

OHIO

The Great Black Swamp

by Joe Terry

There are regions in the United States that were named for what they were. Yellowstone, the Smokey Mountains, the Great Salt Lake are all accurately descriptive terms. For us here in Northwest Ohio it was "The Great Black Swamp". This miasmatic film of mud and water covered many of this area's counties, and small patches still remain. It was an unhealthy locale, haven for mosquitoes and disease that even the local Indians avoided whenever possible.

Ailments in this area were numerous and often deadly. Intestinal problems were among the disorders, and they too could be lethal, especially to the very young and very old. Even when not fatal, the symptoms were uncomfortable, causing many a trip to the outhouse. Enter our hero.

He was relatively young; only in his mid-twenties. He arrived in the town of Helena, Ohio. The town is still there, situated on Route 6 between Bowling Green and Fremont. Helena was a growing community, in no small part due to the recent discoveries of gas and oil in the area. He didn't come for that reason, at

least not entirely. He was a pharmacist, and reportedly a good one.

By the time the young man arrived in the mid-1880's, he found there was already a druggist or two in business. The earliest recorded was W.H. Spayde, in 1881. By 1885, the first recorded year of his presence in town, Mr. Harter is in competition with Simon Wolf. Shortly after that Mr. Wolf moved to Fremont to practice his profession.

His name was Helon Gepman Harter, a native of New York State born on October 30, 1858 in the town of Columbia. Little is known of his early life, especially what attracted him to a town like Helena. There must have been something, as he lived there over 15 years.

He quickly established a brisk trade, and just as speedily learned to recognize oft asked for remedies. He began concocting and marketing his own, the most popular being a preparation for intestinal complaints. This one in particular soared to a high popularity among its users. In a day and age when one's face and name on the label were the standard, Mr. Harter chose something much bigger, and at least locally, more recognizable.

The name was distinctive enough that the United States Patent Office granted it trade mark #23149. The name chosen was "Black Swamp" of course. The concoction consisted of a mixture of herbs, the

primary one being dried and ground blackberry root. This may seem an unusual ingredient, but The Herbalist by Joseph E. Meyer states "*This shrub is rich in tannin and is therefore a good astringent and tonic, long a favorite home remedy for diarrhea.*"

The fact that Mr. Harter applied for a trade mark meant that he had high hopes for his Black Swamp Blackberry. He first started advertising the same year he received the trade mark, 1893. This he did in several local papers. "*Better than Gold*" proclaimed these little paid announcements, "*for the cure of diarrhea, colic, cramp, cholera, cholera infantum...and all summer complaints.*"

The popularity gradually increased to the point that Mr. Harter outgrew both his store and the small town he had adopted. In an effort to increase his enterprise both in size and recognition, he moved it to Toledo, Ohio in 1900. He also involved a few people in it, so as to have more capital. The firm was now H.G. Harter and Company, with their new location at 629 Main Street, though a few years down the road the business relocated to 609 S. St Clair. It was here the firm was to remain until the end.

The enterprise continued to grow, until it expanded beyond its limited financial capacity. On August 12, 1911 the state ratified articles of incorporation for The H.G. Harter Company. The firm still





Mr. Harter remained the head of his company throughout his life. He fell into declining health in the 1930's, a victim of diabetes. He lapsed into a coma in September of 1937, and passed away on the twenty third. Up until the time of his death he had lived above the factory on St Clair Street.

Helon had only one son, Herold M. Harter. He, in turn, had two; Helon G. Harter II and Herold M. Harter Jr. These boys took over their grandfather's business, but only

manufactured "Black Swamp Blackberry", but in addition was selling other "Black Swamp" products, such as liver pills, syrup, ointment, and sarsaparilla. They also introduced a ranch food, for cattle, and later still a hog tonic. As time went on they continued to add to their repertoire. Crewso Poultry Powders, Challenge Headache Tablets, Noxit Quinine Laxative Tablets and The Renzlo Treatment for Dyspepsia and Nerves were all available from the Harter Company.

As the years went by, people grew less familiar with the benefits of blackberry. To the general public, blackberries were for pies and jam, not medicine. To this end, the name was changed to Black Swamp Bowel Remedy, an interesting moniker, as the use of the word "bowel" on a bottle is rare indeed.

for a year. By 1939, the firm disappears from the city directories. It is difficult to guess what happened, but part of it may have been the looming of World War II. Likely due to the war was the fact that the firm wasn't officially dissolved until October 15, 1946.



Even locally, Black Swamp bottles are somewhat rare. I have two, and several area collectors have some as well, but I have seen no more for sale. None are embossed with a town, so distinguishing those from Helena and those from Toledo is an impossible task unless the label is still on the bottle.

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