

# Kemp's Balsam

by Lynne Belluscio

A couple of years ago, I passed up a postcard with a photograph of a horse-drawn wagon that was owned by Orator Woodward for his Kemp and Lane medicines. The asking price was nearly \$150 and I'm sorry, but that is far too much for a little postcard, no matter how rare. So for the past year I have been watching another Kemp's Balsam postcard on eBay, but it was still over \$50 and I still wasn't sure I wanted to commit that much money.

The card would appear and no one would bid on it and it would disappear, and then be offered again. I finally contacted the seller and said that the historical society was very interested in the card and would he consider a lower price and much to my amazement he agreed. So the unusual postcard has come into our collection.

I've written about Kemp and Lane a couple of times before. In 1883, twenty-seven year old Orator Woodward bought the formula for Kemp's Balsam and began manufacturing patent medicines in a couple of rooms over the F.T. Wilcox Store on Main Street. In 1891 he moved his operations further down Main Street to the Kavanaugh block and bought the rights to Lane's Tea, Lane's Cold Tablets, Kemp's Laxatives, Sherman's Head Ache Remedy and Raccoon Corn Plasters.

Woodward sold his medicines

from horse-drawn wagons and at least one, if not more, were manufactured by the famous Abbot-Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire. (Of course, you all know that in 1899, he bought the rights to Jell-O from Pearle Waite for \$450 and he probably painted over all his medicine wagons and made them into Jell-O wagons.)

When I bought the Kemp's Balsam postcard, it was noted that one of the men was holding a fox. Well, all of us here took turns looking at the alleged fox with a hand lens and I believe that the fox is really a raccoon -- for Raccoon Corn Plasters. Anyone who has known someone with a "pet" raccoon knows that the cute little masked bandits become pretty vicious critters. (I have a personal vendetta against them, since last month a momma raccoon and her family of "cute" little ones dug a hole into my chicken house and dined on a dozen of my chickens!) So I have to wonder if the raccoon on the salesman's lap isn't a stuffed prop.

Last year, we were fortunate to receive a very unusual collection of papers in a large tin chest. Several years ago, they had been found on the curb ready to be thrown away and they were rescued. The papers include patents and registrations for many of the Woodward medicines. So I pulled out the papers on Kemp's Balsam which includes an

original copy of the label registration 3.158 dated March 23, 1883 issued by the United States Patent Office. Attached is a copy of the bright green label.

Also in the file are copies of the recipes for Kemp's Balsam. First you combine 34 gallons of water with 200 pounds of sugar and 56 gallons of glucose. But the "active" ingredients are frightening. First there is 2 ounces of tar emetic which is a very powerful emetic that is used to induce vomiting. Then 8 ounces of oil of tar which is used as a pulmonary and intestinal antiseptic -- and supposedly is better than pine tar. Next there is 6 quarts of chloroform. That certainly would calm a cough!

The recipe also calls for 2 quarts of squills and I had to do a little searching for that. It seems that squills are small medicinal plants with blue flowers. (I think I have some growing in my front yard.) The juice of the bulb is extracted with ethanol and is used as an expectorant in a variety of cough medicines. Then 2 quarts of hydrocyanic acid are added to the concoction. This is not stuff that should be in any "medicine"! Known as Prussic Acid, it is a

very potent poison.

Finally there was 5 pounds of sodium salicylate, which is used to suppress pain, and is a cousin to the active compound in aspirin. People who have a reaction to aspirin are often given sodium salicylate. The recipe seemed to stay the same for several years, but in 1917, the recipe included 1 1/2 quarts of caramel -- as if more sugar would cover up the prussic acid and the oil of tar and chloroform!

After reading the ingredients I couldn't help but remember an old adage that went something like "It's not the coughing that will carry you off, but the coffin they will carry you off in." I suspect that a little Kemp's Balsam went a long way, but it certainly encourages me to look a little closer at the active ingredients in the cough medicine on the shelf.

