A Parade of Grateful Women: The Surprising Success of Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound and the Language of Women’s Health

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ABSTRACT

A Parade of Grateful Women: The Surprising Success of Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound and the Language of Women’s Health

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Waltham, Massachusetts

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Consumers in nineteenth century America witnessed a rapid growth of patent medicines, potions, and pills, advertised and promoted to cure all manner of ailments. Women in particular found themselves challenged with maintaining an established domestic economy while being confronted by shifting expectations both in the home and in the larger world. As the chief decision makers for consumable goods used within the home, they were faced with a growing proliferation of choices, each promising to be better than the last. As they navigated a sea of dubious claims and dangerous formulations, little guidance was offered in choosing medicines for themselves and their loved ones. In 1875, an unassuming woman from Lynn, Massachusetts quietly stepped into the void, with a product that promised health
and happiness for women; their particular and delicate concerns were her specialty. Her name was Lydia Estes Pinkham. This paper examines the place that Lydia Pinkham’s products held in this cultural milieu, and how the company’s advertising and images incorporated, communicated, and perhaps challenged some of the prevailing ideologies regarding women’s health. Pinkham’s grandmotherly image, juxtaposed with her matter-of-fact ways of addressing women’s health issues long before it was considered ‘seemly’ to do so, brought attention to the medical needs of American women, in part by making the subject unavoidable. The advertising’s language offered women a new vocabulary with which to assert their desire for compassionate and effective health care. These changing ideas regarding the care of women’s bodies, and their own attitudes towards them, challenged the status-quo in an era that promoted feminine passivity as the ideal.
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Introduction

“Like an endless chain, the procession of grateful women stretches on and on and on!”

The serene and unassuming woman in black bombazine and lace could be anyone’s grandmother. A picture of quiet grace, it is difficult to imagine her abandoning her knitting, let alone establishing and headlining a business that would eventually earn millions of dollars. Yet, in nineteenth century America, Lydia Estes Pinkham did just that. She unabashedly became representative grandmother and epistolary confidante to countless women who relied on her product for their feminine ailments, and her advertising and publications, for their sage advice. Born in the city of Lynn, Massachusetts, she was the creator and public face of the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company, a concern officially begun in 1875 on her kitchen stove, and still in operation today, albeit no longer a Pinkham family business. The product that Pinkham offered women was more than a panacea, as this paper will show. The language that was used to market the Lydia E. Pinkham Vegetable Compound was decidedly frank. Terms such as menstruation, uterine inflammation, and

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2 In 1925, Pinkham Company sales reached an all time high in excess of three million dollars. Sarah Stage, *Female Complaints: Lydia Pinkham and the Business of Women's Medicine* (New York: Norton, 1979), 10; The product is currently (2013) distributed by NuMark Laboratories, 164 Northfield Avenue Edison, NJ 08837. There are two products in production, a modern rendition of the original liquid Vegetable Compound formula, and the formula in tablet form. (See Appendix)
‘painful monthly periods,’

were common in the company advertising, at a time when such words were rarely spoken in public. The Pinkham advertising campaigns were certainly noticed, and perhaps even snickered at. Their companion grandiose claims that the product would cure everything from kidney complaints to unhappy marriages, were probably not taken all that seriously, but the product itself was introduced at a time when women were receptive to the promise of relief for symptoms that were often left untreated and unmentionable. Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable compound offered an appealing alternative in a medical marketplace where the prevailing treatment for women’s troubles was removal of the ovaries, under less than ideal conditions, by men who possessed a limited understanding of women’s anatomy. Lorna Duffin, in “The Conspicuous Consumptive: Woman as an Invalid” notes, “according to Barker-Benfield literally thousands of these operations were performed in America from the 1850’s onwards, and by 1870 the ‘normal ovariotomy’ was being widely performed.” In an age where it was generally believed that women’s bodies were inextricably linked to their emotions, the diagnosis du jour was often simply hysteria.

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3 Stage, 146-157 and inside cover
4 "Popularised by the American gynaecologist Robert Battey (1828–95), who called it “normal ovariotomy” to indicate that the removal of non-cystic ovaries was involved, this procedure met with widespread opposition." Ornella Moscucci and Aileen Clarke, “Prophylactic Oophorectomy: A Historical Perspective.” Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health. 2007 March; 61(3): 182–184.
6 Women were not alone in their nervous ailments, there were numerous tonics and treatments for men as well. (See Appendix)
With a seeming nod to Plato’s notion of the wandering womb, doctors became increasingly focused on the female reproductive system as the seat of all manner of ‘nervous’ disorders that included mania and insanity, as well as diseases of the blood. It is understandable that women turned to readily available remedies, herbal concoctions and nostrums for minor ailments. Patent medicines of all kinds had become increasingly popular. James Harvey Young notes, “in 1859, the proprietary medicine industry had an output valued in census figures at $3,500,000. By 1904 the sum had multiplied by twenty times.”

Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound is often corralled with general patent medicines, and as such, is tarred with the same brush. As a prominent member of the patent medicine camp, it is tempting to assume that its properties were dubious at best. This, though a natural inclination, may be neither accurate nor fair. The Pinkham Vegetable Compound formula contained a number of herbal ingredients traditionally used in folk medicine for women’s ailments. One of the most promising is *cimicifuga racemosa*, or black cohosh. Modern scientific studies have shown black cohosh to be effective in the treatment of menopause, and it is widely used in European countries for hormonal symptoms such as hot flashes and night sweats. Pinkham herself, when naming her product, deliberately chose the term “vegetable compound” in order to both distance her concoction from the narcotic laden elixirs on the

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7 “And the same is the case with the so-called womb or matrix of women: the animal within them is desirous of procreating children, and when remaining unfruitful long beyond its proper time, gets discontented and angry, and wandering in every direction through the body, closes up the passages of the breath,” Plato, *Timaeus* 91a-d. Benjamin Jowett, Trans. http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html

8 Duffin, 36


10 *Cimicifuga racemosa* is also known by the common names; black snakeroot, rattleroot, rattleweed, and squawroot. See the Appendix for information on the formulas, and their ingredients.
market, and to align her name with wholesomeness and vitality rather than illness and debility.\textsuperscript{11}

The purpose of this paper is to open a new discourse on the language that surrounded women’s health in nineteenth century America. By using the example of the Lydia E. Pinkham Company to illustrate my assertions, I will examine the following questions: In an environment that saw the rapid rise and fall of patent medicine businesses, mostly due to ineffective, adulterated, or downright dangerous ingredients, why did the Pinkham product remain successful into the present day? How did the rhetoric employed in the Pinkham advertising campaigns contribute or detract from the prevailing beliefs about women’s health and well-being? As fraudulent as the majority of patent medicines on the market were, Pinkham purported to offer a genuine and effective product that worked for women and their feminine concerns. In what ways did Lydia Pinkham and her products and advertising draw needed attention to the particular and pressing health needs of women?

A culture of care arose in the latter part of the nineteenth century, enhanced in part by a proliferation of advice literature.\textsuperscript{12} It was targeted primarily at women consumers who envisioned the task of family health and well-being as their personal domain. Patent medicines were an intrinsic part of this culture. This paper examines the place that Lydia Pinkham’s products held in this milieu, and how the company’s advertising and images incorporated, communicated, and perhaps challenged some of the prevailing ideologies

\textsuperscript{11} “Given the results of most clinical studies, many experts conclude that black cohosh may be a safe and effective alternative for women who cannot or will not take hormonal replacement therapy (HRT) for menopause. A 2010 review by researchers found that black cohosh provided a 26% reduction in hot flashes and night sweats (also known as vasomotor symptoms).” http://www.umm.edu/altmed/articles/black-cohosh

regarding women’s health. Pinkham’s grandmotherly image, juxtaposed with her matter-of-fact ways of addressing women’s health issues long before it was considered ‘seemly’ to do so, brought attention to the medical needs of American women, in part by making the subject unavoidable. The popularity of her products and her personae are indicative of a larger cultural shift in attitudes toward women, their place in society, and the ways in which their personal expectations meshed with, or contradicted the roles they were expected to fulfill.13 Personal agency in the realm of private matters was a pressing question with much at stake.

Many of these changes in women’s lives can be intuited through the language of the time. Throughout this paper, are woven period examples of the Pinkham company’s testimonials, as a way of illustrating the commercial milieu. Selections are included from Lydia Pinkham’s son Daniel’s Brooklyn letters, written from New York as he pounded the pavement in search of contracts. They provide a glimpse of the determination of an inveterate salesman, as well as demonstrating the ways he manipulated the language of the times to promote the product. James B. Twitchell notes, “The genius was not Lydia or Isaac, but their son Dan. Although his name is rarely acknowledged in the pantheon of advertising geniuses, it should be.”14 Another example of the language of the time is an intimate letter of a nineteenth century woman to her husband. Her experience of available health care and its impact on her marital relationship provides a window into what other women of her time may have been experiencing. A selection from a nineteenth century gynecology manual demonstrates one of the prevailing methods of treatment available to women who presented with “disorders of the womb.”

13 Stage, 66
14 James B. Twitchell, Twenty Ads that Shook the World: The Century’s Most Groundbreaking Advertising and How it Changed Us All (New York: Random House, 2000), 33
In an era that had no shortage of get-rich-quick schemers who used patent medicine as their platform, competition was fierce, few products stood out, and even fewer succeeded. This paper discusses the formative years of the Lydia E. Pinkham Company, and the remarkable rise and early success of an idea, that for all intents and purposes, should have failed, swallowed up by a sea of similar products and claims. The company’s ability to not only survive, but thrive, indicates there was something about the Pinkham product that kept women coming back for more. Contrary to popular belief, it was not simply the twenty percent alcohol content, though it may have helped, for that was the norm, and even on the low end, by the standards of the day for patent medicines. For a point of comparison, Hostetter’s Bitters contained thirty two percent alcohol.\textsuperscript{15}

The passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906\textsuperscript{16} was the death-knell for numerous patent medicine manufacturers, still, the Pinkham product continued to sell. Perhaps the visage of a kindly grandmother, and her no-nonsense advice struck a chord with consumers, but the best advertising cannot hide behind a shoddy product if repeat purchasing is the goal. The tone of the Pinkham advertising was as sensational as the next nostrum maker’s, and followed the same general formula, with the ubiquitous customer testimonial as an alleged

\textsuperscript{15}Alcohol content of the Pinkham product ranged from eighteen percent to around twenty percent, which amounts to approximately 40 proof, enough to have extra medicinal effects. Current alcohol content of the product is approximately 10 percent; James Harvey Young, \textit{The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 129

\textsuperscript{16}This paper will not address the subject of legislation and the preliminary events leading to the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, though the proliferation and dubious claims of patent medicines played a large part, as that is both beyond the scope of this paper and the subject for a much larger one.
barometer of reliability and efficacy. Yet, in a marketplace glutted with similar products, Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound prospered.\textsuperscript{17}

By understanding the language of the times, and seeing the ways people communicated, both in public and in private, we are more able to comprehend what life may have been like for women in late nineteenth century America. As a catalyst for discourse, Lydia Pinkham’s frank discussion of their feminine concerns, such as this comment in an advertising booklet, "Tumors usually come at some time in middle life. The symptoms are very much the same whether the growth is in the womb or in the ovaries,"\textsuperscript{18} nudged open the door of Victorian modesty. The advertising’s language offered women a new vocabulary with which to assert their desire for compassionate and effective health care. These changing ideas regarding the care of women’s bodies, and their own attitudes towards them, challenged the status-quo in an era that promoted feminine passivity as the ideal. These shifts enabled women to take on the larger task of incorporating themselves into a society orchestrated to keep them in specific and circumscribed roles.\textsuperscript{19} By carving out a niche for herself and her business in the man’s world of nineteenth century America, Pinkham inadvertently set an example for her devotees to follow, and there are still those who follow her.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} As of 2013, the Pinkham company has been operating for 138 years continuously.
\textsuperscript{18} Fruits and Candies, Lynn.: (Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co. undated)
\textsuperscript{19} Martha H. Verbrugge, Able-Bodied Womanhood: Personal Health and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Boston (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8
\textsuperscript{20} One hundred and thirty seven years later, a quick internet search of "Lydia Pinkham and Fertility" yields surprising results. There are message boards on the internet where women exchange tales of their experiences with the product. Seemingly, there has been an underground base of Pinkham devotees for some time, and the product has gained a reputation for allegedly increasing fertility in women who have had trouble conceiving. Whether these testimonials have any validity remains to be seen. The Pinkham legend of “a baby in every bottle” is apparently still going strong. Although the existence of online message boards does not constitute evidence for contemporary use of Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound, it is however, enough to warrant further investigation.
These sentiments remain as important today, as they did when Lydia Pinkham was brewing up the first batches of vegetable compound in her kitchen. Yet, underlying all of the cozy rhetoric, there is strong evidence of a shrewd businesswoman, one who was driven by circumstance and need to develop a product, see it to market, and court the consumer base that demanded it. By raising the banner of feminine tribulations, the missionary zeal of the Pinkham campaign was, for all intents and purposes, a resounding success. Whether Pinkham intended to usher in a new awareness of the female body and its medical and emotional needs, remains to be seen. But her frank discussions in the company literature of the intimate details of women’s biological processes, whether they involved reproductive organs or emotional health, helped open the door to further explorations of the problems and deficits in women’s health care.²¹

²¹ Stage, 251
Patent medicines are often examined for their curiosity factor, but as the bastard child of ‘legitimate’ medicine, they are rarely the subject of more serious inquiry. Perhaps this is due to the negative connotations and sideshow atmosphere attributed to medicine shows and their purveyors. Although some of the medicines may possess little of merit worth mentioning, the context in which they were made and sold is important. How they were utilized and received by society can tell us much about the prevailing culture. It is necessary to look past the surface sensationalism. As the number of patent medicines were at their apex in the nineteenth century,22 and were subject to the use and abuse of large segments of the population, their ubiquitous rise and fall may provide insight into cultural attitudes towards health and well-being, and the climate of the medical field in general. The story surrounding the rise and fall of nostrums and the changes precipitated by the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, shed light on the force of legislation on the market. A plethora of examples of home-grown businesses provides a window into the 19th-century market economy and consumer consumption. Patent medicines touched every age and socio-economic level. Their use was widespread and generally accepted as a cheap and valid method of self-treatment.23

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22 Young, 110
23 Due to the presence of alcohol and narcotics, these medicines also possessed a high potential for abuse.
The psychology student may wish to examine the demographics and motivation for self-dosing, particularly with patent medicines that contained a high level of alcohol, or narcotics. Of course, for the historian, the transition from the importation of British patent medicines in the eighteenth century, to a flourishing market of American-made goods speaks to the shift from dependence on the mother country to a nation finding its way in what was becoming an increasingly competitive market in the light of rising industrialism.

With more advertising agencies, more publications, and more people to purchase them, the target customer, and most frequent consumer, seemed to be an urban dweller. Yet, was this true? As the US Postal Service expanded to include more outlying communities, mail order offered another avenue for business ventures. Mail order catalogs, such as Montgomery Ward, est. 1872, and Sears and Roebuck, est. 1893, were becoming popular as ways to market wares, and they were able to reach the customer in more rural areas. The distance from trained doctors would mean that ‘doctoring’ skills and a familiarity with alternative healing methods were demanded from ordinary people, and patent medicines were handily available in catalogs. A lack of available physicians especially in outlying areas engendered self-diagnosis and dosing with what was readily available and affordable. Janette Thomas Greenwood notes, "Between 1800 and 1900...the urban population of the United States grew five-fold."24 Some research has been done on medicine shows, which traveled into rural areas to stage their productions. Anne Anderson’s *Snake Oil, Hustlers and Hambones: The American Medicine Show* and Gene Fowler’s *Mystic Healers & Medicine Shows:

Blazing Trails to Wellness in the Old West and Beyond, document these colorful productions. These traveling spectacles served to provide entertainment as well as promoting sales. More study in this area is needed.  

James Harvey Young, a historian from Emory University, has done extensive research on the subject. Young considered the patent medicine business to be a vital and influential form of marketing, but perhaps more importantly, he interpreted the public reception to its dangers as an example of the growing agency of consumer movements. Young shows that as the consuming public found their bottles of patent medicine to be empty promises, or worse, laden with ingredients that resulted in addiction or death, they became restive for change and began to advocate for government oversight and legislation. Though he is now deceased, his work provides a cohesive and comprehensive view on the subject of patent medicine, its market, and its manufacturers. Researchers are fortunate that he has left his successors a rich source of literature for future investigation.  

Lorine Swainston Goodwin echoes Young’s findings regarding advocacy, in The Pure Food, Drink and Drug Crusaders, 1879-1914. She states, “Each group mobilized out of a pressing need to protect their families, their society, and their continuity against immediate 


26 “Pursuing his interest even in the face of some who suggested that it was not a topic worthy of historical attention, Young published in 1961 *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America Before Federal Regulation.* This was followed by *The Medical Messiahs: A Social History of Health Quackery in Twentieth-Century America.* Young firmly believed in the salutary role of government with respect to the regulation of food and drugs. His book, *Pure Food: Securing the Federal Food and Drugs Act of 1906,* became the standard reference on the early history of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).” Victoria H. Harden, “In Memoriam” *Perspectives,* February 2007, American Historical Association
and accelerating health threats." Goodwin argues that it was ultimately the influence of women’s organizations, such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, that ushered in much needed legislation. Health care consumers, especially those of the working class, were faced with difficult choices as their financial situation rarely allowed physician visits. There are some sources that suggest that the Pinkham product contained opiates, however, examination of the official company records and the various formulas for the products, written in Pinkham’s own hand, reveal the falsity of this claim.

There are a number of biographies available on Pinkham. Though their publication dates range quite a bit, the earlier ones are similar in content. The immediate challenge for the historian working with nineteenth and early twentieth century material is the ‘translation’ and interpretation of a flowery, and to the modern reader, archaic writing style. The period’s biographical treatments tend to be hagiographic, and newspaper accounts, are often equally

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28 Levin writes, “In its original form, Lydia Pinkham's remedy for 'female complaints' was alcohol laced with opium. Needless to say, it was wildly popular.” Jerome David Levin, *Introduction to Alcoholism Counseling: a Bio-Psychosocial Approach* (Washington DC: Taylor & Francis, 1995), 34. As this was not cited, it is unclear where the information was found. In Levin’s defense, much of the anecdotal evidence regarding this period claims that all patent medicines of the era contained dangerous drugs. As such, it becomes essential to look at them on a case-by-case basis. Also see Goodwin, p95, which states, “They banished Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound containing opiates and 20.6 percent alcohol.” It appears in this case that the data was retrieved from a WCTU publication. *Union Signal*, Nov.15, 1883.
29 Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company Records, 1876-1968, box 180, f.536 Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
sensational. At times it can be difficult to cut through the thicket of words and colloquialisms do determine their underlying meanings. The language of the patent medicine business in particular, pushes the envelope of extravagance to the utmost. The earlier representations of the Pinkham story, appear skewed to show the enterprise and the woman in the best possible light, at times obscuring the story. Washburn’s Lydia appears almost saintly, as the book itself reads with an evangelical zeal. He wrote, "In her we find a first bud of that luxuriant bloom of feminine philanthropy so characteristic of our nation, a first blush of the dawn of woman's Better World.”  

It is interesting to note the progression from the more adulatory accounts to the more historical, and well researched, presentation of the Stage text. Her inclusion of a wide range of personal letters and documents makes Pinkham and her circle especially accessible to the modern reader. Stage also notes that Pinkham’s was the first company to "make available to historians its archives and financial records." Whether this indicates transparency on the part of the company is unclear. What it does appear to indicate, is the continuing recognition of Lydia Pinkham and her company as an American icon. An extensive examination of the advertising materials alone could keep a researcher busy for quite some time.  

Peeling away the layers is always a challenge, yet the primary sources clearly show the nuts and bolts of the business itself. The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, contains the definitive collection of materials pertaining to the Lydia Pinkham Company. Although this collection encompasses copious business and financial records, advertising materials, and family memorabilia including a large number of

31 Robert Collyer Washburn. The Life and Times of Lydia E. Pinkham (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1931), 5
32 Stage, 283
photographs, there is little documentation written in Lydia’s own hand. Letters from her family members, photographs, and newspaper clippings shed some light on the woman she was. One precious example, is Lydia’s handwritten book that contains the formula for the vegetable compound as well as others.33

At the heart of Schlesinger’s Pinkham collection, are Daniel R. Pinkham's letters. Thirty-eight letters, many of which were written on his first trip to Brooklyn in 1876, to his brother Will at home, demonstrate the persistence of a born salesman, as he literally wore out his shoes traipsing the streets of New York. They clearly demonstrate the exhaustive work he did in recruiting initial sales, both on the street and in druggist’s shops, yet the most poignant aspect of these letters is their enthusiasm. Pinkham’s charisma literally drips off of the pages, and reading them offers a clue as to a major reason for the company’s initial success. In a market already saturated with similar products, many directed at women’s ailments, Pinkham’s belief in the product and its eventual success, coupled with his relentless work ethic, helped to turn the tide and the fortunes of the Pinkham family.34

Patent drug advertising in general -- and that of the Pinkham Company in particular—in imagery and word, was examined through the use of newspapers and the company’s advertising pamphlets, in order to help determine their influence on the reading and consuming public. The Pinkham Company utilized extensive testimonials in their advertising, incorporating the thankful letters of women who had tried the product and been pleased with the results. It is my contention that these letters, whether they are legitimate or not, provide a window into a time in America when women were becoming more aware of

33 LEPMC, Box#180,536
34 Although this passage reads like an advertisement for the Daniel Pinkham booster club, it is difficult after reading his letters and experiencing their exuberance, to remain unfazed.
the functioning of their bodies, accepting of their differences, and starting to demand acknowledgment of their particular needs, from the medical profession and society in general. Periodicals circulating at the time provided additional information.35

The eleven-part series, “The Great American Fraud,” written by Samuel Hopkins Adams for *Collier’s Magazine* in 1905-1906, stands as the most well-known, and perhaps widely read, commentary on the patent medicine business. Subsequent to the *Collier’s* series, the American Medical Association published the entire series of articles in a booklet, which sold nearly 500,000 copies. As many of the primary source materials, i.e. newspapers and magazines in both advertising and editorial commentary, are quite sensationalistic regarding the subject, it is difficult to ascertain their validity. As such, their reliability as references comes into question. They are valid more as a snapshot of the culture and its attitudes, than reliable witnesses. Obviously, with any kind of advertising, this is to be expected. Perhaps one of the most striking features of nineteenth century advertising, is that apart from the language, it is not very different from that of today. Laden with images of either the stressed woman who clearly needs the product, or the ecstatic woman who was clever enough to make the purchase, the message is the same, ‘buy and be happy.’36

35 There has been much speculation as to the existence, and/or whereabouts of these testimonial letters. Stage notes that the letters, “were destroyed by the Pinkhams, probably in 1940 when the company discontinued its correspondence department to conform with tighter regulation of medical advice by the post office department.” Stage,284 Though there were a scattered few in the archival materials, I was unable to uncover a definitive answer. It is reasonable to believe however, that at least some of the testimonials were indeed legitimate and based on letters received by the company.

The Market

Consumers in nineteenth century America witnessed a rapid growth of patent medicines, potions, and pills, advertised and promoted to cure all manner of ailments. As they navigated a sea of dubious claims and dangerous formulations, little guidance was offered in choosing medicines for themselves and their loved ones. Much of what was marketed to the unsuspecting public was either useless, loaded with potent drugs such as opium or cocaine, or predominately comprised of alcohol.\textsuperscript{37} The phrase ‘patent medicine’ was a misnomer, for relatively few – Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound being a notable exception -- had, or ever even sought, patents, for they necessitated divulging “secret” ingredients, something their creators were wont to do.\textsuperscript{38}

A lack of regulation and oversight allowed any entrepreneur with a clever slogan and a few bottles and cheap ingredients, to stake a claim in the medicinal marketplace. Lemuel Shattuck, Massachusetts public health advocate and statistician wrote in “The Shattuck Report” of 1850, “No restriction is laid upon anyone in the practice of physic, or in dealing in drugs and medicines. Anyone, male or female, learned or ignorant, an honest man or a knave,

\textsuperscript{37} Stage, 63
\textsuperscript{38} Patent filed with United States Patent Office in 1876
can assume the name of a physician, and 'practice; upon anyone, to cure or to kill, as either
may happen, without accountability. It is a free country!"39

Public suspicion of heroic medicine, with its long history of dramatic methods such as
bloodletting and leeches, was blatantly exploited, and served to make these homemade elixirs
appear all the more innocuous, while the high cost of medical attention prohibited the
average consumer from seeking a physician’s care for rudimentary ailments. Self-dosing was
the order of the day. Trained doctors were scarce in an age where many medical schools were
little more than diploma mills. Privately owned, for-profit enterprises, these schools admitted
anyone willing to pay, regardless of prior education or experience. Practicing physicians
themselves, developed and sold their own brand of medicines, often in collaboration with
pharmacists, which may or may not have been more effective than those sold on the street.
Pharmacists, caught between the two factions of consumer and physician, and dependent on
both for their livelihood, were in a particular bind. Pharmaceutical drugs were widely
available in the early part of the century. It was only after 1870 that states began to regulate
both sale and consumption of certain substances.40

Practicing physicians were being challenged from both sides; at once desirous of
consuming and creating new knowledge in their fields, they were ever cognizant of their
creed to ‘do no harm,’ which included not only the physical, but the emotional aspects of the
patient’s health. For women, the problem of obtaining safe, reliable, and accessible medical

the Promotion of General and Public Health Devised, Prepared, and recommended by the
Commissioners appointed under a Resolve of the Legislature of Massachusetts, relating to a
Sanitary Survey of the State. 1850 p.58
40 Joseph M. Gabriel, “Restricting the Sale of “Deadly Poisons”: Pharmacists, Drug
Regulation, and Narratives of Suffering in the Gilded Age,” Journal of the Gilded Age and
the Progressive Era, Vol.9 no.3 (July 2010): 313-336 http://www.academia.edu/1876102/
care was even more vexing. With only a handful of female practitioners, and few medical schools opening their doors to women, the choices were limited, especially if they sought the ministrations of their own sex. Although midwives and eclectic practitioners were available, neither was trained in the scientific methods necessary to treat serious problems. Women’s bodies, and the ailments particular to their sex, were rarely discussed in public, and only marginally cared for. Women themselves, were shockingly ignorant regarding their own bodies and their natural processes. Embarrassment contributed to a culture that preferred to see women as pristine. The messy complications of women’s health, and the emotional dilemmas they caused, were not things to be discussed in polite conversation.41

In the early part of the nineteenth century, pregnancy and childbirth was still considered a natural process, best experienced with as little intervention as possible, usually under the ministrations of an experienced midwife. As social expectations changed, and women came to be regarded as frail and sickly, pregnancy and childbirth became something to be medically managed by male physicians. The presumed (and expected) delicacy of women precluded their participation in their own health and they were often infantilized in the guise of 'protection' of their more delicate natures. Many of these sickly attitudes were outgrowths of the Romantic Movement, which glorified frailty and passiveness in males and females alike. Psychology was in its nascent form, but the first suggestions of a connection between biological process and emotional reaction, initiated by the studies of William James, were being circulated. To women’s great misfortune, these ideas would be misinterpreted and

41 The Johns Hopkins Medical School was an exception. Three of the original class of eighteen that began their studies in 1893, were women.
turned against them, as the medical profession focused on the womb as the center of a woman’s ego.  

In order to understand the Pinkham phenomenon, it is important to place her in the context of her time. The late nineteenth century was an era of accelerated change in America. Rising industries ushered in new ways of performing old tasks, as prevailing cultural expectations continually shifted to keep pace with new technologies. A rapidly increasing population delivered its own set of problems, not least of which, was poverty and disease due to the lack of much-needed sanitation developments. Industrialism and capitalism converged to create diverse social anxieties regarding health and well-being. Physical dangers in the workplace competed with contagion in the streets and alleyways, as people were evermindful of their twin shadows. But not all was bleak.

The emergent national interest in science bordered on mania. It was a new and exhilarating way of thinking, and though emerging ideas were not designed to challenge religious persuasion, they were occasionally received as such. The resulting divisiveness made people uncomfortable, but it also caused them to reexamine their personal beliefs in light of emerging scientific theory. There would be no turning back. An interest in spiritualism was on the rise, perhaps as a rebuttal to standard orthodoxy, or simply as a way of satisfying the need for spiritual succor, while still embracing the new. In the aftermath of the publication of Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species in 1859, there were evolving perceptions of what it meant to be human. The fresh infusion of scientific ideas and

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43 Verbrugge., p110
possibilities became of paramount importance, not only to medical practitioners, but to the
average citizen.\footnote{44}

The middle of the nineteenth century was a time of intense debate and cultural anxiety
over the emergence of what were considered radical evolutionary ideas in a climate of strong
religious determinism. Rupke notes,

“The historiographic model of the mid-Victorian controversy over
the origin of species, initiated by the Darwinians themselves and
followed by historians even after the centenary celebrations of the
publication of *On The Origin of Species*, has been one in which the
development of Darwin’s theory is described in terms of enlightened,
evolutionary ‘forerunners’ versus dogmatic, creationist’ opponents.”

Those individuals who were caught in the crosshairs of the controversy, particularly
practitioners of medicine, sought ways in which to bridge the gap, without sacrificing the
momentum of discovery that was rapidly informing their fields of study and practice. The
‘man on the street’ was fearful over these new scientific challenges to his long held modes of
thinking. Although there were many who readily embraced a ‘new era’ of learning, there
were many more who saw the emerging science as nothing more than a threat; a catalyst to
the erosion of their value system. The prevailing concerns over wellness, in an era before
antibiotics, created a vulnerability to charlatans and opportunists, as anxious women took the
lives of their families into their own hands, never knowing if the latest 'cure' would also be
the last.\footnote{46}

Patent medicine was not a new phenomenon in America. English medicines were
frequently imported for use by the consumers of the eighteenth century. Patent medicines had

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\footnote{44} Edwards, 160  
\footnote{45} Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Richard Owen: Victorian Naturalist* (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1994), 256  
\footnote{46} Edwards, p.154
their origins in Europe of the seventeenth century. Royalty granted “letters Patent” to individuals, which allowed development of industry, business, and new discoveries, and afforded monopoly privileges for a specified number of years. Although it is unclear when English patent medicines began arriving in the New World, Young notes, “By the 1750’s the names of several old English nostrums were appearing fairly frequently in the advertising of colonial apothecaries, not only in Boston, but in other colonial towns.”

It was not long however, before American apothecaries smelled opportunity and began concocting their own. Their initial efforts were given a healthy boost by the ban on importation from England during the American Revolution, and increasing customer demand. But apothecaries did not have a monopoly on the market. After the Revolution, America's herbal bounty, as well as the exoticism of those ingredients alleged to be in Indian remedies, provided the impetus for American entrepreneurs to create their own medicines and tonics, a practice that escalated rapidly in the nineteenth century. The secrecy involved in the creation of special formulas prevented many creators from seeking patents, so as not to have to disclose their ingredients. Few were forthright in presenting their ingredients for consumer perusal, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the market was flooded with elixirs.

It was a time of flux for all, but women in particular found themselves challenged with maintaining an established domestic economy while being confronted by shifting expectations both in the home and in the larger world. As the chief decision makers for

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48 George B. Griffenhagen, and James Harvey Young. Old English Patent Medicines in America (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1959)
consumable goods used within the home, they were faced with a growing proliferation of choices, each promising to be better than the last. While women labored to create comfort and health for their families, they had few role models.\textsuperscript{49}

In 1875, an unassuming woman from Lynn, Massachusetts quietly stepped into the void, with a product that promised health and happiness for women; their particular and delicate concerns were her specialty. Her name was Lydia Estes Pinkham. Pinkham herself is an enigma. Though anecdotal representation abounds, and the business and financial records regarding the Pinkham enterprise are copious, there is little hard documentary evidence regarding her as a person. What little is known about her, must be gleaned from her interactions with her family and community, the causes she held dear, and the individuals she chose to spend her time with. One of the most extensive descriptions of her is found in the

\textit{Municipal History of Essex County in Massachusetts, Volume 3}, which states,

“those who knew Mrs. Pinkham describe her as a woman of tall, slender, graceful figure, with a kindly, attractive face., which bespoke grace and beauty of character. Devotion to her family was her ruling trait, and to the last she preserved a remarkable alertness of mind. At the age of fifty-seven she was the winner of an old-fashioned spelling bee, spelling down every competitor. The last one to go down before her was a young man, who later became her son-in-law and manager of the business which bears her name. In her business she gave advice free to all inquirers, a department that grew to such proportions that in one year she and her staff of women assistants received and answered one hundred thousand letters.”\textsuperscript{50}

At this juncture, it is important to know more about the Pinkham family, and how the company started.


\textsuperscript{50} This figure has appeared in other places, though its accuracy cannot be proven. \textit{Municipal History of Essex County in Massachusetts, Volume 3}, edited by Benjamin F. Arrington, Lewis historical Publishing Company, 1922
Conception: In which the Pinkham family of Lynn, Massachusetts has an idea

Lydia Estes was born on February 9, 1819, in Lynn, Massachusetts, where she would spend most of her life. Born to a Lynn shoemaker and a radical Quaker, Lydia was the tenth child of twelve. Lynn was a working class town, known for its concentration of shoemakers. What had begun as a small web of artisans, rapidly expanded in the 1830’s, increasing production by two-thirds. Soon, large numbers of men were employed at Lynn’s factories. Lynn was rapidly becoming a bustling city. It boasted the state's first electric trolley, a railway system that opened in 1875 and carried travelers to Boston, and a string of summer homes for the well heeled along the coast. The state of Massachusetts would soon become home to a burgeoning patent medicine industry. Nearby Lowell, another industrial city, was home to four well-known manufacturers: C. L. Hood and Co., creator of Hood's Sarsaparilla, J. C. Ayer, creator of Ayer's Cherry Pectoral, Carleton and Hovey’s Father John's Medicine, and the ubiquitous Moxie, created by Dr. Augustin Thompson. The market for patent medicines was heating up, as brisk business served to engender competition for customers.

During her formative years, Lydia was exposed to a continuous parade of reform minded individuals. Lynn was a city of growing diversity. The Estes family strongly supported the

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52 Years est. Hood, 1876, Ayer, 1843, Carleton and Hovey, 1855, Thompson, 1885
53 In the year 1919, “of the 102,000 people in Lynn, 45,000 are foreign born, and though the census gives 6,000 as the number who are unable to read and write English, Mrs. MacLean estimated the number to be nearer 15,000. There are considered to be representatives of forty-one races of foreign born in the United States and of these she has met twenty-six in Lynn.” John Albreer, Secretary. *Annual Report of the Secretary*, January 8, 1919. The Register of the Lynn Historical Society.
abolitionist movement. Frederick Douglass was a close friend of the family, and Lydia’s sister Gulielma, was ostracized from the local church due to her fraternizing with him. Lydia’s upbringing in such a liberal environment gave her the impetus for her own involvement in the abolitionist movement. The Lynn Anti-Slavery Society organized on April 25, 1832, and at the age of sixteen, young Lydia joined.54

After spending a number of years as a schoolteacher, Lydia met Isaac Pinkham, a shoe manufacturer. They were married in September of 1843. Their first child, Charles Hacker, was born on December 23, 1844. Isaac’s increasing involvement in speculative financial enterprises continually put the family in financial straits. With the Lynn shoe industry growing, and the population booming, Isaac invested heavily in what he believed to be the next big, and sure, thing - real estate. Stage notes, “he changed occupations as often as some people changed clothes.” His unassailable faith that a pot of gold was just around the next corner, surely influenced his children, and helped to create in them the notion that belief and success were inseparable. Fortunately, they would also inherit their mother’s strong work ethic.55

The young couple continued to have children, one dying in infancy, then three more in succession, Daniel Rogers, William Henry, and Aroline Chase. With so many mouths to feed and uncertain finances, Lydia was clearly under a great deal of strain. Her increasing interest in spiritualism may have been indicative of her need for a core of stability in her life. Lydia’s mother had been interested in the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg, and it was likely that Lydia had developed an early interest in things of the spirit. An apocryphal story claims that stability was soon to arrive in the guise of a twenty-five dollar debt that was owed to her.

54 Stagep.21
55 Ibid. p.25
husband. In lieu of payment, a “Lynn machinist named George Clarkson Todd,” 56 made good on his debt with a formula for an herbal elixir that allegedly assisted the female body in managing all manner of ills. 57 As home brewed concoctions were the norm for nineteenth century mothers, Lydia added it to her canon of prescriptions, not realizing how soon it would be pressed into service. 58

As her husband’s get-rich-quick schemes continued to flounder, Lydia quietly concocted batches of her elixir on her stove, and provided them gratis to friends, relatives, and acquaintances, to rave reviews. By initially giving her product away, Pinkham utilized what has been proven to be an effective marketing technique, especially for a nascent business. Whether she was conscious of this is unclear. By all accounts, before the decision was made to market the compound, she shared it freely out of a desire to ease the womanly suffering she knew so intimately herself. In Treatise on the Diseases of Women, it says, "Without money, but with a hopeful heart, she made up little batches of this remedy to give to neighbors and friends whom she felt could be relieved by it." 59

If nothing else, Isaac's persistent optimism encouraged his sons to trudge along, helping out with odd jobs, while they waited for the Pinkham ship to float into harbor. At least in Isaac’s case, it never did. The Panic of '73 destroyed him. Heavily invested in real estate on

56 Ibid. pg. 27
57 This story is reported in most renderings of the Pinkham story. Though no hard evidence exists to support this claim.
58 Pinkham may have based her remedies on formulas on those in John King’s American Dispensatory, first printing,1854, a well known and popular reference. It is uncertain which edition she had, possibly the 1870 one. Stage, 90 LEP 546
59 Apparently, she was on to something. A contemporary example of the effectiveness of this method, lies in Debbie Field’s story, the chocolate chip cookie entrepreneur, who handed out her cookies free of charge, to boost sales. Forbeswoman 11/20/2012. http://www.forbes.com/sites/learnvest/2012/11/20/how-to-build-a-multimillion-dollar-company-the-story-of-mrs-fields-cookies/2/
extended credit, he lost everything. He did not work again, but would continue to provide stability to their home life and emotional support to the family’s new endeavor.60

Women would often arrive at the Pinkham household from Salem and the surrounding communities after hearing of Pinkham’s formula. Her sons, quite rightly, saw that money was to be made in the patent medicine market, and suggested to their mother that her medicine had as good a chance as any at selling. The Pinkhams made their first official sale of Lydia's vegetable compound and an enterprise was born. At first, Lydia may have been resistant to the idea. She saw her compound as an extension of her own public service, a neighborly charity she willingly offered to those in need, her own personal ministry. It likely did not take long for the rest of her family to convince her, however, of the extension of good the family could offer by expanding into a true business, thereby supporting themselves while assisting the public attain better health and well-being.61

Thanks to Isaac's fervent belief in the fellowship of good hope, the entire family got behind the project. The boys spent their after-work hours - they worked full-time to help put food on the table, and Aroline worked as a teacher- going door-to-door with printed handbills, saturating local neighborhoods and eventually expanding into Boston. Unfortunately, they saw only a few orders for their efforts. It was when Lydia herself took to writing lengthier instruction 'manuals', a practice that would continue after her death and be one of the reason's for the company's great success, that things began to take shape. Lydia's genius was her direct appeal to women – she artfully positioned herself, and the advice she

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60 Jean Burton, *Lydia Pinkham is Her Name* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1949),67
61 Stage,31
gave, as sensible, no nonsense, and authoritative. Whether this was intentional or not, she came across as an honest and wise family woman who cared.62

In the basement kitchen of Western Avenue Lydia brewed the compound daily, the family gathering in the evening after their assorted jobs, to bottle it together. Isaac, still respectfully and lovingly regarded as the head of the family, although a broken man, would read aloud or fold brochures as they worked.63 No decisions were made without his input. Jean Burton notes it was the "Pinkham habit to decide unanimously on a course of action," and Lydia included him in all business matters.64

Mrs. Pinkham's involvement in every step of the manufacturing process is evident in the detail found in her personal formula book.65 Leaving nothing to chance, her attention to uniformity of the product and quality control may have been one of the reasons she enjoyed such a consistent customer base. Many products on the market were unreliable in both contents and efficiency, as they could vary from batch to batch. Herbal components are notoriously difficult to work with, and though not tested and documented in the nineteenth century, the amount of active constituents can differ from plant to plant. Pinkham appeared to intuit these discrepancies and strove for consistency. In the Treatise on the Diseases of Women, she writes, "I do not believe in mercury, arsenic, and the host of mineral poisons which are found in so many remedies. When taken into the system they disturb every

62 Burton, 72
63 Stage, 31
64 Jean Burton, Lydia Pinkham is Her Name (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1949), 68
65 LEPC, Box 180, 536
function, interfere with the most vital processes, and produce the most disastrous consequences."

Obviously, the initial pressing concern for the Pinkham family was profit and financial solvency, but by all appearances, Lydia Pinkham believed that she had created a product that offered genuine relief to women for their concerns. This was evidenced in her insistence on crafting and giving the product away to friends and neighbors long before the family thought to market it. What is known about Pinkham regarding her strong abolitionist stance, her insistence on a good education for her children of both sexes, and her caring attitude towards a husband who had been sidelined by financial disaster, speaks volumes about the woman herself. The Pinkham product appealed to many segments of the female population, but one demographic in particular stands out, that of working women. As Lydia Pinkham lived and ran her business in a working class town, she had no illusions about the difficulties that women faced in the workplace. Her goal was quite simple; to frankly address those health concerns that were particular to women, and offer them products designed to alleviate them. By turning her enterprise into a family business, she offered a model for an alternative to the encroaching threat of industrialism, and by keeping her business local, she set an example that others might do the same. With sales continuing at a steady but slow pace, the family settled on a new strategy. It was time for Dan to take to the road to peddle the product, and he set out for Brooklyn.

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66 Lydia Estes Pinkham. *Treatise on the Diseases of Women*. Lynn, Mass., U.S.A.: Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co., 1904. As this was printed after Pinkham’s death, it is unclear whether Lydia herself uttered these words, or they were merely attributed to her, based on the author’s knowledge of her ideas.

67 Burton, p.76
Travails: In which Daniel Pinkham goes to Brooklyn and wears out his shoes

Dan Pinkham was diligent about writing to his brother Will at home while he was in Brooklyn, New York, soliciting accounts with druggists. He writes from the post office, “I’ve just had to let up bummimg pen and ink at the P.O. for it has just closed, but I might as well keep on writing. I’m pretty tired tonight, worked pretty hard yesterday and today. Thunder! I forgot to back my envelope over to the P.O. so I shall have to back it with lead pencil.”

The early success of the Pinkham product had a great deal to do with Dan Pinkham’s ceaseless promotion, the product's resultant advertising, and its subsequent placement in apothecary shops. But there had to be a driver behind the pharmacist’s willingness to take on yet another elixir, in a market already glutted with products, many of which purported to offer the same cures. Pinkham’s Brooklyn letters give evidence of a possible reason. He simply refused to accept failure. Though optimistic, there were times when his frustration at the lack of progress was evident, ”I should think you would know that my shoes are all out by this time. Now I will recite my expenses of yesterday to you - I should think you were all crazy.” He wanted to make a profit as much as the rest, and would even stoop to blatant fabrication in order to do so. While in New York Pinkham became more aware of the competition’s products and how they were being marketed. He writes,

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68 D.R.P. May 5th, 1876 (MC 181 3118)
69 D.R.P. Sunday 10 AM (MC 181 3118)
Brother Will: -

“I think there is one thing we are missing it on, and that is, not having something on the pamphlets in regard to Kidney Complaints, as about half of the people out here are either troubled with Kidney Complaints or else they think they are. I think you better put something about Kidney Complaint of both sexes in very conspicuous type on the first page where it says, "Guide for Women" and have quite a sentence as it won't then seem so much out of place to hand one to every man and woman too.”

Yet, Pinkham cannot be given all the credit. Compelling advertising can convince people to make an initial purchase, but a business cannot survive without repeat customers. The adage holds, it is far more difficult to make an initial sale, than it is subsequent ones, providing you give the consumer a reason to come back. The fickle nature of the purchasing public in any era is well known, and it is more difficult to move a product with little financial support. The product proved to be a harder sell than expected, due to the delicate nature of its claims. According to Dan Pinkham, Women did not want to purchase something that so blatantly spoke of problems such as “falling uterus.” They were uncomfortable with the frank language of the advertising, which is evidenced in Dan's letter of May 5, “As a general thing now the men make no bones of reading it, but if you happen to look at a woman while she is reading it she is likely to tear it up." This comment illustrates an understanding on Dan’s part, of the social expectations of women, and how they affected their behavior. The fact that a woman would feel compelled to hide what she was reading, simply because it discussed bodily functions is an indicator of the times.

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70 D.R.P. May 5 6 1/2 PM (MC 181 3118)
71 DRP, May 5, 6 1/2 PM. MC 181 3118
Gradually those barriers were weakened, thanks to consistent and widespread advertising, and an increasing public discussion of women's health in advertising and women’s magazines. The matter of fact language used in the Pinkham advertising and publications—a four page pamphlet was included with the product, which graphically addressed women's bodily functions—may have assisted in opening up a discourse regarding women's health issues and options for treatment. This constant exposure, not only to women, but to the general reading public, put women's anxieties about their health in the public eye. What had previously been kept behind closed doors, was foisted directly into the marketplace.72

The Lydia Pinkham advertising campaign was timed perfectly. That it may have been dismissed as less than serious, did nothing to lessen its appeal. Embarrassed as they may have been to see their personal anxieties 'outed' in public, Pinkham's no-nonsense approach, and seemingly earnest promise to answer each personal inquiry, created a relationship of sorts with the very customer she wished to reach.73

When examining the advertising for these products it becomes clear that a 'hook' is important. While many of them claimed to cure the same ills, the need to differentiate their product from the rest of the pack demanded something extra. For the Pinkham family, that something extra was Lydia herself. In 1879, Dan came up with the brilliant idea of putting Lydia’s picture on the packaging and an icon was born. The calm but authoritative image of a grandmotherly figure on the box made it stand out on the crowded shelves. Her image of soft

72 Of note here is the fact that the company did not change their tactics due to sales resistance, they simply waited for them to become effective. Ironically, this was likely due to the cost of changing advertising materials more than any deliberate strategy.
73 An important premise of salesmanship, now and then, recognizes that the initial relationship established with the customer matters far more than the initial sale. If the customer is comfortable with you, they will come back for more, something Pinkham seemed to know intuitively.
femininity and wisdom gave the product the identity it needed to reach the female market. The company invested heavily in advertising, not only in newspapers and flyers, but in booklets and pamphlets that offered health advice, along with a serving of recipes and household tips. People participated in a lifestyle when they bought into the Lydia Pinkham world.74

Women were growing increasingly dissatisfied with the medical options open to them. A byproduct of the new advances in science and medicine was the shifting function of the hospital itself. Once known for serving charity cases, they soon became a destination for the well heeled to seek the latest advice regarding their health from physicians, who were increasingly spending time abroad to further their training. While Paris contributed to a new understanding of pathology, Germany excelled in its exacting laboratory methods. Male practitioners returned, particularly from Germany, to disseminate the latest techniques, still unavailable in America. The dichotomy in medical care soon became evident in the increasing gap of treatment based on means and class structure.75

Doctors trained abroad, were the treatment of choice for those who could afford them, while patent medicines, like the Pinkham product, were marketed to, and primarily consumed by, the working class, who were no longer welcomed at the hospitals. This is not to say that

74 A search on the Library of Congress Website of Historic American Newspapers, for Lydia Pinkham, turned up 56,879 entries for the years 1836-1922 only. Adjusting these years to align with the Pinkham business beginning in 1875, that amounts to more than 1200 ads a year, in a small sampling of papers. Multiplied by the extensive scope of advertising milieus, the numbers are truly staggering.
wealthier patients did not consume medicines; they did, often those compounded by their physicians, which may have been equally dubious in quality and efficacy.\textsuperscript{76}

Ironically, Pinkham advertising chastised the professional medical community for pursuing dangerous treatments while it actively sought physician's testimonials and support. The addition of a medical man's endorsement lent credibility to the product's claims, at least in the eye of the consumer. They also opened the door to placement in druggist shops. A precarious alliance existed between pharmacists, who carried both prescription and proprietary medicines, and the doctors and nostrum makers who promoted them. Physicians and patent medicine producers, though outwardly discrediting one another, depended on each other's questionable practices to bolster their own claims and reputations.\textsuperscript{77}

In nineteenth century America, medical education, like medicine, was far from standardized. Most medical schools were proprietary institutions, with meager facilities and nonexistent laboratories. There were generally three ways students could obtain an education; through an apprenticeship to an established practitioner, through attendance at physician owned schools where the student directly paid the physician/instructor for the courses in which he was enrolled, or at universities which generally offered a more broad curriculum of instruction. The end result of these differing approaches was a disparate and inchoate medical community. It boasted of practitioners with uneven skills and a rather aggressive market mentality that saw doctors competing for the ‘best-paying’ patients. It would seem that

\textsuperscript{76} The marketing to specific class structures can be seen in an overall examination of the Pinkham advertising. There is a concentration of advertising in magazines and newspapers that catered to the working class, farm wives, and the African-American and immigrant communities.

\textsuperscript{77} Young, James Harvey Young.,\textit{The Toadstool Millionaires; A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation} (Princeton.: Princeton University Press, 196), 206
America would never quite break from its early market values. “With its pragmatic acceptance of a medical market-place within liberal political values, Anglo-American medicine diverged from the continent.”78

Late nineteenth century medicine was still in the nascent stages of learning to bridge this gap. With medical advances occurring rapidly, the drive to assimilate new knowledge could crowd our compassion. Women, children, and the poor, were often the first to suffer, perhaps one of the reasons for the concurrent rise of a number of social and religious agencies designed to assist these segments of society. A rapidly increasing population brought its own set of problems, not least of which, was poverty and disease due to the lack of much-needed sanitation developments, particularly in urban areas. Industrialism and capitalism coalesced to create diverse social anxieties regarding health and well-being. Deficits in sanitation fostered epidemics and fear, especially in areas such as factories and workplaces where close contact for long hours was the norm. Falling ill created a twofold problem for workers and bosses, as sickness meant missed wages, and remaining at work spread germs to others. Physical dangers in the workplace were a constant concern. An increasingly informed public was beginning to demand more reliable medical care and the trained physicians that went along with it. Porter notes in a remark attributed to William Osler79 in 1894, “The physician without physiology and chemistry… flounders along in an aimless fashion, never able to gain any accurate conception of disease, practicing a sort of popgun pharmacy.’” It is clear from this remark that Osler was all too aware of the work still to be done.80

79 William Osler was one of the four founding physicians of the Johns Hopkins Medical School. Three of the original class of eighteen that began their studies in 1893, were women.
80 Porter, 305
Advice literature proliferated as ladies magazines became popular and offered their own brand of advice. In a piece in Godey's Ladies Book, February, 1857, the following reflection citing a need for women in medicine appeared. "One of the Twelve Reasons why more attention should be given to the general diffusion of physiological and hygienic knowledge among the present and prospective mothers of our country; and why ladies should be educated for the practice of medicine among their own sex and children"

"Because thoroughly educated female physicians can relieve and remove suffering of a vast and increasing number of the most delicate and refined of their own sex, many of whom, from an instinctive sense of propriety, too often endure their tortures even unto death, rather than submit to the necessary treatment by the male physician." 81

To gain a clearer understanding of the questionable and painful practices women were subject to, a glimpse into what these methods entailed is in order. It must first be noted that as the nineteenth century progressed, so did the methods and practice of gynecology. Yet, heroic methods were still heavily utilized, and a perusal of mid nineteenth century gynecology manuals provides some shocking and rather disturbing examples.

In the earlier part of the century, the practice of bleeding was still commonplace, and often the first line of action for numerous ailments. Women who presented with difficulties of the womb, or those attributed to it, were perfunctorily treated with leeches, both externally and internally. Gynecologist James Henry Bennet writes, "the leeches should be put into the speculum and pushed up close to the cervix by a plug of sponge or cotton; they are thus imprisoned in the instrument between the cervix and the plug." If the leeches failed to do

81 Sarah J. Hale – “The Editor's Table”, Godey's Ladies' Book, Feb. 1857
their job, Bennet noted the physician may resort to caustics, such as silver nitrate, acid nitrate of mercury, or nitric acid. With treatment like this, it is not surprising that a woman would reach for a bottle of Pinkham's.82

As is illustrated by the following, male physicians were not the only problem. The cultural expectations of the time, not only hampered women's accessibility to health care, but cast aspersions on those women brave enough to trust in its dubious methods. The letters of Emma Spaulding, written in 1873, illuminate one of the more difficult obstacles women faced in obtaining proper health care; their husbands. The prevailing cultural attitudes called into question a woman who entrusted a male physician with treatment of her more ‘delicate’ matters. In her letter of August 7th she wrote,

“I remained supposing that my husband would be delighted to hear that there was so good a prospect of my being restored to sound health. The Dr. gave no more indication of sensual feeling or of thinking that he was doing anything indelicate than he would if he had been treating my face or my hand. If he had shown passion, do you think so meanly of me as to believe that I could not and would not instantly have repulsed him and left for home? Why have you sought to humiliate your wife, and injure yourself by such dreadful suspicions as you have cast upon me. I was safe both because I could have detected the designs of a passionate man in the very beginning and defended myself, and because no physician of the character and standing of Dr. Saunders or indeed of any standing in the medical fraternity would compromise himself by offering insult to his patients, much less by overcoming them by brute force.”

Emma’s story is by no means unique. Women often suffered in silence rather than be treated with suspicion by those they cared for. Although the letters from Emma’s husband are

82 James Henry Bennet, "A practical Treatise on Inflammation of the Uterus, its cervix, and Appendages and on Its connection with Uterine Disease" 1853. 223, 234-235
 unavailable, it is not difficult to see the kind of predicaments some women were faced with when attempting to care for their health.\textsuperscript{83}

During the middle of the nineteenth century, the previously established ideals of collective health as a representation of national robustness, gave way to a more personalized vision of health and well-being, in the Northeast in particular. With the advent of cheaper and more accessible print culture, and the resulting increase in advertising for medicines, products, and programs of all stripes, the consuming public began to equate personal fitness and health as a desirable commodity as well as an attainable goal. Rising industrialism, particularly in urban areas, created new and pressing anxieties regarding its effects on both personal constitution and the domestic economy. The wake of the Civil War left large segments of the population with lingering injuries and chronic ailments of both body and spirit, which allopathic medicine could do little to assuage. As common ingredients in available patent medicines were narcotics and/or alcohol, it is easy to understand their appeal. Coupled with their low cost and accessibility, it is unsurprising that the use of opiates in America peaked at this time.\textsuperscript{84}

As the growing distinction between the domestic realm and the world of commerce drew more men into the marketplace and away from the fields and home-based economies, the fabric of society and the relations between the sexes began to shift in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. There was a strong cult of domesticity in the nineteenth century, due in part to the shifting family dynamic. Yet, the idealized Victorian picture of marital bliss was not the reality for a large segment of the population. The responsibility for routine medical care often

\textsuperscript{83} Emma Spaulding Bryant to her husband, John Emory Bryant. \textit{John Emory Bryant Papers}, Special Collections Library, Duke University http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/bryant/1873-08-07.html

\textsuperscript{84} Verbrugge, p.39
fell on the woman. Used to caring for her children, it was a natural extension of her role to ‘doctor’ her husband and even friends and neighbors. The reform minded culture created a climate in which women often extended this care into the community caring for the poor and indigent.  

As the country industrialized, the expectation that the man would work outside the home to provide for his family, increased. It was equally expected that the woman would stay home to create a sanctuary for her children and her husband. There was an underlying assumption that having children was an expected and desired state of affairs for the lady of the house. An inability to have a child, the blame that went with it, and the dreaded label of the 'barren woman' was challenged outright by a publication in 1902 by the Pinkham Company, which stated, “The reason why some wives do not have children may be entirely the fault of the husband.” Although it is unclear who wrote the booklet, or whether Lydia herself had written it earlier, such assertions regarding fertility were groundbreaking for the time, especially when considered in light of contemporary understanding of the era. In *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*, Michael S.Kimmel notes that it was not until the 1970's, that there was "a shift in thinking about causes of infertility as well as the role reproduction plays in the human psyche. Until recently, men were excluded from consideration in the fertility picture because the problem was considered a female one.

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86 Not only was the woman accused of being responsible for her state of childlessness, she was likely considered to be hysterical as well.
Expert opinion suggests that women were to blame for infertility for millennia precisely because the idea was too humiliating for men to consider about themselves.  

As women at home struggled to find their place in a changing world, the women who worked in the marketplace were dealing with difficulties of their own. Social pressures here too, created expectations of behavior and decorum that were often difficult to maintain. The Pinkham company promoted their products to working women with ads like this,” “I am a machine operator by trade and am on my feet all the time. before I began taking leave I was unable to work for a certain time each month. I suffered awfully and had to come home. A friend of mine told me of your medicine and now I am fine and in the best of health. You may use my name and I will answer any letters written to me.’ Miss Agnes Morrissey,119 Wade St, Fall River, Mass.” In the nineteenth century, women who worked were suspect. The notion that there were single mothers, who had mouths to feed, was not considered a seemly topic for discussion. Mixed messages were everywhere.

89 Fruits and Candies, Lynn.:(Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co. undated),14
Quickening: In which the portrait of Lydia Pinkham inspires confidence in countless women, resulting in an outpouring of laudatory testimonials, which may or may not be genuine as the following story suggests.

When Frances Wynne arrived for her shift at a Simpson-Crawford department store on Sixth Avenue, she was unprepared for the reception she was met with. Her co-workers gave her pitying looks or avoided her altogether. After a few days of this treatment, she began receiving letters of condolence from friends, who were pleased she had finally "found relief." Frances was stymied. She was even further confused when her co-workers began making fun of her. Presently she was taken aside by her supervisor, and a Miss Tierney, the cashier, and given the surprise of her life. They showed her two newspaper ads, which displayed a picture of her in an advertisement for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. Underneath her picture was the following:

"Miss Elizabeth Wynn, of no. 205 8th Avenue, New York City writes,
'Dear Mrs. Pinkham, For months I suffered with dreadful headaches, pain in the back, and severe hemorrhages. I was weak and out of sorts all the time. Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound helped me when all other medicine had failed. It seemed to be just what I needed and quickly restored my health.'"90

Although the name had been changed slightly, and it was not her address, it was most definitely her face in the advertisement. Frances Wynne filed suit against the Pinkham Company for ten thousand dollars in damages, for appropriating her picture and

90http://2.bp.blogspot.com/pinkhamad.jpg
misrepresentation. She claimed that she had never taken the medicine and that "the advertisement caused her life to become unbearable." What was revealed in court, was that Miss Tierney had been complicit in the event. Earlier, she had introduced Frances to a "customer," a Miss White, who was so taken with Frances' beauty that she suggested she have some free pictures taken, and she would receive all but one, which would be kept for the photographer's portfolio. Frances agreed. As she had won a recent beauty contest, she was likely comfortable being photographed. Miss White was in the employ of a James T. Wetherall, an advertising agent hired by the Pinkham company. Miss Tierney admitted that she had written the testimonial herself and forged Frances' signature. She also admitted that she had assisted Miss White in obtaining other testimonials. Frances was awarded six thousand dollars, but the advertisement continued to appear in other papers and Frances was "obliged to give up her employment."  

On May 23, 1907, The Outlook published the following. “Miss Frances Wynne, a saleswoman in a New York department store, was awarded damages in the sum of $6,000 for the unauthorized use of her photograph in an advertisement. The offending advertiser was the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company, manufacturers of certain widely and unpleasantly advertised remedies.”

This incident illustrates one outcome of what had become common practice in the competitive business of nineteenth century patent medicine. Companies routinely solicited testimonials in creative ways that often bordered on subterfuge. Counting on the fact that

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92 New York Times, Wed. May 13, 1908
people liked to see their name in print, it was not difficult to find willing converts, as evidenced in this testimonial from a Pinkham advertising booklet, “I hope to see my name published with those other women who have been helped by your medicines.’ Mrs. A. J. Clayton, 506 Madison St, Syracuse, NY.”94 As patent medicine companies often hired brokers, they could feign ignorance if discovered, although in the Pinkham case, it is unclear how the defense responded. As the adage goes, any publicity is good publicity, and the success of the Pinkham enterprise demonstrates that notoriety is not always a hinderance to profits. Perhaps the fact that there was a lawsuit at all, is indicative of the company's popularity and success, as few people would go through the trouble of suing a company without assets.95

Who wrote the ads in the early years? Burton suggests it was Pinkham herself, although there is little definitive proof. Considering that Dan was kept busy wearing out his shoes on the pavement of city streets, it is likely that the assertion is true, perhaps assisted by the rest of the family. Much of the imagery in advertising targeted to women presented an idealized version of nineteenth century living, particularly in the domestic realm. Cherubic children and blissful mothers sold everything from "Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup" to baking products. Pinkham's early pictorial ads stood out. Featuring the no-nonsense visage of the company's founder, they conveyed a clear message of authority and approachability.96

The vehicles that patent medicine purveyors used to reach their public were prolific and at times awe-inspiring. Realizing that traditional print culture such as newspapers and

94 Fruits and Candies, Lynn.: (Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co. undated)
95 "Physicians generally should take note of this case, since few newspapers are likely to publish an account of it, because of their advertising arrangements with the Lydia E. Pinkham medicine company.” Chicago medical recorder, Volume 30, January 1907.376
96 Burton, p.72
magazines would not necessarily reach a portion of their target customer base, Pinkham resorted to posters, trade cards, and utilitarian household items, such as tape measures and sewing kits emblazoned with the company logo. Each time the lady of the house reached into her sewing basket, she was reminded that she had an ally who understood her feminine travails, by the reassuring image of Lydia Pinkham on her tatting shuttle.\textsuperscript{97}

But the most common advertising ploy during the nineteenth century was still the testimonial. If your friends and neighbors waxed poetic about the latest nostrum, why, you would be a fool not to try it too! Patent medicine dealers counted on just such a scenario, but how did they get these testimonials? A number of methods were used. The first, was simply asking customers for them. The pot might have been sweetened by a gift of product or even a small amount of cash, but for many people, the lure of a moment's fame was enough. Patent medicine men also utilized brokers, as seen in the Pinkham case, who procured testimonials for them, or simply made them up. Young notes that testimonials from “plain everyday working people,” were more valuable than those of the well known.\textsuperscript{98}

Often the Pinkham testimonials invited the reader to contact the happy customer to confirm the testimonial's validity. It is unclear if this ever happened, and if so, what the result was. A notice in \textit{The Daily Inter Ocean} invites its readers to “Write to Mrs. Lydia E. Pinkham, 233 Western Avenue, Lynn, Mass. for names of ladies that have been restored to perfect health by the use of her Vegetable Compound. It is a positive cure for the most stubborn cases of female weakness.” One has to wonder whether the ladies who read \textit{The

\textsuperscript{97} These items are much sought after collector’s items today.
\textsuperscript{98} James Harvey Young, The Toadstool Millionaires; A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation.. Princeton©Princeton University Press, 1961), 188
*Daily Inter Ocean* and other publications considered themselves weak before reading the advertisements. 99

Testimonials, whether genuine or not, ultimately helped to create a 'sisterhood of suffering' amongst women as "Mrs Smith" or “Sadie Jones” could look at the daily paper and see that someone in her very own town shared her affliction.100 Even if the women were fully aware-and one has to assume they were- of the possible falsity of the advertising, it worked, as the sales records show. 101 A Pinkham advertisement in 1903102 concludes with, "5,000 $ forfeit if we cannot forthwith produce the original letters and signatures of above testimonials which will provide their absolute genuineness."103

The Pinkham Company claimed that they received thousands of letters from satisfied customers, eventually employing a small army of women to answer them. In *Lydia E Pinkham her Life and Times*, Hubbard states, "In one year over a hundred thousand letters asking such advice were received. Mrs Pinkham left at her death voluminous notes, in her own handwriting, relative to these inquiries."104 The Pinkham advertising consistently encouraged women to write to Mrs. Pinkham with their health concerns, and she would "answer" them. This tradition carried on many years after her death, until the *Ladies Home Journal* published an exposé in which a photograph of Lydia Pinkham’s gravestone showed the world she had been dead for more than twenty years. The company simply stated that

99 The Daily Inter Ocean, (Chicago, IL) Thursday, February 24, 1881; pg. 8; Issue 290; col F
100 This phenomenon is not unlike today’s Internet message boards designated as 'health forums' where fellow sufferers can commiserate and hopefully support one another.

102 The Sun, Fort Covington, NY, Thursday April 23, 1903
103 It would be interesting to know, especially in light of the above story, whether anyone ever took them up on their offer.
104 Elbert Hubbard, *Lydia E. Pinkham: Being a Sketch of her Life and Times*, The Roycrofters.1915 p.30
certainly they meant the "other" Mrs. Pinkham, Lydia’s daughter-in-law, and undaunted, customers continued to write.\textsuperscript{105}

"And so the letters began to arrive from every quarter. Now hundreds of these letters are received every day. More than a hundred thousand were written in a single year. Every one is opened by a woman, read by a woman, sacredly regarded as written strictly in confidence by one woman to another. Men do not see these letters." Note here that it mattered little whether men saw the letters or not, as they would become public with allegedly real names when they were used in advertising.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{105} Stage, 163
\textsuperscript{106} Lydia Estes Pinkham, \textit{Treatise on the Diseases of Women}. Lynn, Mass., U.S.A.: Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co., 1904. Although the author is purported to be Pinkham herself, this was copyrighted in 1901, and 1904, eighteen and twenty-one years respectively, after her death.
Although it is tempting to see Pinkham with a decidedly feminist slant, crediting her with a willful determination to change the face of women's health care, there is little evidence to support this theory. It is more likely, that whatever changes were wrought due to her actions, were unintentional by-products of the Pinkham advertising campaigns. Pinkham cared about women, and their health, but it would be erroneous to say that she had a specific agenda in mind. She simply believed that she offered a quality product that could help women, and consumers were able to intuit this fact. To imply that women at the time were overly susceptible and actually believed all of the advertising does a disservice to both Pinkham and her customers. She was a shrewd businesswoman, and she took advantage of the sensational advertising of the day to sell her product. In the midst of reform-minded health movements, the standard ads, dramatic though they were, still worked. It is almost as if women felt trapped between two worlds, and in a very real sense, they were. Not quite regarded as citizens in their own right, but on the brink of change, women of the late nineteenth century struggled to find their place in society and in the home.

Did Pinkham and her product change the climate of women’s healthcare? Not in any quantifiable way, yet the frank and continuous public discussion of women’s health issues in print, helped to create a climate where women may have felt more comfortable seeking out what they needed to care for themselves and their families. Unlike contemporary cultural
icons, who hawk merchandise based on a desired 'lifestyle,' the Pinkham response was based on neither lifestyle nor celebrity, but the appearance of sound sensible advice, dispensed by a homespun figure, in a marketplace of conflicting opinions. Pinkham's personalized approach appealed to women who were used to confiding in, and advising one another regarding their 'ailments.' She publicly granted women the permission to ask questions about the perfectly normal functions of their bodies. In a rapidly industrializing era, her placid image harkened back to simpler times, times in which family, and home, and the idea of a grandmother brewing 'simples' on her stovetop elicited comfort and stability.

The Pinkham family did not create the business in the spirit of altruism - clearly it was a business model from the beginning. But in the process, the Pinkham enterprise helped women. Whether the product's popularity was due to the connection women felt to Lydia herself, or its composition, remains to be seen. The unintended result helped to change the way women viewed their bodies and promoted participation in their own health-care. As the culturally conditioned squeamishness at Lydia Pinkham's frank manner abated, and women became more comfortable asking questions, the desire to understand their bodies, over-ran Victorian modesty.

The surprising success of the Lydia E. Pinkham Company was not in its financial accomplishments, though that is what is generally considered, as it was after all, a business. Dan Pinkham’s skill in promoting a product that was similar to many on the market, and single-handedly carving out a niche for it, before resorting to the hiring of an advertising agency, stands out. But the ultimate surprise lay in areas usually not mentioned. The Pinkham Company advertising is remembered for the frank and unashamed language of the
literature itself, as it supported the initial and tentative steps, toward a more open and public
discourse regarding the female body and its functions.

The world of nineteenth century medicine was complex and evolving. The rise of the
Lydia E. Pinkham Company was by no means unusual. The fact that it was orchestrated by a
woman and addressed needs that were specific to the female population was. Its incredible
popularity, and Pinkham’s subsequent elevation to what can only be called cult status belie
cultural expectations and women’s roles at the time. The true surprise is subtle, and one that
can only be understood in retrospect. Pinkham’s appeal brought increasing public awareness
to the problems in nineteenth-century women’s healthcare by using frank language to discuss
the natural functions of women’s bodies. In an age where women’s complaints were
routinely blamed on hysteria or wrong thinking, Pinkham offered another option. Though
still clothed in the dramatic and misguided terms of the day, such as 'fallen womb' and
'deranged organs', the Pinkham advertising, put women’s bodies front and center in the
public eye and gave women a grandmotherly figure to look to for guidance. If this demure
looking grandmother could publicly discuss female anatomy, well, they could too. It was
certainly a start.
More research is needed into the cultural dynamics of self-dosing and alternative medicine. With growing frustration at the rising costs of health care and the depersonalization of the doctor-patient relationship, Americans are seeking options. The rising popularity of alternative medicine can no longer be ignored, but until the back pocket alliance between big pharmaceutical companies and medicine is challenged, little will change. Simply put, there is not enough profit in "vegetable compounds" anymore. Ultimately the rise and fall of the patent medicine industry and its replacement by pharmaceutical juggernauts demands closer inspection. There are many questions to be answered, and communication is the key.
Appendix

Original Formula- Lydia E. Pinkham Company
Vegetable compound
8 oz unicorn root
6 oz life root
6 oz black cohosh
6 oz pleurisy root
12 oz fenugreek seed
for 100 pints
“sufficiently strong of spirit to keep from souring and suitable to place on the market
For 1000 bottles of compound, we use 27 gallons of alcohol; this includes all the alcohol
used, soaking and all…If the medicine has a high percentage of alcohol it settles quicker.”107

Current Formulas- NuMark Laboratories108
Lydia Pinkham Herbal Liquid Supplement with Vitamins C&E
Lydia Pinkham Herbal Tablet Supplement with Iron, Calcium, and Vitamins C&E
Proprietary blend
Motherwort (Leonurus cardiaca)
Gentian (Gentiana lutea)
Jamaican dogwood (Piscidia erythrina)
Pleurisy root (Asclepias tuberosa)
Licorice (Glycyrrhiza glabra)
Black cohosh root (Cimicifuga racemosa)
Dandelion (Taraxacum officinale)
Liquid- addition of Vitamin C 20mg. and Vitamin E 5mg, per Tablespoon (Dosage-1 T 3x
daily)
Tablets – addition of Vitamin C 20mg, Vitamin E 10 IU, Calcium 166 mg, Iron 2 mg. per
two tablets (Dosage- 2 Tablets 3x daily)

Lest men be left out, there were products for them too. An ad in The Denver Evening Post
boasts, “Weak Men, do not despond, CALTHOS will restore you…Over one hundred
thousand sufferers of lost manhood in all its most terrible forms have been cured.”109 The
name, Calthos, may have been derived from the Greek kalathos, which refers to a type of
basket or container, often symbolizing fertility.

107 LEPC, Box 180, 536
108 NuMark Laboratories, 164 Northfield Avenue Edison, NJ 08837
109 The Denver Evening Post, (Denver, CO) Saturday, September 23, 1899; pg. 3; col C
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Abbreviations used

DRP – Daniel Rogers Pinkham Letters

LEPMC- Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company Records, 1876-1968

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