

SMITH BROTHERS' COUGH DROPS AS A PATENT MEDICINE

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by Cecil Munsey

Over 150 years ago, in the bustling river town of Poughkeepsie, New York, a carpenter named James Smith put down his hammer and saw and took to the stove – he opened a restaurant. Smith was a good carpenter but he was an even better cook. The Smith family had come to Poughkeepsie from their home in Scotland by way of a fifteen-year layover in St. Armand, Quebec, Canada.

According to a recently found menu from the Smiths' original restaurant, in 1946 the Smiths' food business was celebrating its 99th year (1847-1946).

The cough drop business all started one day in the late 1840s, when a roving peddler named Sly Hawkins swapped James Smith a cough candy recipe for a meal. Smith made his first batches of his new cough candy at home on the kitchen stove. The first batches were five pounds each. He began giving it away to his restaurant customers. It was well received and soon people were coming to James Smith's restaurant specifically to get cough candy. And so it was that in 1847 while the American Medical Association was being created in Philadelphia, the patent medicine "Smith Brothers' Cough Drops" was being created in Poughkeepsie.

The business of selling cough drops was slow in growing. James was tied to his restaurant business and could not devote the needed time to promotion. James, however, had two sons – William and Andrew, the "Smith Brothers" [Figure 1]. Like almost all young men, these two boys had a need for spending money. Together they came up with an idea that was the foundation of a business that has produced, over the years, enough cough drops to ease the roughened throats of all the people in the world.

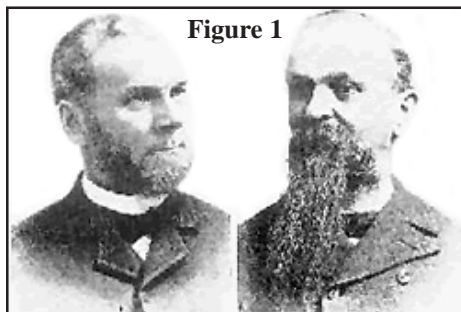


Figure 1

William and Andrew had their father make up an extra batch of cough candy and then they waited patiently for the New York-Albany stagecoach to make its scheduled stop in Poughkeepsie. When it did, the boys, with great vigor, descended upon the passengers and sold them cough candy. This innovative merchandising technique not only had immediate but residual results. Just as restaurant customers came back for cough drops, stagecoach passengers began to send back for more cough drops.

This latter development further inspired the Smith brothers and soon they were traveling up and down the Hudson Valley, peddling their cough candy and taking orders on wholesale lots. Their success encouraged them to venture into the Catskill Mountains area. Here again their efforts met with success.

From the kitchen stove at home, the Smiths moved the cough candy manufacturing business to a furnace in the basement of the restaurant. Business continued to grow. They then started a factory on Church Street that could produce six tons of candy a day.

James first advertised the candy in early 1852 in the local newspaper as James Smith & Sons Compound of Wild Cherry Cough Candy "*for the Cure of Coughs, Colds, Hoarseness, Sore Throat, Whooping Cough, Asthma, etc. etc.*"

In December of 1852 young William, the

older of the two brothers, ran another newspaper advertisement under his own name [Figure 2] in which he told the world that the "Cough Candy" was sold wholesale and retail at 23 Market Street. From this early advertising, the Smiths learned what so many other proprietary medicine men of the period already knew – it pays to advertise! Years later the brothers credited their success to "Continuous advertising, small space, plenty of insertions, simple copy..."

From those first ads it can be noted that the Smiths promoted their product as a "Cure" [for everything] instead of a "Specific [one thing]." It can also be noted that a doctor, E. Trivett, and the Van Valkenburgh & Coffin drugstore, were retailing the cough candy for the Smiths.

William and Andrew took over the restaurant after their father's death in 1866, devoting more and more of their attention to the cough candy. They converted a barn on the edge of town into the country's first cough-drop factory. They expanded sales by offering the candies to other retailers, maintaining their own brand name by providing glass dispensing jars and paper envelopes clearly marked "Smith Brothers."

Imitation may be the highest form of flattery, but this was small consolation to William and Andrew Smith in the late 1860s, when unscrupulous competitors tried to capitalize on the popularity of Smith Brothers Cough Candy (later to become "drops") by bringing out similar medical confections with names like "Schmitt Brothers," "Smyth Brothers," and even "Smythe Sisters."

Clearly, something had to be done to

Figure 2

Cough Candy.

THE subscriber, at N. 23 Market Street, Poughkeepsie, manufactures a COUGH CANDY which has stood a test which has established its superior qualities to the satisfaction of all who have had occasion to try it. That it is of the highest value for the purposes for which its intended might be shown by scores of certificates, but they are unnecessary where the article is manufactured. Its reputation as a cure for hoarseness and every kind of cough not positively incurable, is established so firmly that it cannot be shaken, and those who want convincing only need to make a trial.— All afflicted with Hoarseness, Coughs, or Colds, should test its virtues, which can be done without the least risk.

Sold wholesale and retail at 23 Market Street, and also by Dr. E. TRIVETT, and VAN VALKENBURGH & COFFIN, Drug-gists. A liberal discount made to dealers.

WILLIAM SMITH.
3m67

Poughkeepsie, Dec. 10, 1852.

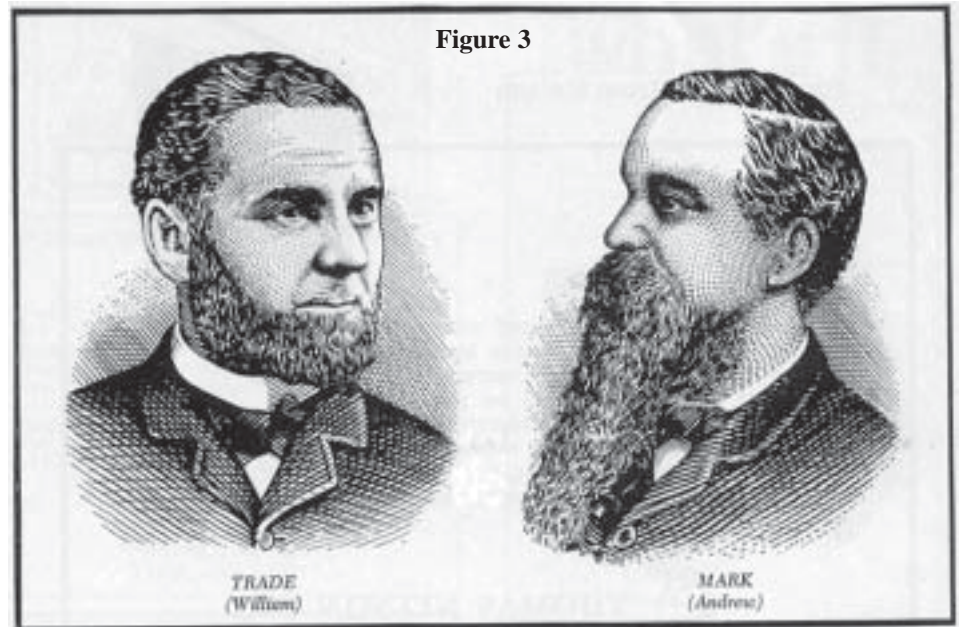
distinguish the brothers' red and their black aromatic product [black cough candy] from its many imitators. With this thought in mind, the Smiths registered their portraits as a trademark [Figure 3] and had their likenesses fixed to glass display jars [Figure 4] that were used to display their drops at general stores and apothecary shops. It is, indeed, a lucky collector who owns one of these historic relics. The jars, as can be seen in the illustration, are about 14 inches in height, bulbous-shaped with a pedestal base, capped with a nickel-plated cover, and featured an under-glass label with their trademark portraits; the oval-shaped label was bordered in gold. The envelope that contained drops sold from the display jars is shown as Figure 5.

The most logical question at this point is: what happened to the hundreds of store jars with the beautiful under-glass labels used by the Smith brothers for the six years between 1866 and 1872? No doubt many were kept and used for other things and many were just discarded. But as is almost always the case, interested people kept a small number of jars. It is from this small group that occasionally a collector will have an opportunity to buy a specimen. [Warning: Because of the seemingly perpetual popularity of the Smith Brothers, "fantasy items" are offered on the current marketplace. For example, I have seen jars with screw lids (Figure 6) and even a glass marble (Figure 7) imprinted with "Smith Bros. Cough Drops." These and other contemporary items are not authentic.]

Despite the protective steps, the problem of counterfeit drops continued to plague the brothers. Any merchant who wished to pad his profits could do so simply by filling the "Smith Brothers jar" with a cheaper brand of cough drops and then passing the bogus lozenges off as the real thing.

William and Andrew finally came up with a foolproof way to safeguard the integrity of their product in 1872, when they began selling Smith Brothers Cough Drops in prepackaged boxes [Figure 8]. This was the first time that cough drops were marketed in "factory-filled" packages. In fact, the brothers were among the earliest confection makers of any kind to box their product. Most other manufacturers of the day sold their candies loose from large counter jars. To further discourage counterfeits and substitutions, they molded the initials *SB* onto each drop. Figures 9 and 10 show two early packages.

How those first boxes of cough drops



were packaged is an interesting story in itself. As related by one historian:

"Not only did the Smiths' farsighted packaging thwart their imitative competitors, it also spawned a thriving cottage industry in the brothers' hometown of Poughkeepsie, New York. Early every evening, a wagon loaded with five-gallon milk cans of cough drops left the Smith Brothers factory and traveled down a nearby street, depositing a can of drops and a supply of boxes at some thirty houses along the way. After dinner, the families who lived on what became known as "Cough Street" would sit at their kitchen tables and package the cough drops, sixteen pieces to the box."

Like the glass bowl displays it had replaced, the new cough drop box featured

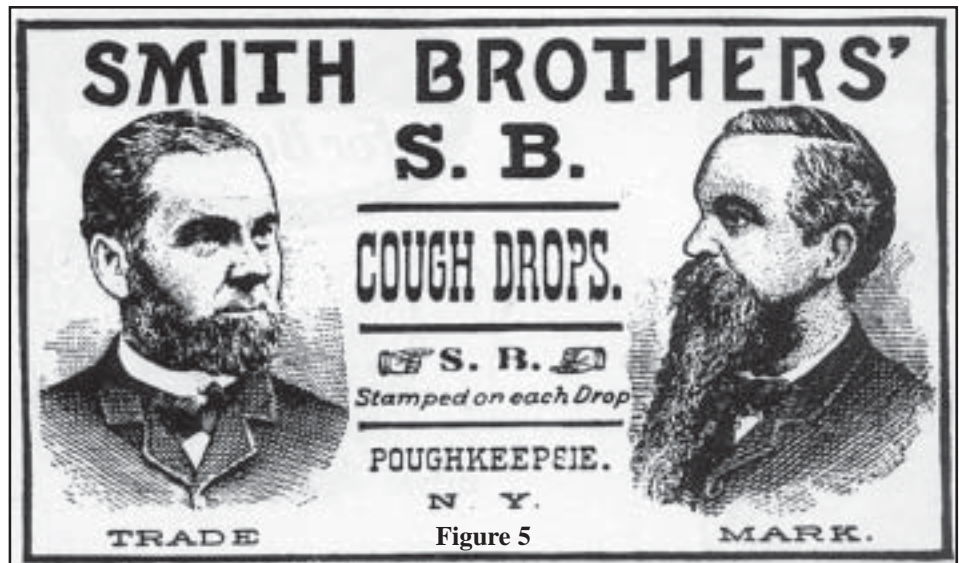




Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8: 1-cent Smith Bros. box.



Figure 9: Sample Smith Bros. box.

Below: Figure 10: 1872 package for Smith Brothers' Cough Drops.



Figure 11

the distinctive trademark-portraits of the two brothers. By pure chance, the word *Trade* was printed under William's likeness, and *Mark* appeared under Andrew's.

Although they probably grew tired of hearing Trade and Mark jokes, the brothers voiced no objections, especially since the ensuing notoriety was good for business.

Aided by their unintentionally humorous trademark on the novel "prefilled" package, William and Andrew sold cough drops at a prodigious rate. During the course of the brothers' lifetimes, output increased from five pounds to roughly sixty tons of drops or one million packages a day.

Sample advertising of the first two

decades of the 20th century is shown here as **Figures 11, 12, 13, and 14.**

It was William (Trade) who was clearly the dominant brother. He controlled the company's finances and had the biggest voice in major policy decisions. The depth of William's frugality was legendary; to save paper, he kept the firm's bookkeeping records on the backs of old envelopes. An ardent prohibitionist (he forbade the serving of ginger ale at the family restaurant because its name was suggestive of an alcoholic beverage), William believed that money led workers to drink and other evils, and so he dutifully kept wages at rock-bottom levels.

William did, however, give generously to charity. Among his benefactions to Poughkeepsie were YMCA and YWCA buildings, the Old Ladies Home, College Hill Park (called Cough Drop Park by townsfolk), and the local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Encouraged by his WCTU dry supporters, William Smith entered politics, making unsuccessful bids for the state senate, governorship, and mayor's office. Ironically, William Frank, a Poughkeepsie brewer, resoundingly beat the temperance-minded cough drop maker in the mayoralty race.

Andrew (*Mark*) Smith did not share his brother's prohibitionist views. A good-natured bachelor, he was not averse to lifting an occasional glass at the local tavern. He differed from William in matters of money as well. Generous to a fault, the younger Smith brother was such a soft touch for any friend in need of a fast loan, that he became known in Poughkeepsie as "Easy Mark."

Andrew (*Mark*) died in **1895** and William (*Trade*), who saw the firm through the tough Pure Food and Drug legislation of **1906** by developing modified claims, died in **1913**. Five generations of Smiths carried on this fantastically successful business which contains all the ingredients of the American dream – log cabin beginnings, first product made over kitchen stove, product sold from door to door, and then the slow ascent to great wealth and world influence.

In **1915**, the Smith family built a new factory with all the latest automatic machinery with a capacity of thirty tons a day.

In **1919**, the business was incorporated, becoming "Smith Brothers, Inc.," with the third and fourth generation of the founders



"When a Feller Needs a Friend"

Yes, he needs a friend, all right, poor kid—a friend who will give him a Smith Brother's Cough Drop and stop that cough. And so does every other boy or girl who is likely to experience the embarrassment of coughing while trying to recite before the whole class.

It isn't fair to prevent any child to go around coughing. The best friend a coughing boy or girl can have is a Smith Brother's Cough Drop, because, while S-B Cough Drops will not cure a cold, they will relieve the cough.

Pure. No drugs. Just enough charcoal to sweeten the stomach.

Drop that Cough
SMITH BROTHERS of Poughkeepsie
 FAMOUS SINCE 1847



Figure 12



"Hey, George, page the
SMITH BROTHERS
of Poughkeepsie
famous since 1847 for the
suppression of public and
private coughing"



Figure 14



Figure 13

SMITH BROTHERS' S. B. COUGH DROPS.
 S. B. COUGH DROPS
 KEYS, N. Y.
 Poughkeepsie, N.Y., U.S.A.
 Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

S. B. COUGH DROPS

A COUGHER is out of place at a theatre, dance, dinner table, church service—in fact wherever people congregate. For his cough is not only a social blunder; it is a real annoyance to those around him. S-B Cough Drops relieve coughing and save embarrassment. Pure. No drugs. Just enough charcoal to sweeten the stomach.

Drop that Cough
SMITH BROTHERS of Poughkeepsie
 FAMOUS SINCE 1847

as its officers.

In 1920, another plant was built at Michigan City, Indiana, with the same capacity as the Poughkeepsie factory, making a total capacity of sixty tons of cough drops a day.

In 1922, Smith Brothers started making menthol Cough Drops.

In 1927, they started putting on the market Smith Brothers' Triple Action Cough Syrup.

In 1963, the family-held business sold out to the pharmaceutical giant Warner-Lambert.

In 1972, The last Smith Brothers cough drop was made in Poughkeepsie.

You can still buy the famous cough drops, now an offering of F&F Food, Chicago. Renamed "Throat drops," they're right there on the shelf in a different but still familiar package, between the Robitussin menthol eucalyptus and the Hall's ice blue.

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