drug and grocery stores, as well as operating a retail store for its products in the factory building. In its first months of operation, the company achieved a modest success. It had not only survived in a period of economic depression but had earned a small profit. Three families, however, were dependent on that profit, and it simply was not sufficient to meet their needs. With a household that had grown to eleven by 1889, A. A. Hyde had by far the largest family of the three partners.

5. For origins of the Yucca Company, see Wichita Daily Eagle, November 12, 1889, May 17, October 1, 1890.

The name “Mentholatum” was said to be pleasing in its sound and representative of its ingredients.

7. Wichita Daily Eagle, May 17, 1890. The local minister was the Rev. John D. Hewitt of the First Presbyterian Church of which A. A. Hyde was an elder. A bottle of the cough remedy—later called Menthocrata—with a label listing its uses is in the Hyde Collection.
May 1890, therefore, he bought out his partners and became the sole proprietor of the company.¹

During the next four years, there was no dramatic change in the fortunes of the Yucca Company or of A. A. Hyde. The product line was expanded to include such diverse specialties as shoe polish, face powder, and sewing machine oil. The only advertising which profits allowed was a series of whimsical verses printed on gummed labels which were then pasted up around the town "mostly at night" by Hyde. The "Poet of the Plains" wrote:

Some people are fat;
Some people are lean,
Some people are dirty,
Some people are clean.

Some people are lively,
Some people mope.
All but the foolish
Use Yucca Soap.

Truth compels us to say that while this poem took only second prize at the Royal Academy exhibition in London last year, 'Yucca Soap' came out way ahead.²

Otherwise, sales of the company's products depended on word-of-mouth, the persuasiveness of salesmen, and the cooperation of druggists. In 1892 the company was formally incorporated. Sixty-four shares of stock, valued at $100 per share, were issued to six shareholders; A. A. Hyde owned twenty-five shares, the remainder being distributed to relatives—his wife and sister—and to business associates.³

Always in search of new products and new sources of income, Hyde began to experiment with a product that was to become the most successful and long-lived of all those manufactured by the Yucca Company. Its origins may be found in Clayton Smith's Vest Pocket Cough Specific. In preparing the components of the cough syrup, A. A. became intrigued by the properties of menthol which served as its base and which, he discovered, the Japanese used as a remedy for headaches and other ailments. He concluded that "if menthol applied in that way would relieve pain, it also would have a healing effect as an emollient." His objective became to formulate a menthol-based salve which would

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¹ For early records of the Yucca Company, see Day Book, August 1, 1889-January 10, 1891, and Ledger, May 9, 1887-1908, Hyde Collection.
² Hyde Collection. In a handwritten note appended to these verses, Hyde identified them as "early advt [sic] of Yucca Co. about 1890-92. These printed on gum'd paper then cut out and stuck on posts, seats, and windows, etc. mostly at night by D. Wheeler and A. A. Hyde."
³ Yucca Company Minutes, Hyde Collection.
"Look well, not be too hard or too soft and especially that it should not be too strong to apply to the eyes or an open wound or too weak to penetrate and relieve sprained muscles, a head ache [sic], or a sore throat." With the assistance and advice of doctors, druggists and chemists, he began a period of experimentation that was to last for four years and that would result in the "healing emollient" which he had originally envisioned.11

In deciding what to name the new product, Hyde felt that it should have a "pleasing sound of easy memory" and should be "descriptive of the contents."

11: For origins of Mentholatum, see interview with Hyde in Kansas City Star, May 1, 1927, and Topeka Daily Capital, March 4, 1928. See also Irving, Master of Money, 36-38; Mentholurgy, 1927, and Spring 1939, Hyde Collection. Mentholurgy was a pamphlet distributed to druggists by the Mentholatum Company from 1916 to 1944. It contained "short terms of interest to the retailer, a little fun and some good common sense" as well as occasional articles on the history of the company and the life of A. A. Hyde.

"Mentholatum" met these requirements. He found it pleasant to the ear, easily remembered, and descriptive of the product's two principal ingredients, menthol and petrolatum. In the context of its time and of the competition, the name was a distinctive one, setting the product apart from other home remedies on the market. It was common practice to name proprietary therapeutics after their founders; Lydia Pinkham was among the most familiar, but others included Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, Dr. Bosanko's Pile Remedy, etc. In contrast, the one word "Mentholatum" printed in white letters on a black background identified the product. It had an impersonal, scientific aura about it similar to that of ethical drugs in today's market. It was not somebody's "secret" remedy. Its components were incorporated in its name. As a result, the word "mentholatum" often appeared in print without being capitalized, as if it were a generic, rather than a trade name.

A 1909 Wichita Eagle cartoon pictured "The Quartet of Hydes" responsible for running the business. A. A. Hyde, founder and president, is at upper left. Other members of the quartet were Edward K. Hyde, vice president of the company and manager of the Buffalo plant; Charles H. Hyde, company secretary; and Alexander Hyde, company treasurer.
In later years, when Mentholatum had become widely known, numerous accounts of the origin of the formula began to appear, each claiming to be the "true story." Among these accounts were ones which attributed the formula to an Indian, a missionary, a poor man whom A. A. had helped, and a local doctor who felt sorry for the struggling businessman and his growing family, Hyde's response to all these stories was unequivocal. The formula, he declared, was the result of his own investigations and not that of any "secret" given to him by someone else. While acknowledging the contributions of his brother-in-law and nameless druggists, doctors and chemists to his efforts, he claimed Mentholatum for his own.12

While he was experimenting with his new product, Hyde tested its appeal and effectiveness by selling it door-to-door and even, according to one account, on street corners in Wichita. It was not until 1895 that the first reference to Mentholatum appeared in Wichita newspapers. In registering the trademark, the Yucca Company stated that the product name "Mentholatum" had been in use since the latter part of December 1894 and that the product had been manufactured in commercial quantities since 1895.13 The claims which Hyde made for Mentholatum were relatively muted when compared with the rhetoric of the times. Testimonials for patent remedies in the local press were tests of their writers' imaginations and skills in extending the miraculous healing powers of their products to as many human ills as possible. Prospective buyers were asked if they were "Bilious, Constipated or troubled with Jaundice, Sick Headache, Bad Taste in Mouth, Foul Breath, Coated Tongue, Dispepsia [sic], Indigestion, Hot Dry Skin, Pain in Back and Between the Shoulders, Chills and Fevers, etc.?" Any of the listed symptoms would qualify the reader as a potential customer. To another man, "who was dying by inches," there came "rewound energy, vitality, strength, good memory, and strong nerves" after he had discovered the product being advertised. Mentholatum, in contrast, was first described as a "useful preparation in your home" for "headache, sore throat, piles (all kinds), rheumatism (muscular), catarrh, hay fever, toothache, sprains, etc." To this list of affictions Hyde added the names of druggists in Wichita who carried the product.14

As Mentholatum gained wider distribution and public acceptance, the company became more expansive and adventurous in its claims. To capitalize on the association of menthol with Japan, it promoted the product by adding the phrase "The Great Japanese Salve" to all labels and promotional material. On the border of this material appeared what purported to be Japanese characters which, on close inspection, would spell out in English such slogans as "Mentholatum Should Be In Every Home."15

Testimonials became the most common way of promoting the product's many uses. These were usually brief statements testifying to Mentholatum's effectiveness as a remedy for a particular ailment or to its reputation as a "best seller" in a drugstore. Among these testimonials, one in particular caught the eye of the management which featured it prominently on the company's stationery and store displays. The author of the statement was a Dr. F. A. Bayer, "Physician and Surgeon" of Mexico City who wrote: "You have the best salve on earth. I speak seven languages." What the doctor's language proficiency had to do with his ability to evaluate Mentholatum's effectiveness was never made clear.

Testimonials also served to introduce new uses of Mentholatum or to emphasize those for which there was the greatest demand. Even during the early trial period in Wichita the salve had proven effective in fighting off an affliction peculiar to the region—the chigger, an insect which made life miserable for all in the heat of a prairie summer.16 The company therefore began to include insect bites among its list of ills for which Mentholatum could be used, emphasizing it in early advertising displays.

Suggestions for other uses soon followed and were incorporated in the company's sales literature. Some were simply variations on a theme, such as "croup, cold sores, pneumonia," and other symptoms related to head or chest colds. Others were more dramatic—and bizarre. A sufferer from varicose veins for thirty-seven years received "instant and continuous relief" from the salve. For another, "Mentholatum applied persistently in nostrils and throat, has entirely restored my hearing." As the

12. See footnote 28 for Aimee Semple McPherson's account of the origins of Mentholatum and Hyde's reaction to it. Correspondence in the Hyde Collection reaffirms the origins of the product as set forth in interviews with Hyde that were published in the Kansas City Star, May 1, 1927, and Topeka Daily Capital, March 4, 1928.
13. Trade Mark No. 47,783 registered November 21, 1905, by the United States Patent Office for a salve manufactured by the Yucca Company of Wichita, Kansas. The trademark, consisting "of the arbitrary word 'MENTHOLATUM'" has been in continuous use "by said corporation since about the latter part of December 1894."
15. The examples of Mentholatum advertising are from the Hyde Collection.
16. "That's A. A. Hyde...He thinks he's got something great. It's a new kind of salve, and it sure discourages the chiggers." From an article by Charles B. Driscoll, a Wichita native and contemporary of Hyde's sons, in the New York Herald Tribune, date unknown, Hyde Collection.
list of uses grew longer, it began to be separated into seasonal categories: cold-related illnesses in winter; insect bites, sunburn, poison "vines" in summer; burns, "sore eyes," catarrh, headaches at all times. Certain ailments, for which Mentholatum had proven most effective and for which there seemed to be the largest number of potential users, were given special attention. Ranking high in this group were piles.

The affliction, being a common one, was treated openly and graphically in the local press, there being none of the restraints or taboos of modern advertising. The vernacular term "piles" took precedence over the more clinical "hemorrhoids" in the highly competitive market for piles remedies. Each product sought to attract customers with lurid descriptions of the physical manifestation of the problem and the curative powers of the particular remedy. Upon entering the market, Mentholatum simply promised relief and gave a straightforward, clinical description of how to use the ointment. A fastidious reader might find that description too graphic in its detail but would also be warned by the Yucca Company that use as directed would not necessarily prevent the return of the problem. "No surgical operation or anything else will prevent this, as any honest well informed doctor will admit," the company advised its customers. Nevertheless, it concluded, "many a man who has used it would not take $100 for the good Mentholatum has done him."

The marketing and sale of Mentholatum followed the same pattern as that of the other products of the Yucca Company. It was introduced into drugstores by salesmen who relied on the druggists to recommend it to their customers. The salesmen's task was made somewhat easier by the fact that Mentholatum was the first product of its kind on the market, unlike the company's other products for which there was intense competition. The effect on sales, however, was minimal at first, but there was cause for optimism in the public response to the new product. For example, Mentholatum was included among the products displayed by the Yucca Company at the Kansas State Fair in September 1896. After listing without comment the company's array of soaps, powders and perfumes, a reporter for the Wichita Daily Eagle noted that the "Mentholatum salve...does its own advertising." Even at this early date Mentholatum was beginning to be singled out from the company's other products for particular mention.


This envelope carried a large advertisement for "The Great Japanese Salve—Mentholatum."
It was this early evidence of Mentholatum’s ability to “do its own advertising” that was the source of A. A. Hyde’s optimism and confidence. The fate of the product and of the company rested, in the final analysis, upon Mentholatum’s ability to “sell itself.” Without formal advertising, the product was on its own once it had been introduced into the market and recommended by the retailer. Unless the customers were persuaded that Mentholatum did what it said it would do, they would be unwilling to recommend it to their friends or to replenish their own supply. Once it had met this test, its success was assured. The problem then was how to achieve as wide a distribution of the product as possible, both among the retailers and the general public. It was in resolving this problem that A. A. Hyde proved most imaginative as a businessman.

For most of the early years of the Yucca Company, advertising had been beyond the company’s means. What had once been a necessity, however, now became a virtue. Newspaper advertising, the company informed its customers, had “done more than anything else to hurt the drug business and the medical profession.” It had “beguiled people into purchasing worthless and even harmful preparations until many sensible folk reject all medicines and say, ‘They do more evil than good.’” Emphasizing therefore that it was preferable “to pay druggists for advertising rather than newspapers,” the company offered the druggists a variety of financial incentives and rebates, not only to purchase Mentholatum but to recommend it to their customers as well. As an introductory offer, for example, a druggist could order a dozen jars of Mentholatum with the understanding that they were to be given away to customers. The names of those customes receiving a free jar of the salve were then recorded on a “Report Form,” provided by the salesman, and upon receipt of the completed form, the company would remit the cost of the jars to the dealer. Salesmen also distributed to dealers samples of Mentholatum in small metal containers at no cost with the request that the samples be passed on to customers “with a personal word of commendation.” In all the promotional literature which accompanied these offers, the message to the druggist was the same—“the best seller in the house”; “Every jar sells another”; “merit alone is advertising and creating a demand.”

Other types of incentives were used to attract potential customers. Salesmen left an aluminum “Wait” card and a supply of Mentholatum with local doctors whose names and addresses were then reported back to the company. Barbers were offered a gold fountain pen—“in no sense a cheap affair”—for giving out fifty samples of Mentholatum to their customers with a word of commendation and for reporting the names of the recipients to the company. In every instance, the purpose was the same—to have Mentholatum introduced and recommended by a trusted member of the community rather than by testimonials in a newspaper advertisement.

For the general public, there were small gifts or favors suitable for distribution by salesmen or druggists. A “medicine time indicator” accompanied the purchase of a twenty-five cent or fifty cent jar of Mentholatum. For children, there was the picture of a horse printed on heavy paper with lines dividing the animal into seven parts. When cut into its component parts, the horse could then be arranged into a variety of positions “almost as various as the uses of Mentholatum.” For the large German-speaking population among immigrant groups, particularly in the area around Wichita, the company provided a translation of its promotional material. It apparently did not consider the “Japanese characters” to be sufficiently intelligible to prospective readers to merit having them translated into German.

So successful were these efforts to promote the sale of Mentholatum that unscrupulous rivals began offering druggists “improved” versions of the product in a package that was markedly similar to the original. Upon learning of these imitators, the Yucca Company
In 1880, when the enterprise was less than a year old, the Yucca Company was featured in a Wichita newspaper article which labeled it a “growing industry.”

issued a warning which suggested that the frontier ethic was still alive:

HE IS A LIAR

There is a slick salesman pushing a so-called ‘improvement on Mentholatum’ imitating not only the Style of our package but also our manner of introduction.

The only originality about him seems to be his faculty of lying about the Yucca Co. and Mentholatum. If he calls on you please get him to put his stories down on paper and sign them. We want to nail him. Double postage returned.

From the lying imitator ‘Good Lord deliver us.’

YUCCA CO., Wichita, Kansas

Whether the company was able to “nail” the culprit is not known.

There is no complete record of the size or identity of the Yucca Company sales force at this time. From the surviving evidence, however, it is clear that the use of the term “salesman” in referring to the group as a whole would be inappropriate. At least two members of that group were women. In A. A.’s native Berkshire County in western Massachusetts, Miss Frances Mansir served as agent for the company. Of the second woman, far more is known for she played a prominent role in the growth of the business. Dr. Ella B. Veazie became the first “Travelling Agent” for Mentholatum in 1896, introducing the product first in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska and then, in 1900, moving to the far western states of Washington, Oregon, and California. Upon her return to the Midwest, she decided to give up her job and devote herself to study at the American School of Osteopathy under Dr. Andrew Taylor Still. After receiving her degree, she practiced osteopathy in Kansas City for several years but then resumed her travels as the “Little Emissary of Mentholatum.” In 1939, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Yucca Company, Dr. Veazie was still alert at the age of eighty-eight, her chief regret being that she was no longer a traveling “man.”

The appearance of two women as salesmen was not an isolated incident in the early history of Mentholatum and the Yucca Company. Of the five original stockholders of the company, two were women—one of whom, Mrs. A. A. Hyde, was elected secretary-treasurer—and women continued to be active in the affairs of the company. On this issue as on others, Hyde was a maverick, bound neither by convention nor popular opinion. He had sent a supply of Yucca Soap, “sufficient to wash ten thousand men,” to Coxey’s army of unemployed for its march on Washington in order that they might “make as creditable appearance at the capitol as possible”; he once voted for Eugene V. Debs for President; he was an early supporter of woman’s suffrage; and he ran for mayor of Wichita in 1885 as a Prohibitionist—and lost. A man of strong convictions in his personal and professional life, he never became a partisan figure in public life or a spokesman for particular causes.

A similar reticence was evident in his conduct of the affairs of the Yucca Company. It was his acumen as a businessman that led in large measure to the development and success of Mentholatum. At no time during the early period of growth, however, did he link his name with the product; all printed material referred to the Yucca Company as the manufacturer and made no mention of its founder and president. And yet, the name of Mentholatum came to be indissolubly linked with that of A. A. Hyde. So strong was this link that by 1915 the company adopted for its use as a trademark the facsimile signature of A. A. Hyde. This association of Mentholatum with its founder came about not by design.

20. Wichita Daily Eagle, April 4, 1891.
THE MENTHOLATUM HORSE

(AND OTHER PUZZLES)

DIRECTIONS:

Use scissors or sharp knife and cut out the horse from enclosed card. Then following the curved lines carefully cut him up into the various parts, legs, neck, round center, &c., making 7 pieces in all. These can then be rearranged showing the horse running, jumping, bucking, &c.

His Positions are Almost as Various as the Uses of Mentholum

WHICH CURES ALL INFLAMMATIONS of Skin, Tissue

or Muscles, ECZEMA, CATARRH, SORE EYES, CROUP, &c

Other PUZZLES Explained on CARD WITHIN.

IF NOT FAMILIAR WITH MENTHOLATUM

CALL ON DRUGGIST for free sample or drop card to

YUCCA CO., WICHITA, KAN.

One of the many product promotions included this puzzle for children.
but as a result of a “crisis of conscience” experienced by A. A. in the late 1890s.

The dramatic increase in the sale of Mentholatum which began in 1898 brought to Hyde the sudden realization that “he was going to be a very rich man.”

It was just as if some man had accidentally found a diamond mine on his farm or an oil well… I had no special talent that deserved such financial reward—not even such a voice and entertaining manner as Harry Lauder. I was glad to think that in a small way I was serving mankind in relieving physical pain—but that was not enough.  

Why he was so troubled by his good fortune was never made clear. It was not a crisis in his own religious faith; that had come much earlier in Leavenworth. His one reference to the source of the crisis in later years suggests that the hard times following the collapse of the real estate boom in 1887 had scarred him deeply. He told a reporter of his experience with thieves breaking through and stealing accumulated wealth, with banks failing, and with stocks worth $200 a share or more within a year or two declared worthless. A number of enterprises that promised large returns failed because of mismanagement, or miscalculation in various ways. After worrying over these material enterprises for years and having health impaired through care of investments I saw that laying up wealth in this world did not bring satisfaction but brought instead, anxiety and a distrust of fellow men. I realized that accumulated wealth was a source of worry, shortened life, and was deleterious to character; that the time spent worrying over these investments, attending meetings and brooding over reports, might be put to much better advantage for my own satisfaction, good of my family, and for the benefit of the community.

To resolve the crisis, he turned to prayer and to the Bible. Both were part of his heritage and of his daily life. His boyhood had been spent in a New England town where his grandfather, the Reverend Alvan Hyde, had served as pastor of the Congregational church for more than forty years and where his father, known to all as Deacon Hyde, continued the family tradition of loyalty and service to the church. In his own home, A. A. began the day with family prayers and scripture reading. It was in the scriptures, in the sixth chapter of Matthew which included the familiar verses of the Sermon on the Mount, that A. A. found the answer to his question. The teachings in the Sermon on the Mount came to me as a revelation,” he wrote, “although I had read them from my boyhood and knew them by heart. The critical verse was the admonition to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” rather than on earth, “where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal.”

For A. A., the lesson was clear. His own efforts to accumulate earthly wealth had led to thieves breaking through and stealing. Those with accumulated wealth should, instead, give away whatever was not needed for their own economic requirements in its entirety “to relieve distress and promote righteousness on earth.” Only
in that way was it possible "to lay up treasures in heaven.
that their hearts might be there also." In putting this idea into practice, A. A. gained a reputation as a tith
a term which ironically he disclaimed for himself and others like him. The tith or the tenth of one's income
was "for those without accumulated wealth"; those who
had surplus wealth for investment, such as he, were to
give away all the surplus rather than just a tenth. By
this precept, a man who died with accumulated wealth,
died disgraced.24

There was nothing particularly original or profound
about Hyde's philosophy of giving. It bore a strong
resemblance to Andrew Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth,"
although Hyde never acknowledged any debt to Carnegie
for his ideas. Nor did he associate his good fortune with
any political or economic theory; his wealth was not a
sign of God's favor towards him or the economic system
which produced it. It was simply a gift of which he was
the trustee or steward, and that sense of stewardship
provided the incentive for his giving. Hyde may have
over simplified life, as William Allen White once re-
marked, but "if he did he erred in the right direction."25

Having made this commitment in principle to give
away his wealth, Hyde then faced the obvious question.
To whom should the wealth be given? At the time this
question arose, the First Presbyterian Church of which
A. A. was a leading member was experiencing a sudden
burst of energy and enthusiasm for the work of foreign
missions. The minister of the church, the Reverend
Charles E. Bradt, was fascinated by that work and set
out to arouse the interest and enthusiasm of his congre-
gation as well. To that end, he invited as guest minister
the Reverend Hunter Corbett who had returned to
the United States on furlough from his mission station in
Chefoo, Shantung Province, China. So great was the
missionary's impact on the church that its members raised
$1,000 for the salaries of Corbett and his wife at a time
when the church was still deeply in debt. In 1898 the
congregation formally resolved to "become and be
known as a Missionary Church."26

In that same year, the Yucca Company published a
booklet of Bible verses which was distributed with each
jar of Mentholatum. It was dedicated to all those who
obeyed the words of the "Great Commission" to go into
"all the world" and "preach the gospel to every creature."
Printed in the front of the booklets were messages from
the Reverends Charles Bradt and Hunter Corbett endor-
sing their purpose and certifying that the company "have
given bond to donate one-tenth of the profits from the
sales of Mentholatum each year to the cause of Missions.
We have used Mentholatum in our family for a long time
and KNOW IT DOES WHAT IS CLAIMED.... We see no reason why it should not bring quite a revenue
to the missionary Boards." The state secretary of the
Kansas YMCA seconded this message, praising the book
and urging that "the texts be applied to the spirits and
Mentholatum to the bodies of tens of thousands."27

Thus began the association of Mentholatum with the
philanthropy of A. A. Hyde. As the surplus grew, so
too did the range and number of beneficiaries. The
publicity which these contributions received was inevi-
tably linked with the product which made them pos-
sible. From this association of Mentholatum with the
generosity of its founder came many of the apocryphal

23. Ibid. See also Irving, Master of Money, 44-47, and Kansas City
Star, May 1, 1927.
24. A. A. Hyde, "Letter to my six sons and three daughters," Janu-
ary 1, 1931. Hyde Collection. See also A. A. Hyde, "The Modern Man
and His Money," The College of Emporia Bulletin 22 (April 15, 1931).
25. Irving, Master of Money, 84.
26. The First Presbyterian Church of Wichita, Kansas, Founded
March 13, 1870. This history of the church was published on the
occasion of its centennial in 1970.
stories of the product's origins. The popular evangelist, Aimée Semple McPherson, once preached a sermon on tithing, excerpts from which were sent to Hyde. The evangelist accounted for A. A.'s success by saying that when he was a destitute young man, he had turned to the Bible and “entered into a definite contract with the Lord” who immediately “began to prosper him.” A friend gave him the formula for the ointment which was to become known throughout all the world. With the wealth which the ointment brought to him, A. A. “had two missionaries financed in India, a missionary steamboat in Africa, three missionaries in China, several missionaries in Japan.... While I stand here preaching this afternoon, his missionary steamboat in Africa is chug-chug-chugging through the waters of coast and river, bearing missionaries to preach the Word to the black man.” Therefore, she concluded, when A. A. began to tithe and to exceed the traditional tenth in his contributions, “the Lord prospered him in a wonderful way,” and changed him “from a penniless, deeply indebted man to a multi-millionaire.” At the end of the article, A. A. wrote in carefully hand-printed block letters: “All Bosh. A. A. H.”

The publicity which A. A. received inevitably attracted numerous requests for funds. One in particular so amused him that he forwarded it to his sister Hattie. The letter was from a Miss Evelyn Hyde who lived on the island of Guernsey and who wrote to her “dear Brother in Christ Jesus” describing her dedication to the Lord and her ambition “to go out as a missionary in India.” Not immediately, she added, “as I am very delicate.” Having heard that A. A. was the richest man in Kansas, she was writing to ask

...in my Master's Name to give me part of your money. Not for me, but Jesus, Him alone I have in view now.... I do hope you will open your heart to me and give me a few millions for Christ's sake, and then, if you have no near relative, give me all you have. Once more, not for me, but to help a real follower of the Lord Jesus. Am a Methodist girl.... Dear Mr. Hyde, keep this strictly private.

In a covering note to his sister, A. A. wrote, “Don't you think this young lady's assurance entitles her to a high place in the family!”

By 1906 the years of struggle and uncertainty were over and the Yucca Company was firmly established. Since its founding in 1889, the company had grown from a small, regional purveyor of soaps and toiletries to the manufacturer of a patent remedy with nationwide sales and distribution. The volume of business it conducted led to the opening of a branch plant in Buffalo, New York, in 1909 and the construction of a new factory in Wichita, the first reinforced concrete building in the city. A large sign identified it as “The Home of Mentholatum.” So dominant, in fact, had Mentholatum become in the company's production and sales that the name “Yucca” had become an anomaly. The yucca-based soaps and other specialties had been phased out and even the Vest Pocket Cough Specific, which had been the precursor of Mentholatum, adopted the name of its more successful progeny and was called “Menthicura.” Finally, in November 1906, the Yucca Company itself was dissolved.

28. Excerpt from The Bridal Call (Los Angeles, Calif.), date unknown, Hyde Collection.
29. Miss Evelyn Hyde, St. Peter's, [island of] Guernsey, to A. A. Hyde, date unknown, Hyde Collection.
and was succeeded by a new corporate entity named, appropriately, the Mentholatum Company. Like its predecessor, its stock was owned by A. A. Hyde and members of his family. 31

With the business prospering and his sons gradually assuming responsibility for the day-to-day affairs of the company, Hyde began to devote more and more of his time to his philanthropy. As his wealth increased, so too did his contributions and beneficiaries. His objective in giving away his wealth was, as his friend, William Allen White, had noted, almost too simple: it was to support any person, organization, or institution which Hyde felt would contribute to the Kingdom of God on earth. What was required of all was a religious, but not necessarily a denominational, commitment. With such a broad mandate, the results were predictably eclectic, ranging from the Pinery Woods Country Life School for black youths in Mississippi to Oberlin College; from the Gilbert Street Mexican Mission in Wichita to a playground in Athens, Greece, for refugees from the war with Turkey; from the National Anti-Cigarette League to the American Friends Service Committee. As the range and scope of his contributions grew, he always reserved a special place for foreign missions and the YMCA—the first of his many charitable interests. In 1925 the city of Wichita honored him at a civic banquet at which his neighbor, ex-governor Henry J. Allen, described him as "the wisest man I've ever known about wealth... He distributes wealth under an unshakable conviction that he's investing in the happiness of others—and that by this course of action, he contributes to a holy purpose in a better world." 32

In January 1935, Hyde was approaching his eightieth birthday. Still actively engaged in the affairs of the company which he had started almost fifty years earlier, he was asked to say a few words to a group of Mentholatum salesmen who were meeting in Wichita. His message to them turned out to be his valedictory. It was a reaffirmation of his faith that "we are not here to lay up worldly treasures but to be of service." 33 Six days later he was dead. When his estate was settled, it was clear that he had fulfilled the goal which he had set for himself. He died without accumulated wealth.

31. Yucca Company minutes, Hyde Collection.

32. Accounts of the banquet may be found in the Wichita Daily Eagle and Wichita Beacon for March 5, 1925. A souvenir booklet with messages and photographs from many of those whom A. A. Hyde had assisted during his lifetime was presented to him on that occasion and is included in the Hyde Collection.