

Piso's Trio: One Step Ahead of the Law

By Jack Sullivan

Special to *Bottles and Extras*

...The consumption cures [are] perhaps the most devilish of all, in that they destroy hope where hope is struggling against bitter odds for existence...

— Samuel Hopkins Adams

Just over the New York border in the western Pennsylvania town of Warren [Figure 1], as the Civil War raged, three men — a marketer, a medic and a moneybags — created a partnership to produce one of America's most notorious quack medicines. It was called Piso's Cure for Consumption. Sold widely, it frequently is found in its several colors by bottle diggers all over America [Figure 2].

The marketer was Ezra T. Hazeltine. The second of eight children of Edwin and Mary Abbott Hazeltine, he was born in 1836 and grew up in Busti, N. Y., a town inhabited by many of the Hazeltine clan. Busti also was the home of Captain Cephas Blodgett, whose fame was creating an early patent medicine he called Blodgett's Balm. Its immodest slogan was: Greatest Little Painkiller of the Ages.

In 1859, age 23, Ezra married Rachel Knapp, also from a prominent Busti family. They would produce three children. One year after their wedding they moved across state borders to nearby Warren. There Ezra — perhaps influenced by Captain Blodgett's success — began to sell his own patent medicines locally.

Hazeltine soon joined up with Dr. Macajah C. Talbott, a medic who also was new in Warren. Talbott was the product of a hit-and-miss medical education. After attending a few classes in medicine, he set up as a doctor in Springfield, Ohio, for four years, then moved his practice to Kiantone, New York. After finishing his training at the Buffalo Medical School, he moved to Warren about 1861. Talbott was a volatile personality. Although insisting that the doctor's natural disposition was toward kindness, the author of his obituary observed that *when he sometimes saw the inhumanity of man raised against himself, he poured out his soul against the perpetrators and even thought of vengeance.*

Enter the the moneybags. He was Myron Waters, a wealthy Warren businessman. More than a decade before Hazeltine and

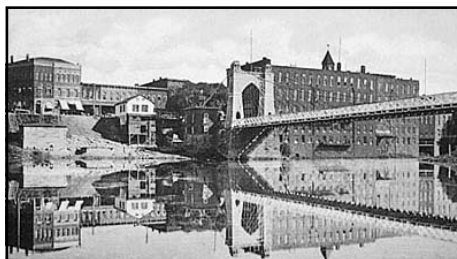


Figure 1: Postcard view of Warren, Pa.



Figure 2: Three Piso's bottles in various colors.

Talbott arrived in town, Waters acquired a fortune and built for himself and his family a splendid mansion in a town that boasted many affluent families. Some years later, during a brief petroleum boom in Warren, Waters led a group of investors that financed the construction of a short-lived railroad to supply equipment to the oil field.

Dr. Talbott had invented a "cure" for tuberculosis, known widely at that time as "consumption." However difficult a character, he hit it off well with Hazeltine, who had demonstrated a genius for marketing quack medicines. They decided to go into business producing a nostrum using Talbott's formula with Waters bankrolling the operation. Founded in 1864,



Figure 3: Revenue stamp with Hazeltine's signature.

their firm initially was called Hazeltine & Company; Ezra was made president, no doubt based on what one commentator called his "business tact and conscientiousness." His signature on a proprietary revenue stamp indicates an individual with a firm hand and an orderly mind [Figure 3].

It was Hazeltine who decided to call Talbott's potion "Piso's Cure for Consumption." It is unclear how he came up with the name "Piso's" which he pronounced "pie-soz." An ancient Roman family bore that name but its members were politicians, not physicians. Ezra set the cost at 25 cents a bottle and maintained it there for decades while many patent medicines sold for much more. Whether because of price or advertising, sales of the nostrum rose rapidly and attracted a national customer base.

Moving from its original quarters, the company in 1870 built a factory on a piece of land in the middle of the Allegheny River that flows by Warren. Known locally simply as "The Island," the site was connected by a short bridge to the town. A Piso's ad from that period states: *Ten years ago we ventured to put a medicine on the market. It had been used for several years in our own vicinity with such good results that we were confident we might safely invest a considerable sum of money in machinery for its manufacture and to advertise it.*

Advertise it, Piso's Trio did. Shown here are some of the trade cards and ads that trumpeted the virtues of their patent medicine. ? The clear implications are that sexy ladies used it [Figure 4] but that the formula was safe enough for children [Figure 5]. Right from the start, however, the quack medicine had its critics in the medical and scientific professions and their allies in government. Piso's Cure always was just one step ahead of official sanctions.

Talbott's original formula for Piso's Cure included opium and possibly other morphine derivatives. But the immediate post-Civil War era brought a revulsion against those drugs as many returning veterans had developed addictions to them as a result of treatment for their wounds. Although Congress only later outlawed



Figure 4: Piso's trade card with woman.



Figure 5: Piso's trade card with child.

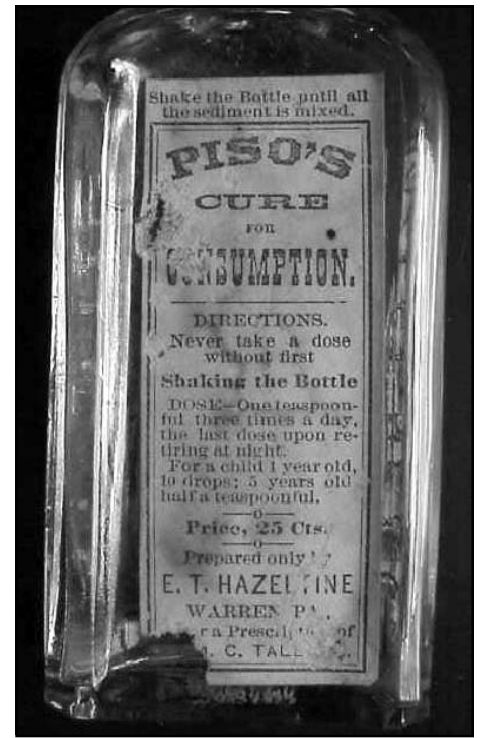


Figure 6: Cure for Consumption bottles.

opium-derived ingredients in patent medicines, the Trio saw the ban coming and by 1872, according to company literature, eliminated opium and morphine from Piso's ingredients. They later won a lawsuit on that score. The medicine still contained cannabis (marijuana), chloroform, and alcohol, but Piso's label did not mention them [Figure 6].

The success of the consumption cure allowed the Trio to branch out into other products, including Piso's Catarrh Cure and Piso's Throat and Chest Salve. In 1883 the partners formed Macajah & Company (after Dr. Talbott's first name) to market a "vaginal wafer" (in a pink box). Although this product was available only upon a doctor's prescription, some critics believed its advertising made exaggerated claims about the wafer's benefits [Figure 7].



Figure 7: Macajah wafer package.



Figure 8: Hazeltine almanacs.

The company continued to advertise in singular ways. In 1879 Hazeltine issued the first of a series of annual almanacs.

Almanacs were a common give-away of patent medicine dealers but his was unusual for being postage stamp sized at 2 by 1 3/8 inches, and best read with a magnifying glass. Shown here are examples from 1889 and 1893 [Figure 8]. The firm continued to issue these mini almanacs through 1917. Other advertising items included a jigsaw puzzle of the United States [Figure 9], a wooden peg game,



Figure 9: Jigsaw map of the U.S.

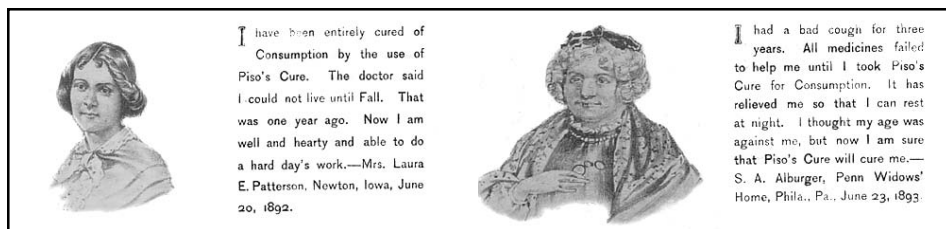


Figure 10: Two ads giving testimonial to Piso's Cure.



Figure 11: Piso's enlarged factory, circa 1900.

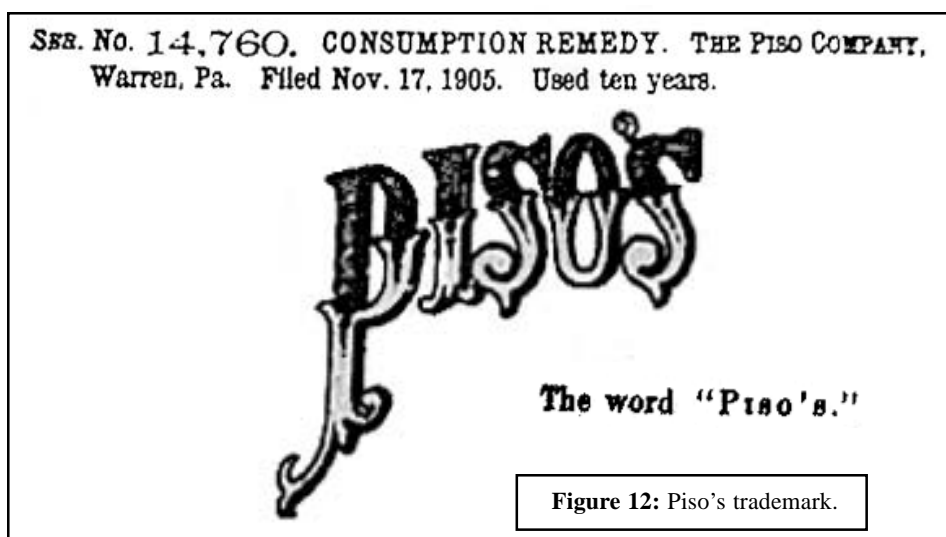


Figure 12: Piso's trademark.

short stories in miniature form, and a picture folio of sailing ships. All contained a pitch for Piso's Cure and often testimonials from satisfied users about its benefits [Figure 10].

In 1886, as profits rolled in, Piso's Trio erected a new brick factory building on The Island, greatly expanding their existing operation. A 1900 photograph shows the enlarged facility [Figure 11]. When Warren celebrated 100 years of its founding in 1895, Myron Waters was prominent on the Centennial Committee and Hazeltine was honored as a "representative businessman" of the town. A year earlier their firm's name had been changed to The Piso Company and a distinctive new trademark adopted [Figure 12]. The firm continued to prosper and became the largest employer in Warren.

But a day of reckoning was dawning. In 1883 the Women's Christian Temperance

Union (WCTU) created a unit designed to identify high alcoholic tonics and cures. The next year the Association of Official Agricultural Chemists began producing reports about false proprietary medicine claims. By 1899 Congress had made it a crime to use the mails to defraud and U.S. Post Office authorities began to take a hard look at mail-order consumption cures. In 1900, J.C. O'Day, a physician, wrote a popular article in which he claimed that earlier in his life, as a locomotive engineer, after freely imbibing Piso's Cure for Consumption, he had hallucinated and nearly wrecked a train. Dr. O'Day blamed *cannabis indica* poisoning.

Although its advertising oozed with sincerity, Piso's continued to be assertive in its claims to cure the often fatal disease. One piece of its literature stated: *We have not promised great things nor have we*

claimed to have a specific or a cure-all. We have merely said that Piso's Cure for Consumption will cure consumption. Elsewhere Piso's declared: It cannot be asserted that every case of consumption may be cured by this medicine but it is true that thousands of lives will be saved if they do not delay too long.

The year 1905 marked both the high and low point of the patent medicine industry in America. That year an estimated 50,000 different brands were produced with a value of more than two billion in today's dollars.' But 1905 also marked the beginning of the *Colliers Magazine* series by Samuel Hopkins Adams aimed at alerting the country to the dangers of quack medicines. Among the 264 nostrums specifically named by Adams, the consumption cures came in for special criticism.

From two New York Sunday papers on the same day Adams clipped nearly a score of ads categorically promising to cure consumption and other often fatal diseases. He reproduced those false promises in "A Fraud's Gallery" and disclosed what was contained in some purported remedies. They included chloroform, opium, alcohol, and hashish, ingredients that actually could hasten the course of the diseases the ads promised to eradicate. Adams concluded his discussion by chastising people like Piso's Trio: *Every man who trades in this market, whether he pockets the profits of the maker, the purveyor, or the advertiser, takes toll of blood. He may not deceive himself here, for here the patent medicine business is nakedest, most cold-hearted. Relentless greed sets the trap, and death is partner in the enterprise.*

Adams singled out Piso's Cure for Consumption. Of it he said: *Analysis shows the "cure" contains chloroform, alcohol, and apparently cannabis indica... It is, therefore, another of the remedies which cannot possibly cure consumption, but on the contrary, tend by their poisonous and debilitating drugs to undermine the victims' stamina.*

Apparently angry at such censure, Dr. Talbott fought back. At the time he was outgoing president of the Proprietary Medicine Association, the leading American lobbying group for his industry. In a farewell speech, Talbott railed at the U.S. medical establishment, declaring: *You attack us because we cure your patients... No argument favoring the publication of our formulas was ever uttered which does not apply with equal force to your*



Figure 13: Piso's Cure.

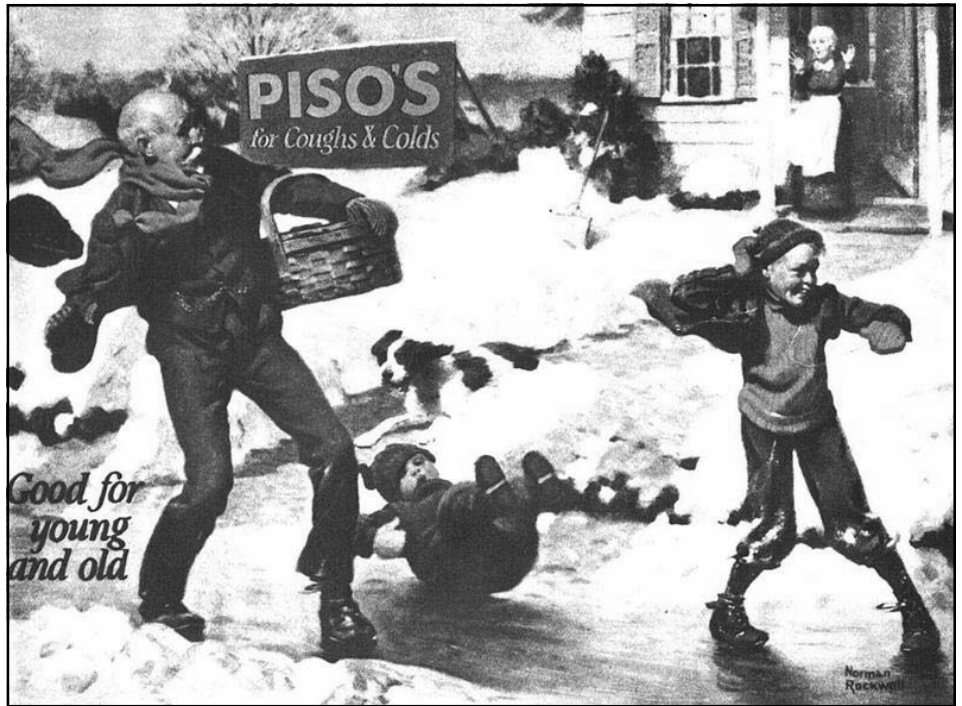


Figure 17: Piso's Norman Rockwell ad (snow).



Figure 14: Mount Vernon postcard advertising Piso's Cough & Cure.



Figure 15: Piso's Remedy — three bottles.



Figure 16: Flood photo of "The Island," April 1913.

prescriptions... It is pardonable in you to want to know these formulas, for they are good. But you must not ask us to reveal these valuable secrets, to do what you would not do yourselves. The public and

our lawmakers do not want your secrets nor ours, and it would be a damage to them to have them.

Nonetheless, ever the canny businessmen and sensing the crackdown to come, Piso's Trio removed the "for consumption" from their labels and advertising in 1904 even before Adams began his series. The nostrum now targeted "coughs and colds" as conditions leading to tuberculosis. With passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act the following year, the Trio were forced to list the ingredients of their medicine. They made chloroform and cannabis a prominent feature of Piso's labels [Figure 13].

The firm also turned increasingly to merchandising with patriotic themes, a common dodge for organizations under fire for dubious products. Piso's gave away miniature copies of the music and lyrics for the National Anthem. It reprinted a patriotic story by the sitting Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Oliver Wendell Holmes. It issued a postcard showing Mount Vernon, home of the revered first President, George Washington [Figure 14]. All bore an advertisement for Piso's Cure .

Regardless of these moves, the authorities were still on Piso's trail. In 1907, the head of the Federal Drug Administration, Dr. Harvey W. Wiley, advised the proprietary medicine industry against using the word "cure" on their labels, except in cases beyond medical dispute. Shortly thereafter, Piso's dropped the word from its ads and

became a "remedy" [Figure 15].

The firm took another hit in 1910 when a report of the Chemical Laboratory of the American Medical Association published an analysis of the Macajah wafer and debunked its false claims. The report stated: *Probably if physicians realized that the same interests that control Piso's Consumption Cure also control Micajah's Medicated Uterine Wafers they would not be so ready to act as unpaid agents for the firm.*

One by one the original Piso's Trio passed from the scene, leaving control of the firm to other managers. Their successors had to contend with the gradual but conclusive tightening of rules on what proprietary medicines could claim and contain. By now all opium-derived products were banned and alcoholic content was under federal controls. Managers also had to cope with frequent floods on The Island that interrupted production for days. A photo shows the devastation from a 1913 inundation. [Figure 16].

As Piso's continued to advertise and sell its medicine nationally, it commissioned an ad in 1920 from the famous American illustrator, Norman Rockwell [Figure 17]. The cost must have been considerable. During that decade and the early 1930s its medicine ads also employed a fashionable "art deco" look [Figure 18]. Note that by now the price had risen to 35 cents a bottle.

Whether it was the effects of the Great Depression or the 1937 passage by



Figure 18: Piso's 1930s ad (rain).

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Congress of the Marijuana Tax Act, effectively barring cannabis in medicine, Piso's corporate life ended before World War II. For a time, however, a Warren pharmacist continued to concoct and sell cough medicine locally under that name. It no longer contained chloroform, an ingredient Congress in 1947 at last banned from consumer products.

The abandoned Piso's factory on The Island was sold in 1951. By 2004 the buildings had been torn down and replaced by a parking garage. Thus disappeared the last vestiges of the thriving enterprise of a marketeer, a medic and a moneybags — the Trio who made Piso's into a national best seller of fraudulent medicine, always just one step ahead of the law. Their legacy, such as it is, resides now in their bottles [Figure 19].

Notes: Material for this article has been gathered from a wide range of sources, including the Internet. Among web references, *The Antique Cannabis Book* was most helpful. The postcard view of Warren (Figure 1) was provided through the courtesy of ePodunk. Photo views of the Piso factory and flood (Figures 11 and 16) are courtesy of the Warren Library Association.



Figure 19: Single clear Piso's cure bottle.

