Medicines:
Amateur and Professional Doctors

SASSAFRAS WAS COMMON IN parts of the Black Swamp, but none grew in our immediate area. Many there, however, were familiar with it; they regarded sassafras tea as an invaluable tonic, and they drank quantities of it every spring. The beverage was made by pouring boiling water over roots or bark, brought in and sold in town by street vendors and grocers. All youngsters welcomed this “medicine” because they enjoyed its taste and smell.

The same cannot be said for the mixture of sulphur and cream of tartar that was administered to some in early spring. This was supposed to “purify the blood” and put one in top physical condition, after he had endured the hardships of winter. The nice thing about these two old-fashioned medicines was that, while they probably did little good, they were practically incapable of doing any harm.

Some families used a cough syrup made by steeping clean hickory bark in water, then boiling it with sugar. It was not only agreeable to the taste but it helped in relieving coughs. Mother had three favorite prescriptions for severe colds or “grippe.” One was hot buttermilk with a
big dash of ground ginger, well sweetened; another was hot lemonade; the third was a big onion, baked in its skin, salted, and buttered. All were pleasant to take, and all seemed to help some, especially if administered while the patient sat with his feet immersed in a basin of hot water, his legs wrapped in a heavy blanket. Deep-seated colds were often treated by rubbing over the chest a mixture of turpentine and lard, then covering the area with a flannel cloth. A "blood medicine" was made by placing sliced horseradish roots in a jug of sweet cider. This was a potion that young patients could enjoy taking. They even liked to eat the horseradish after the cider had been consumed.

Each summer some of the older women collected a supply of native medicinal plants, including boneset, pennyroyal, and catnip. Tea made from either of the latter was regarded as an excellent medicine for stomachache. Catnip-and-fennel tea was considered a sovereign medicine for colic in babies. For earache dried pennyroyal leaves were sometimes packed into the bowl of a tobacco pipe and lighted. Then someone blew through a cloth over the bowl and directed warm smoke into the affected ear. This treatment often afforded relief.

On many family medicine shelves was a glass-stoppered bottle of spirits of camphor. Fumes were inhaled when one felt faint or nauseated. The spirits were applied to affected areas for the relief of headache. Castor oil was a standard medicine. Many, including doctors, had great faith in calomel, followed by Epsom salts, as a trustworthy medicine for numerous ailments. Kerosene was used in some instances for treating frightening seizures of croup. It was swallowed by the patient, a few drops on sugar in a spoon. About every family had its bottle of "Pain Paint."
which was used for numerous disorders, including "cholera morbus" and stomach cramps. Another popular medicine was "Dr. Smith's Catarrh Remedy." Whatever its value as a remedy for catarrh, it was an excellent wash for cuts and burns. Ready at hand beside these medicines, one would find a bottle of "spavin cure" or other powerful liniment for the relief of sore joints and muscles of man or beast. Often there was also a bottle of glycerin, used mainly for sore, chapped hands at corn-husking time.

Patent medicines—tonics, bitters, nerve remedies, cathartic pills, vermifuges, salves, ointments, cough drops, and headache tablets—were bought and kept at hand. At that time some drug houses were advertising and marketing "consumption cures," all totally worthless, with a cruel potential for arousing false hopes in victims of tuberculosis. Others were foisting upon gullible purchasers proprietary medicines whose fleeting, sham therapeutic effects were due solely to a high alcoholic content. Disillusioned victims of the tobacco habit could buy a drug preparation that allegedly would relieve them of all craving for the weed. Apparently, it could be effective only when taken with regular, massive doses of will power.

Two or three of our schoolmates at times wore red yarn tied about their necks; this was supposed to prevent nosebleed. It was by no means unusual to see boys with attacks of "side-ache," induced frequently by running or fast walking, stop suddenly, lift a clod, spit where the clod had lain, then carefully replace the clod. Silly as this may appear, it was effective, presumably because the act of bending over expelled an excess of blood from internal organs. A number of pupils in school wore for weeks at a stretch little cloth bags suspended by strings about their necks. The asafetida
that the bags contained was intended to ward off diseases, even smallpox. Unquestionably, this would have been effective if all the bugs responsible for disease had a sense of smell, for the stuff was quite malodorous. At times we plugged holes bored in horses' feed boxes with asafetida; it was supposed to prevent distemper. We also used pine tar for this purpose.

Every winter epidemics of such children's diseases as mumps, chickenpox, measles, and whooping cough occurred. Few parents worried much about any of them, apparently thinking that since all children would get them eventually, the sooner this occurred and brought natural immunity, the better. No one in our school had the "seven-year itch" or head lice, but both appeared among pupils of other schools. No case of smallpox was ever reported in our immediate neighborhood, but a few times there were outbreaks not far away. Then, on the advice of family doctors, nearly everybody was vaccinated.

Tuberculosis took many lives. No medicine, no treatment, was known that could stop its inroads. Diagnosing a case as "consumption" was tantamount to pronouncing a sentence of death. A few victims of the disease went to Colorado or Arizona, having been told that the climate there might have beneficial effects. The outcome was the same, whether they went West or remained at home; a steady wasting away, a decline in strength and vitality, and finally, death. Typhoid fever also caused many deaths. Cases of malaria we knew about were few. The story was altogether different during a long period after settlement of the region began. To the old-timers malaria was "ager" or "chills and fever." It was long believed to be caused by miasmatic emanations from swamps and stagnant water.
(The original meaning of "malaria," of Italian derivation, was "bad air.") Few of the pioneers escaped this disease, marked by chills, fever, and prostration. In some cases, it was said, even dogs became ill. Without quinine, historians of the period tell us, it is questionable whether settlers in some of the wettest areas could have hung on long enough to provide drainage and so win the battle against mosquitoes, eventually found to be carriers of the blood parasites responsible for the disease.

About 1854, outbreaks of Asiatic cholera, then sweeping the country, occurred in Ohio. The disease struck hard in the Black Swamp region, being carried in by travelers on canal packets. Populations of some canal towns were almost completely wiped out.

Fair weather or foul, doctors made their rounds, riding in buggies or sleighs behind sturdy horses that in emergencies could step off the miles pretty fast. Many of their trips must have been severe ordeals because of deeply drifted snows, ice, floods, rough, rutted roads, or seas of mud. For a long time hospital facilities were lacking; there were no clinics, no laboratory technicians, no X-rays, and few trained nurses. All babies were born in family homes. Doctors did what they could with what they had, and they made it, on the whole, a commendable job. They filled their own prescriptions from stocks of drugs on office shelves or from supplies they carried. Some of their medicines were in powder form, and each dose, carefully measured, was separately wrapped in paper.

One winter my brother suddenly fell ill. We had no telephone, but somehow we got word to our doctor. A foot of snow covered the ground, and the thermometer stood near zero. Within a short time Dr. Hines drove in. Wearing a
heavy buffalo-skin coat, a fur cap, huge fur gloves and arctic overshoes that buckled up to his knees, he tied and blanket ed his horse. Then, big pill bag in hand, he came stamping in. He warmed his hands at the stove, then went to the patient’s bedside. Unhurriedly, he studied and examined the sick boy. Outside the room, he told us it was a case of pneumonia. He wrote directions on some envelopes and placed in them medicines from his case. He gave detailed instructions for the patient’s care and assured us as he left the house that he would be back at the same time the following day. The lad was really very sick. But, thanks to the care of the doctor, thanks to careful nursing by our parents, who followed instructions to the letter, he passed the crisis and within about a fortnight was recovering rapidly. This doctor was such a stickler for studying and weighing symptoms that some called him “Granny” Hines. We were glad that he was that kind of doctor. Probably no man of medicine, at that time or since, could have handled the case better, due allowance being made for the fact that some of the drugs now available are vastly more effective than any known then.

Little was done to correct defects of vision. Not only was medical knowledge of the eye and eye troubles limited, but a much larger proportion of eye abnormalities went unsuspected and undiscovered than in later times. One rarely saw spectacles worn by anyone who had not reached middle age. Generally, they were used only for reading and close work. Some bought their “specs” from itinerant peddlers who carried them, with other merchandise, in their packs; others bought them from stores in town. In either case the buyer made his selection by trying pair after pair, until lenses were found that seemed to restore good vision.
The small oval glasses were mounted in inexpensive steel frames. The usual cost was about twenty-five cents.

No one we knew suffered from total blindness, but the sight of some very old persons was almost destroyed by cataracts. A farmer near us was handicapped for years by eyes that were inflamed, watery, and functionally very deficient. They were believed to have been injured by poisonous dust from grain being threshed. A youth who lived near our farm was one day cutting up a yarn ball when the blade of his knife, accidentally deflected, punctured an eyeball. His doctor used leeches to clear up an infection that developed. Finally, he was fitted with a glass eye.

A small number of people lived a full span of years and retained nearly all of their teeth, sound save for the natural wear of use. The less fortunate majority, however, beginning early in their lives, suffered from tooth troubles. Their natural teeth, sometimes patched and repaired, often with wide gaps between them, might serve until middle age; then they had to resort to “store” teeth. Some never visited a dentist except to have bad teeth extracted and to be fitted with artificial grinders. Others had their teeth inspected and cared for at regular intervals. Dentrifices and tooth brushes were in much less common use than in later times. A man who lived well past the age of seventy, retaining all of his teeth in sound condition, attributed their preservation to a daily scrubbing with soap and water on a cloth.

Occupational hazards have always existed for the farmer. They have increased in number as the use of machinery has increased. Early manufacturers of farm machines made them reasonably safe and foolproof; later manufacturers
have given even greater thought and effort to assure those qualities. Yet, through the years, farm machines have caused a great many casualties. Carelessness or ignorant operation can be blamed in many cases; too often built-in safety devices are ignored.

A young man we knew was mowing in a hayfield when a heavy wad of green grass became entangled on the cutterbar of the mower. As he worked to remove it, the horses moved forward a step or two. The knives caught his arm and mangled it so badly that he was crippled for life. This was not the fault of the machine; there was a clutch in the gearing that drove the cutting blades, but he had neglected to disengage it. At a later period another man was driving a tractor when a leg of his overalls caught in the rotating shaft of the power take-off. Instantly, most of the clothing was ripped from his body and wrapped on the shaft. In all probability, if the garments he wore had not been old enough to tear easily, he would have been whirled and beaten to death. Here, again, negligence was responsible—he had failed to cover the shaft with the safety guard provided by the manufacturer. A thresher lost an arm at the elbow when it was caught in the gears of a steam engine he was operating. Reasonable precaution could have prevented this accident.

Boilers of threshing engines could blow up. No little danger attended the use of the threshing machine. Arms, hands, or clothing might be caught in belts, cylinder, or other moving parts. Shredders, used for husking corn after it had been cut and shocked, occasionally maimed or severed hands or arms. Mechanical pickers, which husk ears from standing corn, are fully as dangerous.

Serious trouble could result if a mower or other machine tore into a nest of bumblebees. The insects, bent on re-
venge, would attack furiously. If the horses were stung, great presence of mind and skillful maneuvering on the part of the driver—often also being stung—were required to avert a runaway that could be disastrous to man, horses, and machine. The only safe procedure was to keep a tight grip on the reins and hustle the whole outfit from the scene as fast as possible.

Working in timber may involve considerable risk to life and limb. A shifting wind or a miscalculation in the use of saw and wedges in felling a tree may cause it to go down prematurely or in a direction different from the one planned. In falling it may break off branches and hurl them with great force. In his youth my father was one day chopping in the woods when his ax caught in an overhanging branch. This deflected the blow and the sharp bit split open his kneecap. Blood poisoning that ensued nearly cost him his life. After the wound finally healed, the joint remained stiff and painful, a permanent handicap.

Farmers commonly rubbed the budding horns of calves with a dampened stick of caustic potash and thus prevented the development of horns. Mature cows whose horns had been allowed to grow were not dangerous to humans, but if they were too prone to hook other animals, it was a common practice to saw off the horns. Bulls were often allowed to grow horns because the appendages helped to establish the breeding of the animals, but horns greatly increased the hazards of working around them. With or without horns, bulls tend sooner or later to become belligerent. To be on the safe side, we inserted a brass ring through a hole cut in the lower septum of the animal’s nose and fastened it there permanently. This is such a tender spot that it is easy to control the most unruly bull by keeping a good grip on the ring.
We once sold a young bull to a neighbor, warning him that the animal, not yet adorned by a nose ring, was becoming cross and would bear close watching. Brandishing a length of heavy fork handle, he assured us that he would be able to manage. After being driven a few hundred yards the bull, planting his feet firmly, assumed a very menacing attitude. Up went the stick and with a resounding whack it was laid squarely across the bovine forehead. The bull fell as if struck by lighting. A minute or two later, blinking rather foolishly, he staggered to his feet and allowed himself to be driven away, meekness personified.

Mature boars grow long, sharp tusks as wicked and formidable as those of their wild forebears. This makes them a serious menace to other animals as well as to humans. To disarm a long-tusked animal, we maneuvered him into a ruggedly built pen and lured him with corn to a point where we could slip a strong lasso-like rope over his upper jaw. Then, closing the noose and drawing him close to a stout post, we knocked off the vicious teeth with a hammer.

The tip of a hog’s long, pointed snout is as tough and wear-resistant as rubber. It is ideally designed and built for digging and plowing into the ground. The equipment of course is an inheritance from wild ancestors that lived largely by foraging under the surface of the ground for grubs and vegetable growths. It would be ruinous to fields to allow hogs to root at will—given even a slight incentive, an ambitious porker can burrow deeply over a large area in an incredibly short time. So the farmer makes sure that all of the root is taken out permanently early in the pig’s career. This is done by inserting and closing securely in place a small steel ring right through the tough cartilage that forms the cutting edge of the porcine snout. The ring thereafter spoils all the pleasure and fun of rooting.
The hog is an extremely stubborn and suspicious animal. Though he will not always fight to defend himself, he will readily take up the cudgels in defense of another individual of his kind, even though the two may be anything but friends. If we caught a pig for any reason and it began to squeal, or if one somehow accidentally trapped sent up a raucous protest, we had to keep a wary eye on all others of the tribe because, though we might be humanely aiding the squealer, there was real danger that part or all of them would attack us.

Buck sheep often become cross, but their victims are likely to suffer more from upset dignity and a sudden burst of anger than from physical injury. They attack by making a swift run and butting an unsuspecting human, preferably from the rear. They are hesitant about attacking a grown man, but a boy who goes near one will do well to keep a sharp eye on him. A buck we had once advanced toward me with pronounced hostility. Seizing a broom, I poised it at the ready above my head. Taking that as the challenge he hoped for, he dashed at me full tilt like a white charger. I swatted forcefully; but before the blow landed, his head struck my midriff with resounding impact, and I went down for the count.

Rattlesnakes and moccasins were occasionally reported in the region, but we never saw any. Garter snakes were common. There were some water snakes, a few spotted "house" snakes (often called milk snakes because of a popular notion that they sucked milk from cows), and a few blue racers, the latter mainly in fields and woods. These reptiles were non-poisonous, all actual allies of the farmer because they destroyed many rodents. Cornered, some might bite, but they were incapable of doing real harm to man. Nevertheless, most people feared them as
much as if they had been venomous, and killed them on sight. One of the boys at school became expert at catching garter snakes in his hands. At times he amused himself by using them to frighten girls. Finally, by a quick jerk similar to the movement in cracking a whip, he would snap off their heads.

Here and there poison ivy grew over fences or on trees. Some fortunates, with natural immunity, could work about it and handle it in perfect safety. Others were so susceptible to the poison that merely walking near a plant would cause their skin to break out in a rash accompanied by intense itching and burning, which induced great discomfort. Many suffered from accidental contact with some part of the plant, living or dead. In one instance a case of blood poisoning developed when a tormented victim scratched open an inflamed patch of skin.

Dynamite, used extensively for blasting out stumps, was treated with such respect that no accidents occurred. Recalling the toy cannons that some of us made and used on the Fourth of July, I am forced to the conclusion that a merciful Providence must somehow have intervened to save us from maiming or destruction. We made them from pieces of gas pipe or from long, large-caliber rifle shells anchored to blocks of wood. Loading them with black powder, we set them off with matches. Fireworks were cheap and plentiful. Quantities were used, but no one was hurt, and no fire damage occurred.