

The Peruna Story: Strumming That Old Catarrh

By Jack Sullivan

Catarrh. Today it is defined sometimes as bronchitis, sometimes as an excess of mucus. There once was an Ohio physician who defined catarrh any way he wanted, propounded a cure for it, made millions in sales, and then occasioned a law to regulate quack medicines. The doctor was Samuel



Figure 1

Brubaker Hartman [Figure 1]. His cure was called "Peruna" (he preferred PE-RU-NA) and bottle diggers all over America have unearthed thousands of them.

Dr. Hartman was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to German-Swiss farmers. He left home at 15 to go to school in Cincinnati, then

apprenticed in medicine to a Dr. Shackelford of Medway, Ohio. Hartman subsequently entered the Medical School of Cleveland from which he was graduated. He began a medical practice, first in Tipp City, Ohio, and then in Pennsylvania. In 1859 he married Sallie Martzell and eventually they had a son and daughter. About 1890, after many years as a practicing and apparently respected physician and surgeon, Dr. Hartman moved to Columbus, Ohio. Giving up his profession, he began to concoct and sell a series of remedies. Among them were "La-cu-pia," a self-described blood thinner, and "Ma-na-lin" for biliousness. But Dr. Hartman stuck it



Figure 2



Figure 4



Figure 3



Figure 7

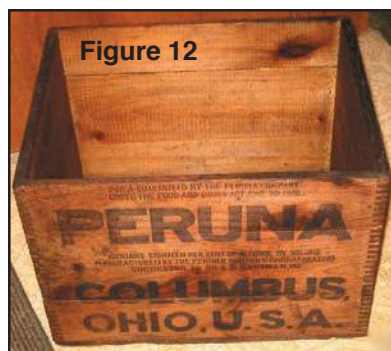


Figure 12



Figure 15

Figure 2: Hall's Catarrh Cure bottle.
Figure 3: Ely's Cream Balm box and bottle
Figure 4: Early Peruna ad
Figure 7: Peruna blob top bottle
Figure 12: Peruna crate
Figure 15: Boxed set of Peruna

rich when he redefined catarrh.

Catarrh — Source of Disease

When the doctor began his campaign against catarrh, a number of remedies already were being sold, among them Dr. Sykes Sure Cure for Catarrh, Hall's Cure for Catarrh [Figure 2], and Ely's Cream Balm Universal Cure for Catarrh [Figure 3]. Hartman's particular genius was in defining catarrh as the root cause of virtually all known diseases. For Hartman — and his advertising — pneumonia was catarrh of the lungs, so was tuberculosis. Cancer sores were catarrh of the mouth; appendicitis, catarrh of the appendix; chronic indigestion, catarrh of the stomach; mumps, catarrh of the glands; Bright's disease, catarrh of the kidneys. Peruna, he said, would cure them all, even yellow fever, another form of catarrh. The good doctor's confidence in his product appeared to be boundless. He wrote a 32-page booklet entitled: "Peruna Cures Catarrh the World Over." Shown here is an ad showing two comely ladies presenting the Peruna bottle. The paper wrapping cites the many and sundry catarrhs conquered by Peruna [Figure 4].

At a time when many politicians found it prudent to be born in a log cabin, Dr. Hartman claimed that his remedy had first been invented in such a rustic structure. His almanacs of later years featured his "laboratories." [Figure 5] As shown here, the first is captioned "Where Peruna First Was Made." The second scene shows a modest two-story frame building with the simple sign, "Peruna" over the front entrance and is designated the "Second Peruna Laboratory." Scene 3 shows significant growth. The structure now is three stories and brick, with three chimneys, all belching smoke. Things might have stalled right there. It was the early 1900s and Dr. Hartman is reported to have been struggling to get enough orders to keep his small staff busy.

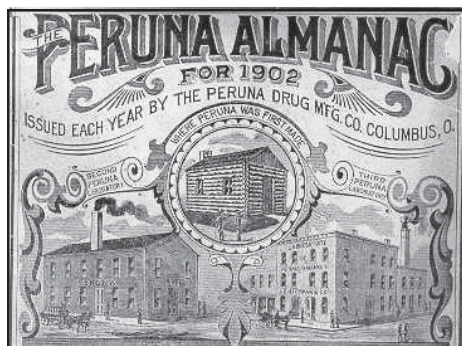


Figure 5: First three Hartman "Laboratories"

The Super Salesman Arrives

Then an order landed on Dr. Hartman's desk for a train carload of Peruna from a patent medicine wholesaler in Waco, Texas. His name was Frederick W. Schumacher. Hartman put his staff on overtime to fill the request and then hopped the same train with the goods to meet this benefactor in Texas. It was an historic ride for both Hartman and Peruna.

Born in 1863, Schumacher had emigrated to the U.S. from Germany when he was about nine years old, settling in Waco. A bright and industrious youth, he got an education, spending some time at Baylor University in Waco. Soon he was earning a comfortable living as a druggist before changing careers to become a nostrum salesman. Hartman immediately recognized the younger man as a marketing genius, hired him on the spot to run Peruna's advertising, and eventually made him vice president of the firm. Schumacher courted the doctor's daughter, Maribel, and in 1895 married her in a splashy Columbus wedding.

Under Schumacher's guidance, Peruna advertising exploded, appearing in magazines and newspapers from coast to coast and even overseas. In time the company was spending in excess of \$1 million annually on ads. Testimonials became a major element in merchandising the quack medicine. Politicians, Army and Navy brass, and members of the clergy all seemed eager to attest to the wonders of Peruna. At one point the company ran an ad listing 50 members of Congress who were "voting its anti-catarrhal ticket."

The firm also took pains to gather favorable comments from common folk. A Mrs. Halleck of Antwerp, Ohio, was quoted in the Dec. 13, 1902, *Mansfield News* saying: "My daughter, Allie, after taking three bottles of your Peruna is entirely cured of catarrh of the head of two years." A testimonial from the Newark, O., *Advocate* of Feb. 8, 1907, declared: "About three months ago I commenced to take Peruna...and I am now entirely cured of that troublesome disease. Your medicine is surely a blessing."

Peruna - America's Best Seller

Within a fairly short time, Peruna became the largest selling proprietary medicine in the United States. Costing \$1 a bottle at a time when 25 cents bought a full lunch, the nostrum brought millions to Dr. Hartman. He built an enormous facility for his Peruna



Figure 6: The Peruna Administration Bldg.

Drug Manufacturing Company, covering two blocks adjacent to downtown Columbus and featuring a spacious administration building [Figure 6]. The doctor moved into a mansion in Columbus and purchased a huge tract of land south of the city for an experimental farm. It employed dozens of workers, many of whom lived on site. He built a fancy combined hotel and sanitarium in downtown Columbus, where the Peruna flowed copiously to residents. His hotel featured a Grand Ballroom where the elite of Columbus regularly came to dine and dance.

Despite being common fare from bottle digs, Peruna bottles of any era are not highly collected since they tend to be clear glass with little embossing except the designation "Dr. S. B. H. & Co." on the base [Figure 7]. The containers came with paper wraps that described the "medicine" and the wonders it could perform, but those labels were highly vulnerable to destruction and fully complete specimens are rare. With intact labels they continue to be sought by collectors of cures.

Dr. Hartman's success in "curing" catarrh spawned a host of Peruna imitators, many in his home state of Ohio. In Cleveland, Horace Bowen marketed his Bowen Catarrh Cure. Toledo had its Echo Catarrh Cure, Piqua its Rose Catarrh Cure [Figure 8], and Columbus, Dr. Beebe's Catarrh and Asthma Cure. But these outfits were mainly local in their sales; in the first half of the 1900s Peruna continued to be the national best seller.



Figure 8: Rose Catarrh bottle

A Shocking Admission!

But the catarrh curing business was about to experience a major setback. Enter Samuel Hopkins Adams [Figure 9]. Adams was born in Dunkirk, New York, and graduated from Hamilton College in 1891. From 1891 to 1900, he was a reporter for the *New York Sun* and then joined *McClure's Magazine*, where he gained a reputation as a muckraker for his articles on the conditions of public health in the United States. In 1904, when he was only 34, he was commissioned by the editors of *Colliers Magazine* to write a series of 11 expose articles on the patent medicine industry called "The Great American Fraud" [Figure 10]. Adams was a highly skilled, thorough and energetic reporter. Instead of assembling material from what others had written, he set out to do original research. He wrote Hartman asking if the Peruna Doctor would grant him an interview. To his amazement, Hartman agreed and Hopkins hopped a train to Columbus.

Despite describing Hartman as a "renegade physician," the writer found the doctor to be genial and welcoming, even though Hopkins had warned him that any information he provided might be used in a critical way. During their extended discussion Hartman freely admitted to Adams that Peruna did not cure anything. There are no such things as cures, he told a flabbergasted Adams. Rather, he said of his clientele: "They see my advertising. They read the testimonials. They are convinced. They have faith in Peruna. It gives them a gentle stimulant, and so they get well."

It was an astounding admission and Hopkins made the most of it, devoting virtually all of one article to debunking Peruna. Adams also subjected the nostrum to a chemical test. He found that a bottle contained 1/2 pint of 90% proof spirits, 1.5 pints of water, a flavor cube and a little burned sugar for color. The cost to Dr.



Figure 9

Hartman was at most 18 cents. Adams also reported that the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs already had banned the sale of Peruna on Native American reservations because the tonic was 28% alcohol.

Congress Takes Action

That *Colliers* article, perhaps more than any of the others, spurred Congress to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Dr. Hartman's startling admissions were cited by proponents on the Floor of the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate, and quoted widely in newspapers of the day. The new law created the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a watchdog for the public health. It also radically changed what the patent medicine industry could do and say. Some firms went out of business; others survived by changing the name of their potion from "cure" to "remedy."

Peruna was among the survivors. It modified its claims. Faced with being taxed as a purely alcoholic beverage, Dr. Hartman accepted a U.S. Government mandate in 1906 that something with a detectable medicinal effect be an ingredient in Peruna. As Adams later put it: "The Internal Revenue authorities bade Old Doc Hartman to put some real medicine in his drink or to open a bar." The doctor chose to add substantial amounts of senna and blackthorn bark, both of them cathartics. He also reduced the alcoholic content of Peruna from 28 to 18 percent. To warn his several million customers of the change, the doctor published a booklet in which he purported to be "shocked beyond all measure" to be accused of trafficking in liquor and claimed that he was acceding to customer requests to give Peruna "slight laxative effects." He recommended it even for children.

Many Peruna addicts failed to get the message and there ensued great rumblings of intestines all across America. Sales plummeted. One patent medicine wholesaler told Adams, "Peruna is nowhere. We used to get a carload, even two carloads a month. Now we hardly handle a carload in a year."



Figure 11: Ad for Ka-Tar-No

Faced with disaster, Hartman and Schumacher decided to revive the old Peruna formula, call it Ka-Tar-No, merchandise it as a alcoholic beverage and sell it over the bar. [Figure 11] Never popular with the saloon crowd, Ka-Tar-No Tonic quickly faded from view.

Dr. Hartman Succumbs

Acclaimed in contemporary accounts as one of the leading citizens and employers of Columbus, Dr. Hartman became known for his civic-minded and philanthropic activities. In 1911, at the behest of daughter Maribel, he built an elegant theater in downtown Columbus and called it "The Hartman." His huge farm became a tourist destination. The millionaire quack was tramping over his fields during a snowstorm in 1912 when, at the age of 82, he caught pneumonia and shortly thereafter died. There is no evidence he was doctored with his own medicine, despite his earlier claim that PE-RU-NA cured pneumonia as "catarrh of the lungs." Moreover, he died without ever disclosing why he was so open about his medical fakery to Hopkins, revelations that helped change his industry forever.

Two years after Hartman's death, Samuel Hopkins Adams published "The Clarion," a novel in which a principal character, an out-and-out charlatan called Dr. Andre Surtaine, is patterned after the Columbus doctor. The fictional Surtaine has made millions from a "sure cure" for most diseases called "Certina." At one point in the novel, Surtaine confesses, "Most diseases cure themselves. Medicine isn't much good. Doctors don't know a great deal. Now, if a patent medicine braces a patient up and gives him courage, that is all that can be done." Although these comments are similar to those Hartman made to Adams in 1905, the book offers no further clue to the motive behind the real doctor's candor to a reporter.



Figure 10: "Great American Fraud" logo

Meanwhile at the Peruna factory, his son-in-law succeeded Hartman. Well known in Columbus as an energetic and canny businessman, Fred Schumacher in 1904 had been elected president of the city's Board of Trade. Clearly he was an ideal candidate to take the helm of the Peruna Drug Manufacturing Company during this difficult period. Under his leadership the fortunes of Peruna revived although the nostrum never regained its status as the nation's top seller. The quack medicine got boosts from two sources: Prohibition and radio.

Peruna: "Prohibition Tonic"

As states went "dry," Peruna continued to be sold over the counter. In Maine, for example, which early (1851) prohibited liquor, Peruna was a popular tonic. People named their children after it. The company made no real effort to disguise Peruna's spirituous nature. Shown here is a shipping crate that clearly states the contents at 18% alcohol — twice the alcoholic content of a glass of wine and, by any count, a stiff drink [Figure 12]. During National Prohibition, Peruna came to be known generally as "Prohibition Tonic." Nevertheless the company continued to gain endorsements from clergymen, including an Episcopal bishop of Baltimore. It also placed ads in church bulletins that claimed Peruna was recommended by: "An Indefatigable and Lifelong Worker in the Temperance Cause."

Radio gave another boost to Peruna. The medium provided regional and even national exposure to dozens of country music groups and an opportunity for Peruna to advertise over the airwaves. It appears that at least 24 groups at 18 stations nationwide and from Mexican "border radio" daily were broadcasting Peruna's message to rural and urban Americans alike. Shown here [Figure 13] is the first Peruna Family Song Book, issued in 1937. On the cover (from top) are Pappy Cheshire and His Gang from KMOX in St. Louis, the Cumberland Ridge Runners from WJJD in Chicago and The Pickard Family from XERA, Villa Acuna, Mexico. So potent was this form of merchandising that the American Medical Association formally, but unsuccessfully, asked that the broadcast industry ban Peruna ads. The AMA claimed that the nostrum was keeping sick people from seeing their doctor. By this time, however, Peruna had toned down its claims. Gone was any reference to catarrh. Now the tonic was "The Great New Cold-Fighter," with ingredients that



Figure 14: Southern Methodist University "Peruna" mascot

purported to build up resistance to the sniffles.

Underlining Peruna's identity with radio and Prohibition, students at Southern Methodist University early in the 1930s adopted as their fight song a ditty to the tune of "Comin' 'Round the Mountain" that went like this: She'll be loaded with Peruna when she comes, She'll be loaded with Peruna when she comes, She'll be loaded with Peruna, Yes, loaded with Peruna, She'll be loaded with Peruna when she comes!" Even today the school mascot, a black mustang, is named "Peruna." [Figure 14]



Figure 13: Peruna Song Book

The End of the Story

With Repeal, Peruna's appeal to the drinking public faded. Its formula was changed once again to bolster sales. No longer devoted to the plague of catarrh or just fighting colds, now the nostrum boasted of "three way action." It claimed to combine an iron tonic, an expectorant and a stomach soother. [Figure 15] Nevertheless, other patent medicines eventually supplanted it in popularity. Peruna was withdrawn from the market sometime during the 1940s. Schumacher and Dr. Hartman's daughter divorced, but he continued to live in their Columbus mansion along with a butler and a cook. Ever the entrepreneur, Schumacher made another fortune in Canadian gold, and at his death in 1957, left an estate of \$50 million to the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts. A town is named for him in Ontario, Canada.

Samuel Hopkins Adams became a well-known and highly popular American writer and novelist. But his fame today rests largely on his expose of the patent medicine industry and its role in the creation of the FDA. Adams died in 1958 at the advanced age of 87, benefited, one suspects, by never having medicated with Peruna.

Note: This article was compiled from a variety of sources, including the Internet. Most important was Samuel Hopkins Adams' 1905 series of articles, later a book, called *The Great American Fraud*. Others were *The Golden Age of Quackery* by Stewart H. Holbrook (1959) and *The Toadstool Millionaires* by James Harvey Young (1961). Figures 6 and 15 are courtesy of the Ohio Exploration Society. Portions of this article have previously appeared in *The Ohio Swirl*, the newsletter of the Ohio Bottle Club.

Jack Sullivan
4300 Ivanhoe Place
Alexandria, VA 22304
jack.sullivan9@verizon.net