

The Man Behind The Woman's Face

**The story of a medicine peddler who traveled many roads
except the one that lead to fame and fortune.**

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The serene face of a certain Victorian woman appears on trade cards for Mrs. Dinsmore's Cough and Croup Balsam almost as frequently as Lydia Pinkham does for her famous Vegetable Compound. Both products were made in Lynn, Massachusetts, the town whose medicines I collect and of which I am writing a book. While the life of Lydia Pinkham is well established, I wanted to know if the lady on the Mrs. Dinsmore trade cards was real and, if so, why she was unknown when the female medicine maker across town was famous throughout the world. Was there really a Mrs. Dinsmore? The story of how this fascinating puzzle was put together might make for very interesting reading at a future time, but for now, I present to you the story behind the face.

The die was cast for Alfred Dinsmore even before he was born in 1822. His Quaker parents had begat vigorously and Alfred found himself surrounded by fifteen brothers and sisters. Three of his four older brothers stayed home throughout their adult lives and farmed the family land along with their father, who himself refused to give it up until his 85th year. Although the family farm was located in the quiet rural town of China, Maine, the Dinsmores had a little city growing under their roof. Alfred needed, and probably wanted, to get off on his own and find his fortune.

In 1848 he married Hannah Somes, already a widow in her mid-twenties. Alfred became an inn holder in Waterville, not far from China. The location seemed a solid prospect because the train stopped in the town, which was making its mark as a lumber center. Down the road could be found O. C. Wright who was actually listed in the 1850 census as a quack doctor and another hapless soul who was also demeaned by the census taker as a "D-d Fool." Alfred employed one of his brothers as the inn's barkeeper, another man to maintain the guests' horses, and a young woman who probably shared the several duties of cook, waitress, and chambermaid with Hannah. The little inn and its staff were poised for success that never came. They were overshadowed by a much larger and more commodious inn a few doors away, and so Alfred and Hannah moved south.

Alfred next showed up in Hallowell, Maine, in 1851, where he was convicted of selling liquor without a license. Stubborn and apparently not discreet, he was convicted a second time in 1853 for the same offence. Earlier that year, Hannah gave birth to their first child, Moses.

Alfred and Hannah relocated still further

south to Portland and in 1858 Alfred was a restaurant keeper. Again the location seemed ideal for success. The restaurant was surrounded by businesses and boarding houses and once more was only steps away from a railroad station. It was in fact a huge station at a junction point of rail lines that coursed through New England and Canada. On the other side of the tracks were the docks that made Portland a major Northeastern port city. Sailors, travelers, longshoremen, train crews, and the like swarmed the area of the restaurant. Given Alfred's history and the rough-and-tumble nature of his customers, the liquor must have flowed lustily with (or without) the meals; whether he was licensed to sell the stuff this time is unclear, but unlikely.

While in Portland, Alfred and Hannah became parents to their second and last child, Benjamin Franklin Dinsmore. The Dinsmores disappeared from Portland as the Civil War broke out. Alfred next showed up in 1862, surprisingly, in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. Not surprisingly, he showed up there in court, this time for selling liquor on Sunday.

Dogged by the legal wrangles of selling liquor by the glass, but fully comprehending the widespread thirst for alcohol, Alfred tried his hand at selling medicine by the bottle. In 1864 he advertised his newest occupation as the General Agent for Sharp's Tonic and Alterative Bitters and Sharp's Balsam of Horehound and Aniseed. They were prepared by John G. Sharp, an apothecary in Saint John who proudly proclaimed his membership in the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain; it was an impressive credential – it just wasn't true. The storyline for the bitters was that Sharp had received the recipe from a medical staff officer who served for thirty-five years in India and China and found it

of great benefit to the British Army during the last twenty years. No such dramatic origin was offered for the balsam, but it is interesting to note that in 1841, when Sharp first started advertising medicines he had imported from London for his apothecary shop, he specified Ford's Balsam of Horehound and Powell's Balsam of Aniseed. He blended the two stated flavors to create his own mixture.

Shortly after Dinsmore became a salesman for Sharp's medicines, Sharp apparently died. Another Saint John pharmacist continued to make Sharp's medicines and at least a half dozen businesses were crowding the Saint John newspapers selling them, but Alfred Dinsmore saw a much bigger opportunity looming over his shoulder. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox in April and Alfred M. Dinsmore was back in the United States by May. He took his family to Cape Elizabeth, Maine, just south of Portland.

Alfred was now in the business of compounding and selling the medicine on his own, but had not established himself sufficiently to advertise or be listed as a medicine business in the Portland area. His personality might have gotten in the way of his product; in early 1866, one of Alfred's older brothers wrote to another brother, "I should like to have about a gallon of Alf's Bitters but I should not want [Hannah] to let me have them. He is too mean for me to deal with."

The Dinsmores borrowed and reborrowed against their home in Cape Elizabeth, perhaps to have funds to get the medicine business going. They then moved to a house in mid-state Carmel, Maine, that they purchased from yet another of Alfred's brothers. In 1870 Alfred was listed as a manufacturing chemist there. While this could mean he was concocting a variety of

products from shoe blacking to perfume, medicine was still his driving focus. The singular contribution of this sleepy backwoods location to Alfred's business plan was its proximity to a relative who had married well. Less than twenty miles away, Alfred's sister Sarah lived with her wealthy husband, Jesse Connor. By comparison, Alfred's estate was valued at \$2,300 when Jesse's was valued at \$35,000; and Jesse was constantly looking for new business investment opportunities.

Alfred and his brother-in-law formed the partnership of Connor & Dinsmore. For Jesse to be won over by Alfred to invest in a patent medicine venture might not have been too much of a leap of faith. Five out of ten of Jesse's neighbors were involved in medicine: there were two apothecaries, one homeopathic physician, one eclectic physician, and one "medicine man." There was also a medical student apprenticing with the homeopath, and a huckster (what

he huckstered is not recorded). Health was a growing industry and Jesse Connor was an opportunistic businessman. He was also prone to a hot temper and use of blunt language; nonetheless, by at least 1872 they were in business together, recognized as "merchants of patent medicines."

The focus of this enterprise was the balsam recipe Alfred had secreted out of Canada. The name he copyrighted was "Mrs. Dinsmore's Great English Cough Balsam of Hoarhound and Anise Seed For Coughs, Colds, Shortness of Breath, Asthma, &c.," but as there was not a bottle made that would fit all that, their bottle was embossed, MRS. DINSMORE'S / COUGH & CROUP / BALSAM / CONNOR & DINSMORE / PITTSFIELD, ME. [Figure 1] In 1998 several cases containing over 500 of these bottles were found in the cellar of a stable attached to a house in Pittsfield – all in mint, unused condition, still packed in straw. Many of the bottles

had sharp edges, pricklers, and fins from the glass-making molds. Most of the aqua, hinge-molded bottles suffered from weak embossing.

The early 1870s was not a good time to launch the new venture. The country fell under the strain of an economic depression. The complete lack of advertising for Connor & Dinsmore medicines suggests a lack of Connor's willingness to invest further in the business. The partnership struggled along from 1872 to 1876. The large cache of unused bottles suggests that the business venture ended abruptly. Perhaps the tempers that both men had exhibited had doomed their partnership before it had begun.

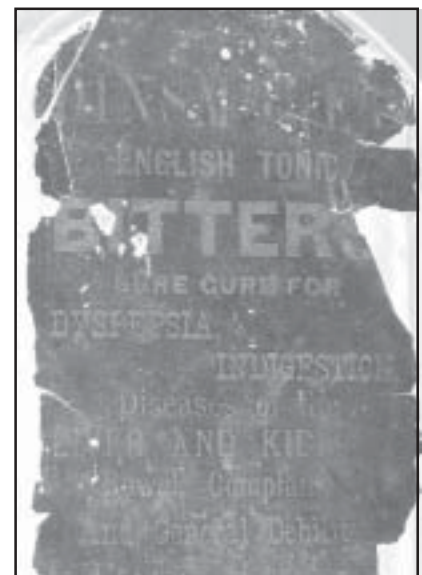
With the partnership severed and his funding gone, Alfred did what he did best: he put his family back in the wagon and zig-zagged across the map once again, this time ending up in Lynn, Massachusetts, the prosperous city that was home to the now well-known brand, Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. It is entirely possible that the family first stayed at the Lynn Hotel, an old establishment that had seen better days. It had become more of a boarding house than hotel and was run by Lemuel M. Brock, a successful, self-made businessman, just like Alfred Dinsmore wanted to be. Shortly after the Dinsmore's arrival, Lemuel Brock became Alfred's partner, purchasing a half interest in the Cough and Croup Balsam, which one nineteenth century account pointed out "was at that time struggling for an existence among the more widely advertised patent



Figure 1: First known bottle of Mrs. Dinsmore's Cough and Croup Balsam, ca. 1875. Over 500 were found in their original packing crates under a stable.



Figure 2: Mrs. Dinsmore's English Tonic Bitters, ca. 1878. Aqua, label-only, which makes this bottle all the more precious to me. Without the label the bottle is a common, with it, it is a treasure! Possibly the only remaining example? (Close-up of bitter's label on the right.)



medicines.”

Shortly after their 1877 arrival in Lynn, the Dinsmores relocated to a very sparsely populated section of neighboring Saugus where Alfred manufactured his patent medicines with Hannah listed as his chemist. Their two sons, now in their twenties, were still living at home, but were engaged in their own business ventures: Moses was a taxidermist and Benjamin made cigars. If the Dinsmore property was a multi-purpose workshop for Moses to eviscerate and mummify animals, Benjamin to make cigars, and Alfred and Hannah to mascerate, soak, and cook up plants for medicines, the pungent place could not have been remote enough for the neighbors' comfort.

Alfred and Hannah resurrected Sharp's Tonic Bitters, calling it Mrs. Dinsmore's English Tonic Bitters. They saved money by buying stock, unembossed aqua bottles and just gluing on a label. The label promised it was a “Sure cure for Dyspepsia, Indigestion, Diseases of the Liver and Kidneys, Bowel Complaints, and General Debility ... and are peculiarly suited to females.” [Figure 2] With Lemuel Brock's financial backing, they followed the Lydia Pinkham example and invested in creating a product image. An artist drew Hannah Dinsmore's face from a family photograph taken a few years earlier. It was an honest, although unflattering rendering of the plain, middle-aged, tired-looking Hannah Dinsmore. [Figures 3 and 4] This image



Figure 3: The Dinsmore Family, ca. 1870. The image of Hannah in this carte-de-visite photo was the basis for the illustration that was used in the product advertising. Left to right: Alfred, Benjamin, Hannah, Moses.

was transferred onto a trade card. So there really *was* a Mrs. Dinsmore, but it was her husband Alfred who had been trying for years to make the Dinsmore brand sell. The advertising copy inside this first Dinsmore trade card stated that the balsam had been in America for 20 years “and has only been advertised by parties that have used it.” This was all too true; the absence of advertising had always stopped Dinsmore's medicines from becoming a success.

In 1881, just a few years after they had tried once more to get the medicines off the ground, Hannah, “a most amiable woman, a good nurse, kind in sickness,” died of Bright's disease; it was a kidney ailment that her bitters were apparently unable to cure. Alfred sold the rest of his share in the business to Brock.

Alfred and his sons went back to where life had been kindest to them – Saint John, New Brunswick. Although Alfred had sold away the rights to his wife's face and his own name in association with a cough balsam, he felt sure he could succeed once again by selling Sharp's Balsam of Horehound and Anise-Seed like in the old days. He reestablished the partnership with his brother-in-law, Jesse Connor, and began the Sharp's Balsam Manufacturing Company. Their twelve-sided bottle was embossed SHARP'S BALSAM, and the label that wrapped around the remaining eleven sides promoted the product in French (“Baume de Sharp”) and English,

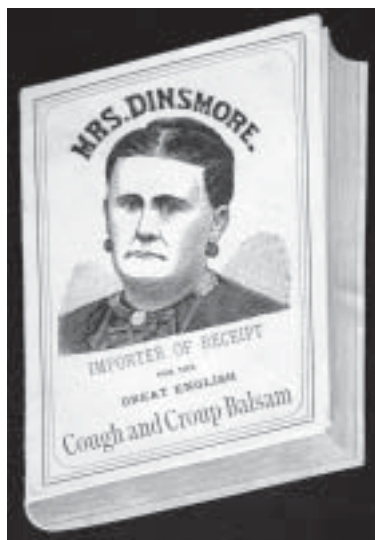


Figure 4: First known trade card for Mrs. Dinsmore's Cough and Croup Balsam, ca. 1879. This version is unflatteringly faithful to the real Mrs. Dinsmore, but was short lived. L. M. Brock is listed on the back as the “selling agent.” When he owned the firm outright, Brock commissioned a new and improved image of Mrs. Dinsmore.

the long title reading almost identically with the name he copyrighted in 1874, “of Horehound and Anise-seed for Coughs, Croup, Colds, Shortness of Breath, Asthma, etc.” [Figure 5] Advertising began in the spring of 1889, but stopped by the next spring. Alfred was not well and lingered for four more years. When he died there was nothing left; he was buried in the pauper's field at a cemetery in Calais, Maine, where his sons were then living, just over the border from Canada.

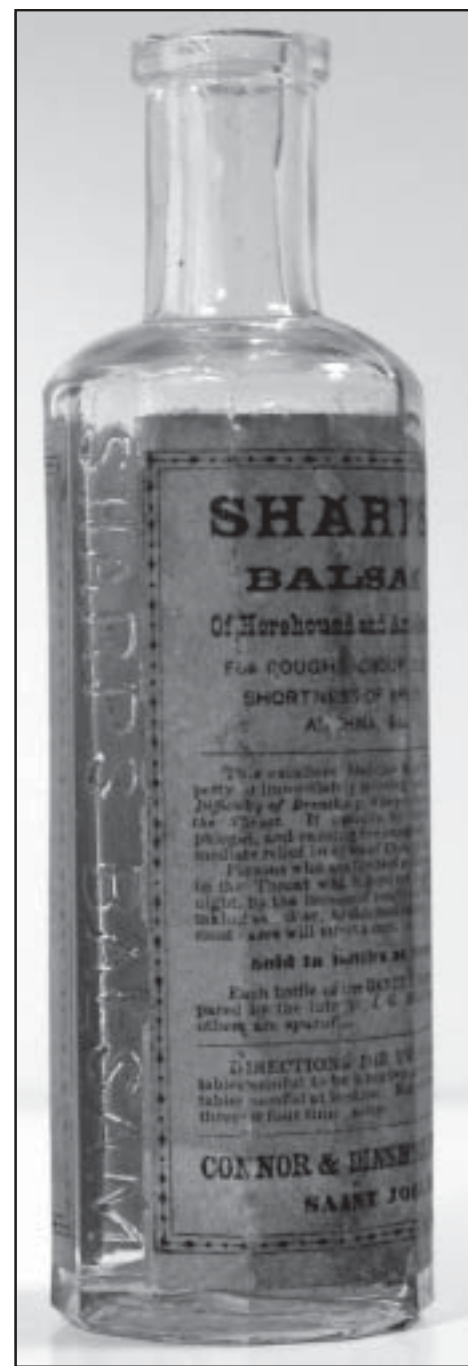


Figure 5: Sharp's Balsam, Connor & Dinsmore, Proprietors, Saint John, New Brunswick, ca. 1888. Clear, ABM with many bubbles and imperfections in manufacture. The entire label is duplicated on the back in French.

Back in Lynn, Lemuel Brock had taken Alfred's medicine business to the next level by investing heavily in advertising Mrs. Dinsmore's Cough and Croup Balsam (Brock never seemed to invest any money or effort in the bitters) in dozens of newspapers throughout the Northeast and by producing sample bottles, advertising giveaways, store signage, and many dozens of trade cards. He had artists improve the bland image of Mrs. Dinsmore into a proper Victorian lady – successful, self-assured, trustworthy, and intelligent – in short, a copy of Lydia Pinkham's famous face. [Figures 6 and 7] His efforts bore fruit; he built up the sales of Mrs. Dinsmore's Cough and Croup Balsam from \$3,000 when in partnership with Alfred Dinsmore in 1877 to \$100,000 in 1892. [Figure 8] Flush with success, Brock had built a factory for the manufacture of the medicine, served a term in the state legislature, and invested in real estate, building over fifty homes in one section

of Lynn that became known for a while as Brockville. [Figure 9]

I bought my first home in Lynn many years ago. Although I had no idea at that time, my house was one of those built by Lemuel Brock with money he gained by successfully selling Mrs. Dinsmore's Cough and Croup Balsam.

References

I have abbreviated this list for reasons of space, but if you have further interest in any of the details of this store, please contact me at one of my addresses below.

Family records of the descendents of Thomas and Eunice Dinsmore (Alfred's parents); in a private collection.

U.S. Federal Census of 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880.

The New Brunswick Courier, 1841.



Figure 6: The Faces, ca. 1882. This version of Mrs. Dinsmore (improved by Lemuel Brock's artist) looked much less like the true Hannah Dinsmore than the original, but it was clearly meant to be in the same style and have the same impact as the amazingly successful cross-town advertising icon, Lydia Pinkham.



Figure 8: A timeline of Mrs. Dinsmore branded products, ca. 1879-1935. Left to right: A. M. Dinsmore & Co., Prop's., Lynn (aqua BIM), ca. 1879; L. M. Brock & Co., Prop's., Lynn (aqua BIM), ca. 1882; red stamped FREE SAMPLE (clear BIM), ca. 1885; backwards "N" variant (in embossing on reverse; clear BIM), ca. 1890; English & German text (clear BIM), ca. 1898; name change: Mrs. Dinsmore's Balsam (clear BIM with contents), ca. 1902; name change: Mrs. Dinsmore's Balsamated Compound, clear ABM; ca. 1935.



Figure 7: A selection of trade cards and other advertising items featuring the constantly tweaked face of Mrs. Dinsmore, ca. 1882-1895. All were produced by L. M. Brock & Co., and made Mrs. Dinsmore widely known; this familiarity brought the large-scale sales that Alfred Dinsmore had spent two decades struggling for in vain.



Figure 9: L. M. Brock & Co., Manufactory, July 4, 1890. Lemuel Brock stands triumphantly at the top of the stairs on the right. He told a newspaper reporter that his successful sales of Mrs. Dinsmore's Cough and Croup Balsam were his proudest accomplishment in business.

Marriage Records of Waldo County, Maine.

Kennebec, Maine County Court Records.

Portland Civil Birth Records.

Portland City Directories, 1855-1865.

Daily Evening Globe, The Morning Freeman, The Halifax Sun and Advertiser, The King's County News, The New Brunswick Courier (all published in Saint John, New Brunswick), various dates throughout the 1860s.

Museum Collections, Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain.

Grantee's Records, Cumberland County, Maine.

Land Records of Penobscoty County, Maine.

The Maine Register, 1872-1873.

The Maine State Yearbook, 1874-1877.

New England Business Directory, 1877.

Registration of Copyright, 25 April 1874.

The Lynn City Item, 1881.

Daily Evening Item, 1881.

Saint John City Directories, 1887-1890.

The Evening Gazette (Saint John, New Brunswick), 1889-1890.

Death Records of Calais, Maine.

Correspondence and conversations with descendents of Lemuel M. Brock.

Bottle labels and trade cards for Mrs. Dinsmore medicine products.

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