Field Medicine at Fort Hays

Among the many fascinating items unearthed at Fort Hays are a number of square or rectangular tin receptacles that have permitted valuable insights. These differ from ordinary tins used for foodstuffs and were most certainly meant for medicinal purposes. A picture of such a container appears in the Civil War Collectors Encyclopedia, written by Francis A. Lord and published by Stackpole Company, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. This item is complete with a label indicating that it came from the Illinois USA Hoop, Dept., and contained "PULLAE QUINNIAE SULPHATI," quinine sulphate pills that are commonly found in medical supply chests.

Fort Hays functioned from 1899 to 1909 and served to protect the trail west, that is, to protect both settlers and Indians. Troops were always stationed there, but not in great numbers. At its peak population, there might have been 200 solders; but most of them would probably have been out on the trail. Soldiers clearly experienced frequent traumatic injuries but often suffered from other maladies, like diarrhea, trichiniasis, infections, and poison Ivy. Fort statistics for 1869 show an average population of 300 soldiers, of whom 16 were taken sick: 1 case of typhoid fever, 10 cases of malaria, 9 cases of dysentery, 3 cases of varicella, 6 cases of rheumatism, and 27 cases of external affections (inflammation of the membranes in the nose and air passages). During this time, there was only one death. Study of these affections of the rugged soldiers is certainly worth the effort, even though it is complicated by the fact that many names are quite similar to those applied today.

KSHS Lab Supervisor Christine Gaunt pulled together a small collection of these objects from the excavation of an oven foundation. The site represents an early period in medical practice. All of the cans are 3.5 inches tall, but they vary in width and depth: the first type is 2 inches wide and 2 inches deep; the second type is 2 inches wide and 1.5 inches deep; and the third type is 1.5 inches wide and deep. As the cans are so similar in size, shape, and construction, it is easy to assume they are "standard issue." They certainly are unbreakable and could be packed or stored very conveniently. There is a cork in the collection with labels that look "USCR," a further challenge for researchers.

The medicines of the time have many strange names, such as "Syrop of Squal," a bulbous herb used as an expectorant, cardiac stimulant, and diuretic. "Extract of Valerian," a perineal herb used as a sedative and anti-inflammatory; and "Creosote, distilled wood tar with antiseptic properties." One can wonder if any of these were contained within the Fort Hays tins. The methods and remedies that the early doctors and medical practitioners employed would cause today's patients to shudder. One can speculate about what future patients will think about the medicines and treatments used in the year 2005.

Clarification

Feedback on articles published in Kansat Preservation is very helpful. A case in point is a recent response from Jim D. Fegness, an archeologist consultant from Baldwin, Missouri, who wrote in reference to two of my recent contributions, both regarding military buttons (see Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 13-14 and Vol. 21, No. 5, p. 17).

The literature that I had consulted indicates that the backmarks on the buttons name the manufacturer; however, according to Fegness, that is not always the case. Apparently, these backmarks frequently designate a distributor rather than a manufacturer. An example is that the Henry K. Allen Company in New York was a dealer in, rather than a manufacturer of, military goods and placed its name on items for sale, including the backs of buttons.

As a volunteer in the KSHS Archeology Lab, I really enjoy writing about selected artifacts. A second pleasure comes from receiving input from readers like Fegness who are willing to share their expertise. Continuing to learn is its own reward.

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