

Herbert E. Bucklen

Dealer in Patent Medicines



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H. E. Bucklen, manufacturer and dealer in patent medicines, was born in Herkimer County, N. Y., on July 19, 1848. The family relocated to Coldwater, Michigan in the 1850s. By late 1860 they lived in Elkhart, Indiana and at the time of the 1870 census, Herbert, age 22, was a druggist alongside his father, Isaac Bucklen.

A biography of Bucklen appeared in *The Indianapolis News* (8/16/1902). In it, Bucklen says that he began buying real estate

and building small homes when he was a teen, reinvesting the profits in real estate, and by the time he was twenty, he owned 32 houses in Elkhart. At the same time, he says, he worked in the back room of his father's pharmacy developing his own special patent medicine—"Bucklen's Arnica Salve." Herbert married a Michigan girl named Bertha Redfield in 1877, and obtained a patent for his salve in 1878. He and Bertha then moved to Chicago, where he sunk his patent medicine earnings into real estate in the growing city.

Herbert E. Bucklen purchased the rights to the medicines of Dr. Z.L. King of Elkhart, Indiana, about 1879 and moved the business from Elkhart to Chicago about 1880. Bucklen spent lavish sums on advertising in all types of media, and created the brand name of "New Discovery", which had national recognition by 1885. He also had several other top selling medicines including the Electric Bitters and The New Life Pills, introduced in 1880 as a cure for stomach ailments. Products which never sold well were Dr. King's California Golden Compound, Dr. King's Hop Cordial, and Dr. Scheeler's Great German Cure for Consumption

Mr. Bucklen is the proprietor of four patent medicines in which he does a very large and successful business: Dr. King's New Discovery for Consumption, Coughs and Colds, Bucklen's Arnica Salve, Electric Bitters, and Dr. King's New Life Pills. He also prints a newspaper called *The Druggist*, devoted to "Health, Business and Science," to advertise his medicines, and also expends, annually, about one hundred thousand dollars with the leading newspapers all over the United States and Territories, setting forth the excellent qualities of his wonderful remedies.

By then Bucklen owned real estate in Chicago, zinc mines in Missouri, gold mines in Colorado, and a great deal of land in northern Indiana, especially Elkhart, where he built a grand opera house in 1884 and remodeled a magnificent hotel in 1889. (Neither building still stands.) Although Bucklen's primary residence remained in Chicago, he had a strong presence in Elkhart. He considered it his true home, and he was listed in its city directories—"occupation,

capitalist." He sent his son Herbert Jr. to nearby Howe Military School.

Another of his pet projects was the St. Joseph Valley Line Railroad, built in 1904-1905. The St. Joseph Valley Line was a "traction line" that started in Elkhart and ran east through Bristol, Middlebury, and Shipshewana to Lagrange. Later a "railway line" extended the Valley Line east from Lagrange through Mongo, Orland, Inverness, Angola, and Berlin to Columbia, Ohio, a total of 70 miles in all. The section from Elkhart to Bristol operated on electricity; from Bristol to Lagrange by gasoline engine; and from Lagrange to Columbia by steam engine.

When Bucklen was extending his railroad line eastwards from Lagrange to Ohio in 1905, he suggested to the residents of Angola, Indiana, that this would be a boon to their small community. The millionaire asked the residents for \$50,000 to help him with the project. When they didn't come up with the money, he was so offended that he decided to build a rival town. An article in the *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette* (11/24/1912) said that the "Arnica Salve King" was planning to "build a city in Steuben County with the express purpose of injuring Angola, against which town he has conceived a grievance." But the railroad line did run through Angola, and the rival town (eight miles east of Angola) evidently was never built.

The railroad line was not nearly as profitable as Bucklen hoped, in fact, it lost a lot of money. Running three kinds of power was complicated and expensive. Business at the west end was very slow. Bucklen poured large amounts of his own money into the project to keep it alive, but it was estimated by the *Indianapolis News* (4/4/1918) that he lost \$1,750,000 on the project.

At one point Bucklen's assets were thought to be worth \$7,000,000, but when he died in 1917, he left his widow an estate which the *Chicago Daily Tribune* valued at \$1,000,000. (That would be equal to \$17,000,000 today, still a nice chunk of change!) Due to the popularity of his Arnica Salve, his death was reported in newspapers as far away as Honolulu.

His wife inherited her husband's assets, but the Valley Line, managed by their son Herbert Jr., was already in financial trouble which only got worse as 1917-1918 progressed. A severe winter, a drop of freight traffic, and a wreck in Inverness which produced serious injuries and fatalities were the final blows. The advent of the automobile probably didn't help, either. The rail line soon went into receivership in preparation for being both legally and literally dismantled and sold for scrap.

Bucklen's funeral was held in Elkhart, and he was buried at Half Acre Cemetery in Cass County, Michigan, along with his wife Bertha.

