

# The Marketing of Patent Medicines in Lincoln's Springfield

by James Harvey Young\*

By the mid-nineteenth century, the marketing of patent medicines in America had become a flourishing and highly competitive enterprise, forcing proprietors to pioneer a broad gamut of psychological appeals in advertising. To gain a foothold and expand their areas of sales, nostrum promoters also sought diligently to place their products in as many outlets as they could.<sup>1</sup> Some features of the complex marketing system that developed appear in a slender sheaf of correspondence received between 1847 and 1853 by a drug firm in Springfield, Illinois, from various proprietary manufacturers and jobbers.<sup>2</sup>

By 1850, Caleb Birchall and Thomas Jefferson Owen had formed a partnership to operate a store on the south side of Springfield's square to sell drugs, medicines, perfumery, books, stationery, and notions. This venture succeeded Birchall and Goudy, a similar store. Birchall, originally from Pennsylvania, was a bookseller and, like his fellow townsman, Abraham Lincoln, an ardent Whig. Owen was a druggist, descended from the first French settlers in Kaskaskia. His father had been Indian agent in Chicago during the Blackhawk War, and he himself had recently served as a hospital steward and acting surgeon during the Mexican War. Lincoln was numbered among Birchall and Owen's customers.<sup>3</sup>

Springfield in 1850 was the state capital and an important mid-sized town in the booming Midwest. In the patent medicine trade, Birchall and Owen acted as wholesaler for the surrounding territory as well as retailer for the citizens of Springfield. The drugstore's sources of supply were many and varied.

Some proprietary medicines came direct from their manufacturers. In 1847, for example, the Baltimore concern of Mastin & Whitely had persuaded Birchall and Goudy to vend three products concocted by one Dr. Martin who had long practiced on the Eastern shore: a Compound Syrup of Wild Cherry, a Universal Purgative Pill, and a Fever and Ague Tonic. These products went by rail to Cumberland, Maryland, from there to Wheeling, in Virginia, and then on to Beardstown, Illinois, from whence the Springfield drugstore was to secure them. Pamphlets accompanied the medicines for distribution among "Customers & Neighbors," as did the text of an advertisement for publishing "in your Almanac, or in some good paper having extensive circulation." The manufacturer wanted the merchants to know that a Methodist bishop from Maryland, who had taken the medicines to his benefit, soon would "travel in Illinois."

Other eastern manufacturers, especially in New York and Philadelphia, solicited custom from the Springfield concern. Included was the New York branch of the British-made Medicated Fur Chest Protectors, "the Great Preventive of Consumption and Unfailing Cure for Pulmonary Diseases," and Waterproof, Anti-Consumptive Cork Soles, for wearing inside boots and shoes, a medicated "antidote to disease." American agents for another British product, Holloway's Ointment, also sought to interest Birchall and Owen. Some companies sold not only their own, but other producers' wares. Radway & Co. of New York, for example, sent an 1852 price list that encompassed not only Radway products but virtually all the noted nostrum trade names of the time.

Birchall and Owen also bought, or more often took on consignment, patent medicines

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distributed by jobbers in Chicago and St. Louis. The Chicago firm of Brinkerhoff & Penton served in 1851 as regional general agent for Morse's Compound Syrup of Yellow Dock Root, which they sold for \$7 a dozen bottles or sent on commission for \$8 a dozen, accompanied by circulars, show cards, and the promise of adequate advertising. Two years later, the proprietor of this syrup

druggists, "and push it right through."

The most detailed and complex relationship with a proprietary manufacturer revealed in the Birchall and Owen correspondence involved John Bull & Company. Coming to Louisville as a boy, John Bull grew up there, having sequential connections with various pharmacists, and launching his first patent medicine, a Sarsaparilla, in the 1840s.<sup>4</sup> Other



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cancelled its relationship with the Chicago firm and sought to deal directly with Birchall and Owen. Asking that current accounts be settled, Morse expressed hope that the Springfield drugstore would continue to stock the syrup. Some of the product had soured, Morse admitted, due to the neglect of the foreman, and if Birchall and Owen had any such losses Morse would make them good. The New York firm sent copy for an advertisement, asking Birchall and Owen to have it run for a year in one or two Springfield papers. Morse also asked for the names of other Illinois druggists who would be responsible agents.

Similarly, E. K. Woodward of St. Louis acted as general agent for a large-scale New York entrepreneur, the Graefenburg Company. A St. Louis manufacturer, James McLean, dealt directly with Birchall and Owen regarding McLean's Volcanic Ash Liniment for man and beast. "[T]ake hold of this Liniment," the proprietor admonished the

nostrums followed: a Bitters, a Cough Syrup, a Spring Tonic, a Worm Destroyer, and the King of Pain, "TENTH WONDER OF THE WORLD, and the greatest blessing ever offered to afflicted humanity." Bull diligently worked at expanding his market. He set up an office in New York City, probably moving there in 1855, but returned to Louisville several years later. Bull was one of the few southerners to devise a private die proprietary tax stamp under the Civil War Revenue Act that remained on the books until 1883. In postwar days Bull's business boomed, and the sale of his nostrums survived their proprietor, who died in 1875.

Bull's association with Birchall and Owen came during his salad days, when he was striving to expand Sarsaparilla sales beyond the Louisville region and north across the Ohio River. In May 1850, the Louisville company shipped twenty dozen bottles of Bull's Sarsaparilla to the Springfield drugstore at a cost of \$6 a dozen, mailing an

*The proprietor of Morse's Syrup, first of Providence, later of New York, copyrighted this poster while his product was stocked for sale on the shelves of the Springfield drugstore of Birchall and Owen. (From Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.)*

invoice on which were printed several "Rules."

Every three months Birchall and Owen was obligated to report the sum of its sales, deduct charges for advertising, freight, and the cost of distributing pamphlets and circulars, and remit the balance either by private conveyance or by mail. The Springfield firm also had to provide Bull with data on the cost of advertising in appropriate newspapers—a column of matter to be changed twice a year—and, when instructed by the manufacturer, make contracts to run such advertising. Moreover, pamphlets and circulars sent by the company had to be "distributed FAITHFULLY AND HONESTLY" to "every house in your town or city," placed "in every Wagon that comes to town," and be put in "places of public meetings, School Houses, &c."

Soon Bull was sending Birchall and Owen a new supply of freshly printed circulars and two examples of column-long advertisements, which were in the process of being stereotyped. "If you will inform us," the proprietor wrote, "how many papers you have in your district that you wish to advertise in we will send your plates."

These advertisements illustrate Bull's bountiful boasting and histrionic hyperbole. "I have in my poverty relieved more human suffering than did Stephen Girard or John Jacob Astor with their millions," Bull boasted, citing a Louisville paper that supported this remarkable claim. His Sarsaparilla, he asserted, was "hailed by the afflicted with demonstrations of joy," and had "formed an era in the medical world." Bull disparaged competitors by name and added testimonials and a catalog of therapeutic claims. Clergymen and physicians played dominant roles as testifiers, but praise also came from an "accomplished lady," the wife of a doctor, who was cured by Bull's Sarsaparilla—after her husband's efforts had failed—of "prolapsus uteri, fluor albus, piles, . . . chronic diseases of the stomach . . . and

derangement of the whole system." Other ailments which the Sarsaparilla would "Cure without Fail" included cancers, consumption, dropsy, erysipelas, rheumatism, syphilis, diseases from the use of mercury, and "Exposures or Imprudence in Life."

Soon Birchall and Owen had gone beyond being Bull's sales outlet only in Springfield and had become exclusive agent for as many Illinois counties as the firm saw fit to conquer. Only "the River Counties" were exempted, and in these both Birchall and Owen, and Bull Company representatives could work. "We much prefer," wrote the Louisville proprietor, "the plan of having one good general agent to so many doubtful small ones." Some sales were made in Birchall and Owen counties by Bull drummers already on the road when the agreement between manufacturer and Springfield drugstore was made. The company acted quickly to give Birchall and Owen credit for such sales.

Shortly a dispute over price broke out between the two parties. Bull had raised its price for Sarsaparilla to \$7 for a dozen bottles; Birchall and Owen protested, citing a rumor that another agent was getting Sarsaparilla for only \$5. Bull responded, "flatly deny[ing]" the report. The \$7 itself, the company argued, was an extremely low price, one to which it was pushed by pressure of competition. Bull could not reduce that charge unless agents assumed the costs of printing and advertising.

After its vigorous launch, correspondence lapsed between the Louisville proprietor and his Springfield agent. Illinois sales of Sarsaparilla evidently did not develop as briskly as both parties would have desired. At any rate, Bull & Company was obviously dissatisfied when Birchall and Owen, on January 1, 1852, submitted payment of \$243.28 to settle accounts for the year just ended. Because the agency agreement with the Springfield drugstore was "not paying" Bull, the company wrote, the manufacturer

Recd at D. of S. Mar. 18. 1850.

Loaga June 5. 1847



**MORSE'S  
COMPOUND SYRUP OF  
WEEBON DOCK ROOT,  
FOR PURIFYING THE BLOOD, &c.**

This compound will remove and cause a permanent cure of all diseases arising from an *impure state of the Blood*, such as SCROFULA, which presents itself in a variety of forms; SALT RHEUM; KING'S EVIL; PIMPLES on the FACE; BLOTCHES; ULCERS; ERYSIPELAS; RING WORM; CONSTIVENESS; SUPPURATION of the GLANDS; MERCURIAL DISEASES; DYSPEPSIA; JAUNDICE; LIVER COMPLAINTS; DROPSY;  
*General Debility; Colds; Coughs; Giddiness;*  
and remove every taint, from whatever cause it may arise, and completely  
**Renovate the System.**

Taking into consideration the *salubrious effect* of this medicine, together with the *quantity sold for the price*, it renders it decidedly the *cheapest preparation in use.*

As far as this article has been used it has superseded all other preparations ever offered to the public for the above complaints.

This medicine is put up in quart bottles, with the words—'MORSE'S CELEBRATED SYRUP, PROV. R. I.' blown in the glass, and sold for ONE DOLLAR per bottle, or six bottles for FIVE DOLLARS.

*Prepared and sold, wholesale and retail, by the Proprietor.*

**C. MORSE, Jr., DRUGGIST AND APOTHECARY,  
167 (formerly 55) Broad Street,  
PROVIDENCE, R. I.**

Copy Right secured.

Young's Print



## HOLLOWAY'S OINTMENT.

*Hippocrates helps Holloway, a British nostrum merchant, sell his Ointment on the prairies of Illinois. (From a circular in the Birchall and Owen Papers.)*

desired "to bring it to a close." Bull asked Birchall and Owen to make an offer on twelve-month terms for the Sarsaparilla remaining in the hands of its agents and told the Springfield concern to discontinue all advertising for the product. Bull would be glad if the Springfield drugstore would continue to stock Sarsaparilla, but the terms must be different from those in the terminated agreement.

Whether or not Birchall and Owen accepted Bull's new proposal we do not know, for here the correspondence ends. Nevertheless, the fragmentary correspondence provides an illuminating glimpse into some

early American proprietary marketing practices.

### Notes and References

1. James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (Princeton, 1961), 106.
2. The collection was acquired by the author from a dealer in Springfield in 1954.
3. Biographical information on Birchall and Owen was provided by the late Harry E. and Marian D. Pratt and by Roger D. Bridges of the Illinois State Historical Society.
4. Biographical information on Bull comes from Richard F. Riley, "New Historical Light on Dr. John Bull," *American Philatelist*, 88 (1974): 142-44, and Henry W. Holcombe, *Patent Medicine Tax Stamps*, [George B. Griffenhagen, compiler] (Lawrence, Mass., 1979), 68-70.

