

"The Rise and Fall of the Rattlesnake King"

By Courtney Llewellyn

(The following information comes from the blog of Dr. Romeo Vitelli, found at drvitelli.typepad.com and reprinted with permission of Country Editor)

Clark Stanley, "the Rattlesnake King," always knew how to put on a good show.

According to one news account describing his appearance in Hartford, CT's city hall square on July 1, 1902, members of the audience watched as Stanley beheaded and skinned one of the rattlesnakes he had on display. Dressed in a "combination cowboy and Indian suit with a novelty in the shape of a four-in-hand tie made of snake skins," the Rattlesnake King showed off his skill in dealing with snakes, as well as how he used the freshly skinned snake to extract the oil that he sold to customers. Stanley was the original "snake oil" salesman. His rattlesnake oil billed as a sure-fire remedy for chronic pain and inflammation resulting from lumbago, arthritis, animal bites and scratches – quite a bargain for 50 cents a bottle.

The process of extracting rattlesnake oil, which Stanley claimed to have learned from Hopi medicine men, was straightforward enough. After decapitating the snake, Stanley cut it open and plunged the body into a pot of boiling water that supposedly released snake fat that rose to the surface of the water. He then scooped it up and poured it into bottles and offered it up for sale as "Clark Stanley's Snake Oil Liniment."

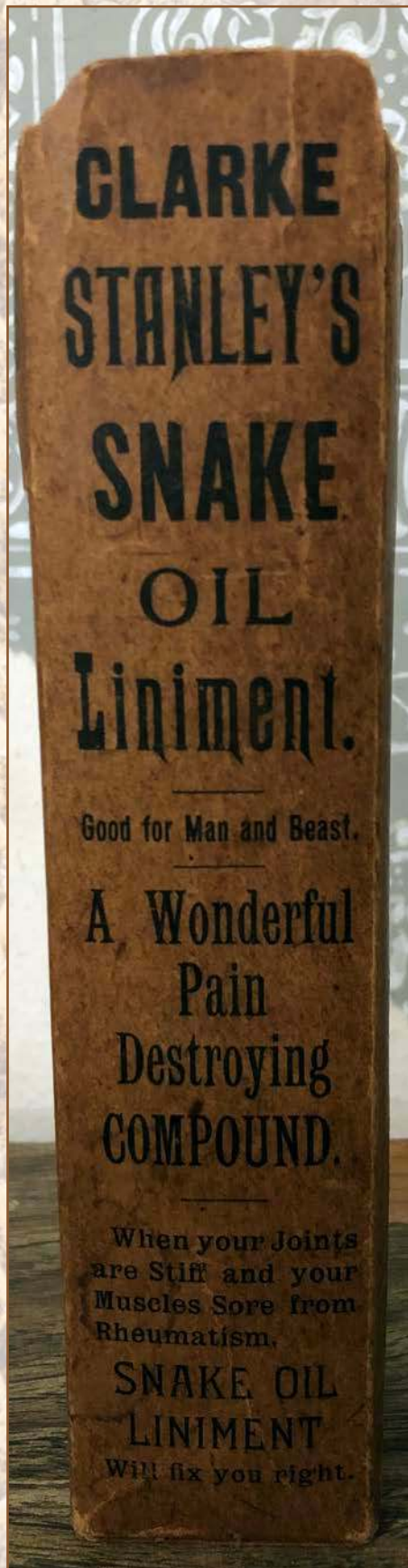
The selling of snake oil was what he did during his frequent "medicine shows" on his travel circuit across the United States. Not only did countless potential customers line up when he came to town, but his graphic killing and dismembering of a rattlesnake was one of the highlights of the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

Stanley played his cowboy role to perfection and the snakes were real. Whenever he did his show, he brought a few rattlers to act as props to entice audiences to buy his miracle liniment. He told reporters his Texas snake farm boasted hundreds of rattlers, although, thanks to the demand for his product, he often had to buy more from animal farms across the country.

Stanley also sold a variety of other rattlesnake-based products and boasted of his fondness for rattlesnake stew (presumably with the



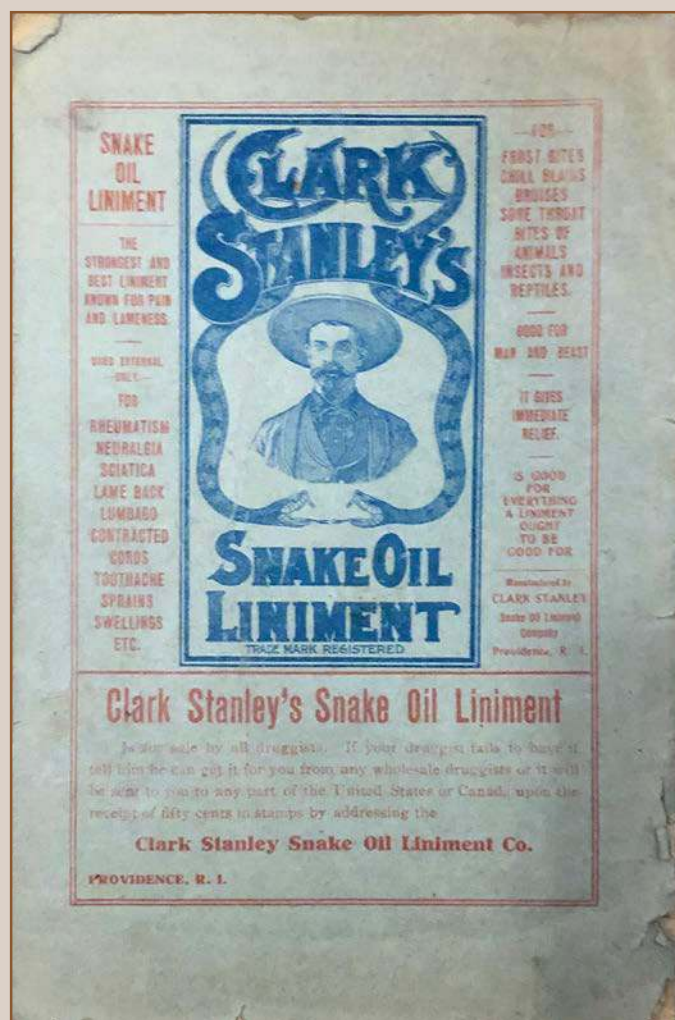
Clark Stanley's Snake Oil Liniment bottle. (Rattle from snake and bottle above Photos are by Courtney Llewellyn)



Clark Stanley's Snake Oil Liniment bottle in a plain brown box, Photo 2 Stanley's graphics change in later bottle. (Photos are by M. Van Zant)



Rare book published by Clark Stanley (Photos are by M. Van Zant)



venom sacs removed). Business was so good that he had other showmen go on the road to sell his products too.

Though far from the first huckster to sell snake oil remedies, Stanley was the most well-known. There was some basis to the belief in his liniment's effectiveness thanks to Chinese traditional medicine. Chinese laborers working the railroads often purchased oil made from Chinese water snakes to relieve pain from arthritis and bursitis. While the medical value of this kind of snake oil seems legitimate, Stanley and his competitors seemed disinclined to buy snakes from China to sell in the United States. They found a local substitute in the form of rattlesnakes, which, due to their lethal reputation, had a mystique he used to entice buyers.

But rattlesnakes aren't Chinese water snakes. Their bodies don't contain as much of the valuable oil that their Eastern counterparts do and they're much more venomous. And Stanley discovered his supply didn't even come close to meeting the demand for

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his miracle product – which led him to tinker with his original formula.

By 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act passed and strict new standards were put in place to prevent the sale of adulterated food and medication. It wasn't until 1917 that government inspectors finally seized a shipment of Stanley's snake liniment and conducted a thorough analysis of its contents. They discovered

Stanley's snake oil liniment didn't contain any snake products whatsoever. According to the official report, the bottles contained a mix of mineral oil, camphor, cayenne pepper, animal fat and turpentine. Stanley was charged for "misbranding" his product and

fined \$20. However, Stanley soon found himself out of business. Even though his scam had likely made him a wealthy man, he never really recovered and quickly faded into obscurity.

Though there have been other medical hucksters since Clark Stanley, his snake oil is still famous enough to lend its name to a myriad of other products of dubious medical validity sold today.

