

# Lydia's Medicine

Copyright © 2003  
by Cecil Munsey



## 130 Years Later

### Then and Now

In the panic of 1873, to help support her family after her husband Isaac (Figure 1) lost everything in the crash, Lydia Pinkham (1819-1883) went into the kitchen and began to brew a brown, bitter-tasting mixture of roots, herbs and alcohol. Lydia (Figure 2) called her home remedy, "Vegetable Compound—a Positive Cure for all those Complaints and Weaknesses so common to our best female population." The brew, that she started making as a favor for her friends, made her the best-known woman in 19th Century America, and it founded a business, in Lynn, Massachusetts that was run successfully by the Pinkhams until 1973. The first recorded sale was \$16.00 for an unknown quantity. Generally the medicine was sold five bottles for \$6.00.

The Pinkhams' four children, Charles H. (Figure 3), Daniel (Figure 4), William (Figure 5) and Aroline (Figure 6) helped start the business and run it profitably. They did, that is, until tragedy struck the family. Dan and Will, both died of "consumption" (tuberculosis) in 1881 and Lydia herself suffered a stroke and died in 1883. In that year the business was grossing \$300,000 a year. Charles, Aroline and her husband, a lawyer named Will Gove (Figure 7) carried on the business so smoothly the customers still bought the Vegetable Compound and still wrote to Lydia for advice. Lydia became the Ann Landers of the 19th Century.

Even though stories periodically hinted about Lydia's demise, customers refused to believe their counselor was gone. It was not until 1902, when Ladies Home Journal published a photo of her tombstone (Figure 8) in Pine Grove Cemetery in Lynn, Massachusetts that the general public realized Lydia had actually been dead for 21 years! Faith in Lydia's Compound never wavered, however, and sales actually doubled at a period when a national scandal attacked all patent medicine advertising.

In the mid-1960s with the Pinkham

family still running the company there were 112 shares among the six who ran the company. Their income was down to \$37,333 each by then. Lydia's great grandson, Charles "Charlie" Pinkham was treasurer of the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co. before it was sold to Cooper Laboratories, Inc. in 1968.

Cooper paid the Pinkhams over a million dollars for the run-down firm and moved it to Puerto Rico (Figure 9), supposedly closer to its source of raw materials and cheap labor. According to one of Lydia's biographers Sara Stage in 1979, "Cooper Labs, drawing on a residual demand created by past advertising, managed to gross over \$700,000 annually on sales of the Vegetable Compound."

In 1973, after 87 years, the old brick factory, in Lynn, Massachusetts, that faithfully churned out the vegetable compound for "women's troubles" was closed (Figure 10). Even though the old-time medicine continued as a subsidiary of a New Jersey pharmaceutical company,

Lydia Pinkham's kin were no longer in the business.

By the early 1970s the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company only had 94 employees. In the mid-1920s there had been as many as 450 employees. From the peak of \$3.8 million in sales in 1925 the company dropped to \$600,000 in sales in 1973. Still, until that time the company had only two unprofitable years. And, Lydia's grandmotherly face (Figure 11) adorned about \$160 million worth of advertising (in inflation-adjusted dollars) since 1876.

### An Amusing Business Obituary

The late humorist, Erma Bombeck duly noted the passing of the company, in one of her columns:

*Lydia Pinkham is dead.*

*The bottle of magic elixir died at the age of 87 in an old brick factory in Lynn, Mass. She is survived by two unprofitable years.*

*Since a bottle containing a promise of youth obviously could not have died of old age, the question is, 'What killed Lydia Pinkham?'*

*Probably the same thing that killed Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny and White House tapes – hard core realism. People just stopped believing.*

*This is a practical generation with very little imagination. It believes only what TV shows them to be true. Women will*



**Fig. 1**



**Fig. 2**

**[Fig. 1]** Lydia's husband Isaac Pinkham, a real estate agent who was always broke. **[Fig. 2]** Lydia at age 25, shown here with her son Charles. Her medicine company sometimes used this photograph (with Charles eliminated) to picture her as a young school teacher.



[Fig. 3] Lydia's son. Charles H. Pinkham as an adult.



[Fig. 4] Lydia's son Daniel Pinkham.



[Fig. 5] Lydia's son William Pinkham.

*believe that two breath mints can dance together, irregularity can get you fired and grey-haired people never sing around the piano. We never become suspicious of cold syrup with shot glasses for a lid.*

*But show them a bottle of potion that promises youth, and they stop believing.*

*A group of us were talking about middle age and trying to figure out how we could buy our way out of it when I decided to lay a Lydia Pinkham claim on them.*

*"Hey, gang, what would you say if I told you I have a cure for drooping spirits that gives elasticity and firmness to the step, restores the natural luster to the eyes, and plants on the pale cheeks of women the fresh roses of life's spring and summer?"*

*"You devil!" said Mayva. "I'd say they just renewed your American Express*

*card."*

*"No, it's a new compound," I said, "to help women through middle age."*

*"How often do you have to go in for a root touch-up?"*

*"You don't put it on your hair, you drink it."*

*"No more iron!" said Carol. "I've had so much of that stuff my teeth are rusting."*

*"It's not iron. It's just a harmless vegetable compound guaranteed to help you with "women's trouble."*

*"Look," said Velma, "I've got a mother-in-law who is having me arrested for impersonating a mother, a 15-year-old who answers bed-wetters' ads, a husband who has the most extensive collection of swizzle sticks in North America, and I just found my identity and want to trade. Are*

*you saying this will cure my troubles?"*

*Lydia Pinkham is dead, leaving middle age with only one hope. All of you who believe in Doris Day – clap your hands.*

### The Great Pinkham-Gove Feud

After the death of Dan and Will in 1881, Charles H. Pinkham ran the company. Charles died in 1900 of kidney disease – a sad irony in light of the Compound's claims to cure all kidney troubles.

Charles' death triggered a power struggle within the family which raged intermittently for the next half-century or until the 1950s. Aroline Pinkham had married a lawyer named Will Gove, as already discussed, and while Charles was running the company, the Goves had little to do with the business. The Goves did little work and yet shared in the profits.

In 1900, after Charles' death, Will and Aroline (Pinkham) Gove moved quickly to seize control of the company and drive out the Pinkham heirs, including Lydia's grandchildren (Aroline's cousins) Lucy and Marion Pinkham (Figure 12). Each side of the family held 56 shares in the corporation. Because Will Gove was Secretary of the Board of Directors, after Charles' death the Goves assumed control. Since each side of the family owned equal shares in the company Jennie Pinkham (Figure 13), Charles' widow, was elected to the board. But because the equal shares facilitated a stalemate on the board so control could not be taken back from the Goves.

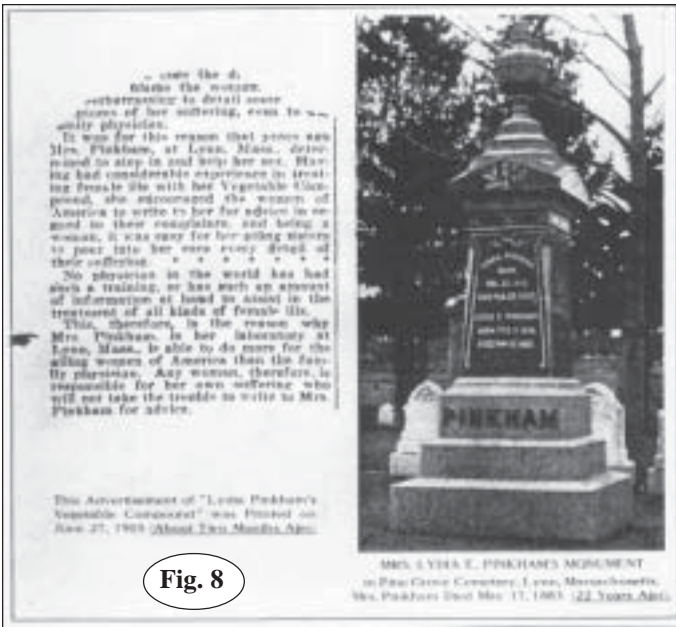
Jennie Pinkham asked her son Arthur (Figure 14) to drop out of college and help her protect her stake in the Lydia Pinkham Medicine Company. Arthur realized the



[Fig. 6] Lydia's only daughter, Aroline (Pinkham) Gove.



[Fig. 7] Will Gove, a lawyer married to Aroline.



**Fig. 8**



**Fig. 9** The “Tombstone Photo” that appeared in the November 1904 issue of “The Ladies Home Journal.” Editor Edward Bok (whose story is told in the November 1999 issue of “Bottles & Extras”) was asking the question, who answered Lydia’s mail for the past 25 years since her death?

**Fig 9]** Cooper Laboratories, Inc. purchased the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine. Co. and moved it to Puerto Rico.

law offered the Pinkhams no recourse and to regain some control of the company he would have to force the Goves to negotiate.

Arthur also realized that the Pinkhams had two important assets – the Pinkham name and his father, Charles’ reputation in the patent medicine industry. His first move was to order the postmaster to deliver the thousands of letters addressed to “Mrs. Pinkham” to his mother – Mrs. Jennie Pinkham instead of the factory where the Goves had control. Then, in a brilliant move, he went into competition with the Lydia Pinkham

Medicine Company – his mother’s own company. Arthur began to manufacture the Vegetable Compound. Copyright protected the trademark “Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound,” but not the formula of the medicine. Arthur could legally duplicate the Pinkham Compound as long as he gave it a different name. Jennie Pinkham took the first letter of the names of each of her children and arrived at the name “Delmac.” Early in 1901 Arthur ran a full-page ad in the local paper introducing the “Delmac Liver Regulator.” Its label featured a picture of his late father, Charles Pinkham, known by druggists

across the country as the manufacturer of the Pinkham medicine. As a final touch, Jennie Pinkham wrote an enthusiastic endorsement which she signed “Mrs. Pinkham.” [Collectors will easily understand the extreme value of a copy of that full-page advertisement or an extant example of a bottle of Delmac Liver Regulator featuring a picture of Charles Pinkham. To date it should be noted that neither is known to have survived, but....]

A few weeks after producing and advertising his new medicine, Arthur called on Will Gove and invited him to sample the Delmac Regulator. One taste and Gove capitulated – the medicine was indistinguishable from Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound. The Pinkhams and the Goves reached a compromise. In return for the written promise that she would refrain from marketing products that competed with those manufactured by the Lydia Pinkham Medicine Company, Jennie gained a seat on the Board of Directors. The newly constituted Board then elected Arthur Pinkham vice-president and secretary of the company.

Four months after the Goves’ takeover, the Pinkhams had regained a voice in the company’s management. Will Gove was president of the company from 1900 until 1920. He proved to be a poor administrator. The ongoing family feud continued and the dispute was passed on to the Pinkham and Gove children.

By 1926, while Arthur Pinkham was president of the company, Lydia Pinkham Gove (Figure 15) had control of the advertising program for the medicine firm. Lydia’s stranglehold on the company came



**Fig 10]** The Lydia Pinkham factory in Lynn, Mass. was built in 1886 (the year Coca-Cola was invented), The factory was closed in 1973 after making the famous vegetable compound for 87 years.



[Fig. 11] Lydia E. Pinkham as she appeared in 1879. This photograph was the one that became the trademark for the famous vegetable compound.

about largely as the result of the 1921 by-laws which gave the Pinkhams control of the executive branch of the company and the Goves control of the purse strings.

Aroline Gove increasingly deferred to her strong-minded daughter. Lydia used the power Aroline had given her as treasurer to control advertising. Any advertising she didn't like she refused to pay for. In 1927 the Pinkhams put the



[Fig. 13] Jennie Pinkham, wife and widow of Charles H. Pinkham, became a board member and helped run the company after her husband's death.

Medicine Company into receivership. That move brought the Goves to their senses and an elaborate compromise was worked out. The solution was short lived and by 1929 Lydia Pinkham Gove had regained control of advertising. She formed the Northeastern Advertising Agency and developed advertising programs for the company.

Lydia's cousin, Charlie Pinkham believed he had better advertising ideas than his cousin did. To take control of the program, Charlie convinced Edythe Bradford, one of the Gove stockholders, to vote with the Pinkhams to regain control of the advertising of the famous Vegetable Compound. (Charlie had promised Edythe he would make her joint manager of the [Lydia's] Northeastern Advertising Agency.) Lydia retaliated by once again refusing to sign checks for advertising. Lydia finally prevailed and authorized advertising (much of it featuring her) which amounted to over 80 percent of the company's gross sales. In 1933 she spent over a million and a-half-dollars. In spite of her massive spending, the company continued to lose money.

Lydia was no fool. Her plan was to drive the company to almost bankruptcy so that she could buy the Pinkhams' stock. To further her scheme, she and her mother loaned the company, without authorization, over \$250,000 at 5 per cent interest and then as treasurer, refused to pay off the loans.



[Fig. 14] Arthur Pinkham, Jennie's son and grandson of Lydia, left college to help the Pinkhams retain their half ownership in the company during the feud with the Goves. He eventually became president of the medicine company.



[Fig. 12] This is a trade card featuring two of Lydia E. Pinkham's grandchildren – Lucy and Marion Pinkham.

Charlie Pinkham refused to give the treasurer any more money so Lydia threatened to stop all advertising. She did and, for the first time since the medicine became a success, there was no advertising. That lasted for six months. Charlie next abandoned the house agency (Northeastern Advertising) and signed a contract with Erwin Wasey of New York. Lydia resorted again to not paying advertising bills.

The family feud finally ended up in court and stayed there for five years, eventually going to the Massachusetts Supreme Court. In July of 1937, the Court granted the Pinkhams an injunction against the Goves to prevent them from interfering in the business.

The final chapter of the Pinkham-Gove feud was recorded in Maine, before that state's Supreme Judicial Court, where the Gove stockholders had filed for receivership. Aroline Gove died at the age of eighty-two before the final decision was made. Lydia Pinkham Gove herself was the one responsible for losing the case in the Maine courts: Under questioning from her own lawyer, she testified that absolute equality between the two families had always been intended and upheld by both sides until Arthur Pinkham sought to usurp control of the business. When asked if her



**[Fig. 15]** Lydia (Pinkham) Gove tried for years to control the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company as its treasurer. She was an aviation enthusiast and as indicated on a 1928 calendar advertising the medicine, “Lydia E. Pinkham’s granddaughter was the first woman to cross [as a passenger] North America by aeroplane. She made the flight from Los Angeles to Boston in August, 1926, in 31 hours’ actual flying time.”

intent had been to “rule or ruin,” Lydia responded: “Certainly not!” The Pinkham counsel’s cross-examination, much like a current television rerun of a Matlock episode, was at first puzzling. He produced a note written two years earlier by Lydia thanking several company employees for sending flowers on her mother’s eightieth birthday. Had Lydia written the note? She testified she had. Would she read it to the Court? Unsure of its importance, Lydia began to read:

*“My mother’s mother, Lydia E. Pinkham, arranged that the Gove interest should control the management of the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company for as long a time as possible and her choice has been amply justified by the splendid record of success which has been obtained until the present time.”*

The note was proof that the equal division the Goves had built their case upon had never been recognized or accepted by Lydia or her mother Aroline. They had wanted to rule, not to share equally in the management of the company. Arthur Pinkham summarized the situation,

after the case was dismissed in February of 1941, by pronouncing, “That there is no war like a civil war and no feud like a family feud.”

In the long run the Lydia Pinkham Medicine Company proved to be the biggest loser in the Pinkham-Gove feud. The lengthy wrangling between the families badly crippled the business. During the early years of the court fight, advertising virtually ceased, and sales declined precipitously. The 1940s saw an increase in sales that reached \$2,636,000 in 1945.

Reminiscent of the sad irony of Charles Pinkham’s death in 1900 of kidney disease and as if to once again mock claims of the Vegetable Compound’s efficacy, *Lydia Pinkham Gove died in 1948 of ovarian cancer.*

The Pinkhams and the Goves during an uneasy truce ran the company but not very successfully for another decade or so. But as already written earlier in this treatise, *“In the mid-1960s with the Pinkham family still running the company there were 112 shares among the six who ran the company. Their income was down to \$37,333 each by then. Lydia’s great grandson, Charles “Charlie” Pinkham was treasurer of the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co. before it was sold to Cooper Laboratories, Inc. in 1968.”*

### **What Was the Medicine Made Of?**

The original formula for Lydia’s vegetable compound is much the same today as it was in 1873 except Vitamin B1 was added in the 1940s (Figure 16). Oh yes, the amount of alcohol was cut from 18% (36 proof) to 15% (30 proof). Two or three bottles taken at once will still make any woman forget her complaints, as well as her Christian name. But in the recommended dosages, the compound – now called, “medicine” does have a beneficial effect. That was discovered after the famous Pure Food and Drug Legislation of 1906 allowed it to remain on the market and the Federal Trade Commission concluded again in 1940.

The ingredients are water, alcohol, vitamin B1, licorice, camomile, pleurisy root, black cohosh, life root plant, true unicorn, false unicorn, gentian and dandelion root. The medicine has a bitter, nut-like flavor with a faint aftertaste of licorice. *“Your initial reaction is to screw up your face,”* according to a comment by Hermon E. Smith, one of Lydia’s great

grandsons whose job it was to taste every batch made in the early 1970s.

During the mixture’s heyday, annual sales hit \$3.8 million in 1925. Her 62-page “Guide for Women” was printed by the millions and in seven languages.

### **How Famous Was Lydia?**

Lydia was so famous that newspapers in the late 1880s and early 1900s, lacking appropriate photographs, ran pictures of Lydia with newsworthy events or obituaries of famous women. A chorus from one of several songs about her proves the point:

...So we’ll sing of Lydia Pinkham,  
Savior of the human race,  
She sells her Vegetable Compound,  
And the papers publish her face.

Some of the famous women identified in newspapers with Lydia’s picture are:

#### **Date – Famous Women**

1880 – Lucetia (Coffin) Mott, a famous Quaker abolitionist and feminist.

1889 – Mrs. James G. Blaine, wife of the great statesman who served in Congress (1862-1876); was Secretary of State for President James A. Garfield in 1881 who was shot to death four months after taking office; and Blaine was also Secretary of State for President William Henry Harrison (1889-1892).

1901 – Queen Victoria, Britain’s Queen who took the throne, at age 8, and reigned from 1837 to 1901 – a period of 64 years.

1911 – Carrie A. Nation, who was an early member of the “Women’s Christian



**[Fig. 17]** Mrs. Nation began her destruction of bars in the name of “Prohibition” on June 1, 1900 in Kiowa, Kansas where she attacked three “joints.” She used stones, brickbats, full ceramic malt bottles, and one billiard ball as ammunition. She did not adopt the use of her now famous “hatchet” (which in reality was a Crandal hammer used by masons to dress building stone – until her visit to Wichita some six months later.

Temperance Union” (WCTU) and who was arrested 30 times for destruction of bars. (Fig. 17)

1892 – Lizzie Borden, of Fall River, Massachusetts, accused ax murderer of her parents. She was acquitted of the famous crime after a trial that captured the imagination of the world.

### The Medicine Today

About a year ago, bottle collecting’s own Steve Ketcham authored one of his many articles for *Bottles & Extras* (see bibliography). In his own words, “It was an article about medicines which endured long after the 1906 Pure Food and Drug laws were passed.” Steve quotes from his article:

*“Americans were startled by such a revelation. I was equally startled just last month when visiting our local drug store. There on the shelf among the vitamins peered the stern visage, like a phantom through the ages, of Lydia Pinkham. Her picture was on a box that read, ‘Lydia Pinkham’s Herbal Compound.’*

*“Just as it did a hundred years ago, the product offers relief for female complaints. The label advises that the product contains 10% alcohol [20 proof], ‘solely as a solvent and preservative.’ These identical words appear on a package dated 1929, at which time the product contained 15% alcohol [30 proof].*

*“Today the product is marketed by Numark Laboratories Incorporated of Edison, New Jersey. [ Numark Labs is the successor to Cooper Labs that purchased the Lydia Pinkham Medicine Company from the Pinkham family. (See earlier discussion.) ]*

*Current packaging emphasizes the*

*product’s vitamin and iron content, its herbal content, and its efficacy in relieving the symptoms of menstruation and menopause. Clearly, Mrs. Pinkham was onto something back in 1873.”*

### Lydia E. Pinkham Collectibles

The Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co. was one of the most successful proprietary medicine makers in the world. It was just one of many patent or proprietary medicine companies but there is a huge assortment of collectibles associated with it.

The following is an abbreviated list of what is available:

- 164 booklets in English
- 62 booklets in seven foreign languages
- 21 different medicines produced from 1876 that yielded medicine bottles, cartons, wooden crates, etc.
- 12 years of calendars
- 10 advertising postcards
- 46 different trade cards
- Sachet posters
- Vanity cases
- Leather manicure sets
- Tattling shuttles
- Knitting protectors
- Tape measures
- Thermometers
- Sewing cases
- Leather medicine cases
- Perfume vials
- Sewing cards
- Memo books
- Shoe polishers
- Vanity pencils
- Leather bookmarks
- Picture puzzles
- A variety of display advertising
- Flower seed packets
- Newspaper advertisements
- Magazine advertisements
- Company correspondence



[Fig. 16] A bottle of Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound from the 1940s. The medicine was the same as it was in 1873 except Vitamin B1 was added and the amount of alcohol was cut from 18% to 15% – that was a reduction in alcoholic content from 36 proof to 30 proof.

### References:

#### Books:

Burton, Jean. *Lydia Pinkham is Her Name*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1949.

Stage, Sara. *Female Complaints – Lydia Pinkham and the Business of Women’s Medicine*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1979

Washburn, Robert Collyer. *The Life and Times of Lydia E. Pinkham*. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931.

Munsey, Cecil. *The Illustrated Guide to COLLECTING BOTTLES*. New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1970.

#### Periodicals:

Burrill, Gary. “Lydia’s Last Laugh – The Case of the Confounding Compound.” *Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, March/April 1989, Vol III, No. 2 and [same author; same title], *The World*, March/April 1989.

Bombeck, Erma. “Lydia Pinkham Magic is Gone.” *Escondido Times Advocate*, December 13, 1973, B2.

Cooper, John. “Lydia Pinkham and the Business of Women’s Medicine.” *Ghost Town Echo* (Washington Bottle Collectors Association), November 1989.

Ehrilch, Daphne. “Lydia Pinkham Medicine Company.” *Radcliffe Quarterly*, Vol 61, No. 4, December 1975.

Hubert, Edward C. “Radio vs. Wireless.” *Radio News*, January 1925.

Ketcham, Steve. “Some Early Medicines Endured the Test of Time.” *Bottles & Extras*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January 2000.

Munsey, Cecil. “The Real Lydia Pinkham (Truth? or Spin?).” *Bottles & Extras*, Vol. 12, No. 4, April 2001.

Munsey, Cecil. “Lydia Pinkham, Larkin Soap and Fate – A Strange and Fascinating Sage of Coincidence.” *Trade Card Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 2001.

Munsey, Cecil. *The Muckrakers – (Part 2) Edward William Bok* November 1999 – Issue No. 115, pp. 3-5.

Rapoza, Andrew V. “A Baby in Every Bottle: The Curative Powers of Lydia E. Pinkham Advertising.” *The Ephemera Journal – The Ephemera Society of America, Inc.*, Volume 4, 1991.

Tyler, Varro E. “The Honest Herbalist – the Bright Side of Black Cohosh.” *Prevention*, April 1997.

Waterfield, Marge. “Yes, There Really Was a Lydia Pinkham.” *The Antique Trader*, Dubuque, Iowa, April 24, 1973.

Cecil Munsey, 13541 Willow Run Road, Poway, CA 92064  
Phone: (858) 487-7036; E-mail: cecilmunsey@cox.net