



Vince Martonis surrounded by his remarkable Dr. Fenner collection.

Fifty Fabulous Years of Fenners

By Vince Martonis

The year was 1985. We were scheduled to dig for seven hot and sweaty July days behind Dr. Fenner's impressive home in Fredonia, New York. This was a large brick mansion he bought in 1883, after ten successful years selling his remedies. We were mostly an enthusiastic but amateur crew called the Canadaway Creek Anthropology Project, investigators of historical sites, supervised by a newly graduated PhD archaeologist from the University of Buffalo and a Fredonia State Anthropologist.

Introduced to the students as a local historian, I was there mostly in the role of a glass and pottery expert. Or so they thought. Because the day before, a digger had unearthed a 2" shoulder shard showing some design and a star from an aqua scroll flask, and this day I had brought the exact half pint flask to show everyone, a GIX-31, ironically the only flask I possessed at the time.

It was beyond luck that I had just that flask. The student diggers were quite im-

pressed with what they judged as my vast knowledge of glass, and I was thereafter shown every fragment we found. I myself was completely overwhelmed with the serendipitous thought that Fenner and I owned the same version of a scroll flask, only 100 years apart! Fenner and the Fates had to be smiling down on me.

A couple of days earlier, we had located Fenner's barn foundation. This day, we hit a long shed next to the barn and began to unearth some shards of 1880s Fenner

bottles. Most were unembossed, but three DR. FENNER'S/SALT RHEUM/OINTMENT 2 ½" bottles did surface pretty much unbroken, along with a cast iron mini mixing vessel with a handle and three little feet. Also, a case for what was most likely his personal pocket watch.

As a Fenner bottle collector, I was in heaven. There I was, on my knees, trowel in hand, scraping away the dirt in the very area where Dr. Fenner made his medicines a century earlier. Talk about being in touch with history!

In 1992, when the anthropologist left the college and headed to Maine to retire, he turned over to me all that we had excavated behind the Fenner house. Those three bottles, mixing vessel, and watch case are now in the Barker Museum in Fredonia where they belong.

Many years before his life in his mansion, Milton Fenner lived in the very rural Fennerville. Doesn't sound like much of a settlement. It wasn't. But it was near the land where Christopher Fenner — descendant of a Puritan Divine and three

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TOP LEFT: GIX-31 flask with outline showing the shard found during the Fenner Site dig. Note: the design curves in the flask are reflecting portions of the iron pontil.

TOP RIGHT: This photo of Dr. Fenner belonged to his son, Milton. In 1977, he gave it to a writer who published an article about his father. She gave the photo to me, and I donated it to the Barker Museum in Fredonia, N.Y. I forged his signature under the photo.

BOTTOM: These three DR. FENNER'S SALT RHEUM OINTMENT bottles, a mixing vessel, and a watch case were excavated behind Dr. Fenner's house in Fredonia in 1985.

FOLLOWING PAGE:

TOP: In 1885, Fenner bought an 1839 Methodist Church and converted it to use for his People's Remedies production. In 1971, I lived in the house which shows on the far left. My landlady gave me a Fenner bottle she dug in the yard and that began my Fenner odyssey. *Photo courtesy of the D. R. Barker Museum, Fredonia, NY. Retouching by Niles Dening Photography.*

BOTTOM: Here are 15 variations of Fenner's well-known KIDNEY & BACKACHE CURE/REMEDY medicine. The clear and yellow amber sample size examples are very scarce.





Rhode Island Governors — settled in 1817, so it took on the family name.

On a picturesque road overlooking Cassadaga Creek in South Stockton, Chautauqua County, the westernmost county of New York State, the Fenners experienced the simplicities and complexities of a challenging life. They were mainly farmers, also makers of the Fenner Churn. Nothing much notable there today, except Fenner Road, named after the industrious family.

Milton M. Fenner, son of Christopher, was born July 28, 1837, the seventh of nine children. Losing his father at age 13 no doubt aged him and taught him to fend for himself to a great degree, and fend he did.

A teacher in local schools. Medical college in Cincinnati. Three years in the Civil War, rising to the rank of 1st Lieutenant as Assistant Surgeon U.S. Navy. Battle hardened as a commander and a surgeon. Medical practices in Flint, Michigan, and Jamestown, New York. An unsuccessful oil speculator near Drake's Titusville. Publisher of a medical journal. County Physician to the Poor. Physician to the County Insane Asylum. Chairman of the N.Y. Committee on Public Health.

All this before he turned 32 and moved a medical practice from Jamestown to Fredonia in early 1869. But already he had been mixing up the medicine. As noted in an 1868 Jamestown directory ad,

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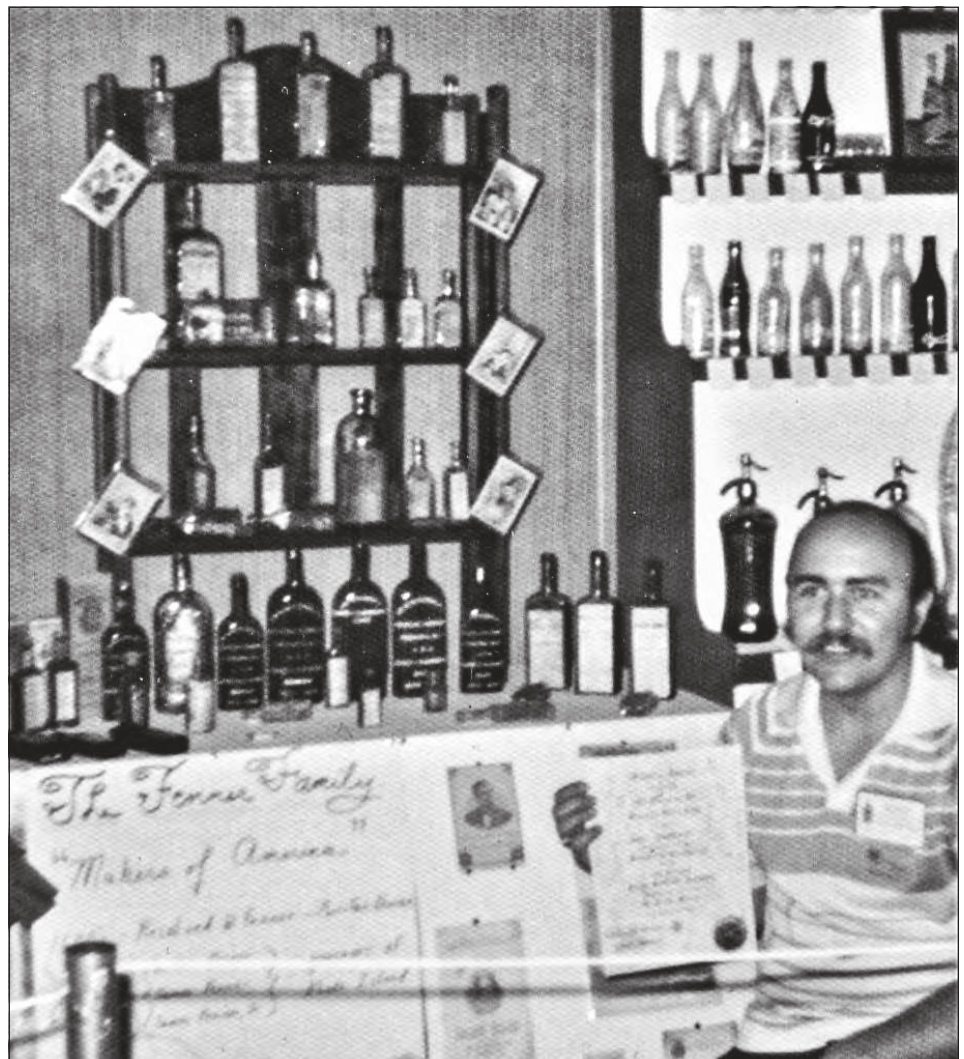
TOP: The two pint CAPITOL BITTERS are rare. The four in the top row are embossed CAPITOL BITTERS but have other medicine labels on them. LIFE ROOT is a unique example. CAPITOL BITTERS trade card with stag.

BOTTOM: My first major Fenner display at the incredible St. Louis National Bottle Show in 1976.

FOLLOWING PAGE:

TOP: A variety of Fenner's medicines. The sample size of the GOLDEN RELIEF is the only one known (on its side on the right).

BOTTOM: Very rare merchant's COUGH HONEY store sign — E.H. Mills Brookton, N.Y. My one-of-a-kind broken embossed COUGH HONEY bottle at center.



four medicines were formulated and sold by Dr. Fenner: Specific Lung & Throat Remedy; Specific for the Itch; Liver and Blood Alterative & Tonic Compound; and Liver & Blood Pills.

And hear this. In fifty years of searching, I was never able to find even one of these four elusive Jamestown Fenner medicines. If you have one, you may hold me up — slightly.

So what have I found in fifty years? About 140 variations of his Fredonia Fenner medicines, along with hundreds of advertising items and other paper rarities, mostly dating from 1872 to about 1914.

Dr. Fenner's most popular seller was his reliable and well-named GOLDEN RELIEF, though there are no bottles embossed with the name. This was one of the seven original Fredonia Fenner medicines he began selling in 1872. Fenner's 1873 formula notebook shows a 60-pint result using 40 pints of alcohol, white tea tree oil, ether, camphor, oil of hemlock, sassafras, German Liver Bitters, and more. It was 138 proof.

Over 100 years later (1977), I bought a bottle of it in a Fredonia drug store, still the same old formula, that is, until 1964 when a tax on alcohol forced Brown Mfg. Co. to denature the alcohol, making it "for external use only" for the first time. S. C. Wells & Co. bought the Fenner business in 1914 and later Wells itself was bought out by the Brown Mfg. Company, which continued to sell Fenner medicines past the 1970s.

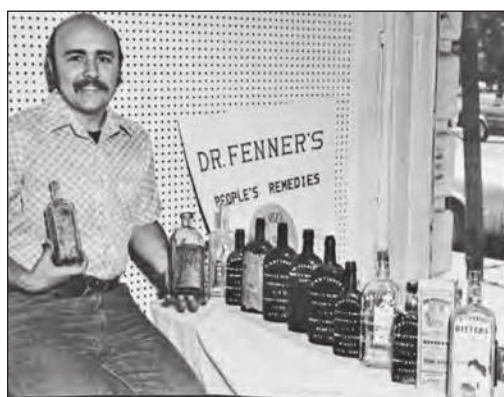
Fenner's Kidney & Backache Cure comes in a variety of embossings, sizes, and colors. After the Pure Food & Drug Act of 1906, the word Remedy replaced Cure. Besides sample sizes in amber, honey amber, and clear, the Cure can be found in rare variations of green and a near yellow. The Remedy is in a standard amber, except for three very rare examples known in a yellow olive shade.

Another money-maker, his BLOOD & LIVER REMEDY & NERVE TONIC,



TOP: GOLDEN RELIEF was Fenner's hottest selling medicine, lasting from 1872 into the 1980s. The labels on the two bottles in the top row are on CAPITOL BITTERS bottles and are quite scarce.

BOTTOM: Very rare 9 x 12 Dyspepsia Cure poster, a scarce box, and a bottle with contents.



PHOTOS (from top left): DR. FENNER'S KIDNEY & BACKACHE REMEDY. I own 2 of the 3 known in this yellow olive color, both mint. 1 of the 2 will be auctioned by AGG in July. The third known is highly stained.

Two DR. FENNER'S KIDNEY & BACKACHE CURE bottles in very rare colors. Very few like these are known.

To promote my interest in Fenner medicines, I asked a Fredonia pharmacist if I could set up a display in his store window in 1977. This photo was published in a local newspaper and later in a magazine article.

Fenner's BLOOD & LIVER REMEDY & NERVE TONIC medicine was a strong seller for 42 years and even after that when S.C. Wells owned the business (*bottle on left*).

used these roots: sarsaparilla, yellowdock, turkey corn, stillingia, bitter, Indian physic, mandrake, licorice, sweet flag, and more. A 40-gallon result used 100 lbs. of sugar, 36 gallons of water, and 4 gallons of alcohol. It was a long, percolating process taking up to seven days. The known bottles show a variety of labels but no embossed medicine name.

Bottle collectors have all seen his embossed CAPITOL BITTERS bottles. This impressive aqua, sometimes clear, bitters is almost always found in the 10 ½" size. Few realize that it also comes in a *RARE* 9" size in aqua and clear. Again, a plant-based medicine, it used columbo root, cloves, orange peel, and allspice in a weeks-long percolating process.

Eclectic medicine, which Fenner studied in Cincinnati and followed, strongly promoted the use of plants, roots, and barks to cure the patient. Clearly, this is on the mark when we examine today's remedies. Let nature do its work and get plenty of exercise — the philosophy of health Fenner promoted.

An early botanical supplier for Fenner was Eber Pettit who owned a nearby supply business across the creek from the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation. Pettit's rapport with the Indians helped him learn about the curative properties in nature's remedies. He used this knowledge when he mixed his own medicines as the American Eye Salve Company in Fredonia.

Another popular Fenner medicine was his COUGH HONEY, later changed to COUGH-COLD SYRUP after the Pure Food & Drug Act of 1906. Once again, a number of roots and herbs, and the addition of skunk cabbage, became the curative agents.

There is only one bottle I know of embossed with the words COUGH HONEY. In three indented panels are the words DR. M. M. FENNER FREDONIA, N. Y./IMPROVED/COUGH HONEY. In 1978, my 4-year-old son, no

doubt imitating daddy's bottle arranging, reached into the back of my showcase and pushed that bottle down onto a labeled BLOOD & LIVER REMEDY & NERVE TONIC bottle, breaking both. I glued the COUGH HONEY back together, only having a slight idea of how rare it was. Since then, I have never been able to find another — and neither has any other collector to my knowledge.

Other Fenner medicines were SOOTHING SYRUP, SENNATORIA/SENNA CONFECTION, PLEASANT WORM SYRUP, ST. VITUS' DANCE SPECIFIC/MEDICINE, BACKACHE PLASTER, FIT REMEDY, VEGETABLE BLOOD & LIVER PILLS/PELLETS, LIFE ROOT, SALT RHEUM/FAMILY OINTMENT, CATARRH REMEDY and GERMAN EYE SALVE.

The last two are the only ones I was never able to add to my collection. Fenner col-

lector Doug Lehman of Weirton, West Virginia, has the last one, but no one I know has the CATARRH REMEDY.

In 1885, to adequately develop all aspects of his business, Dr. Fenner bought an old Methodist church building where on three floors he had all he needed, including his own printing press in the basement. He became wealthy and influential to the extent that he was able to become a two-term New York State Assemblyman, Town Supervisor, a director at two banks, part owner of the Columbia Hotel, President of his own insurance company in Buffalo, developer/part owner of a street railway, and savior of the Chautauqua Co. Fair. He also had a fire company and a veterans organization named after him!

And what did he enjoy in any spare time he had? One simple pleasure was touring the countryside on a bicycle with his son Milton. I learned this in 1977 when I sat down with 90-year-old Milton M. Fenner

Jr. to see what he could tell me about his father. Dr. Fenner's first wife died young and he married an attractive 22-year-old at age 47, the result being the birth of Milton in 1887.

Milton also told the story of his father's "model farm" behind the house, 12 acres, including a deer park which became a local attraction. He also reminisced about their travels to visit his grandmother and uncle in California.

I look back now at that 28-year-old Vince and wish that I had been wiser with my selection of questions. What a very rare opportunity I had to talk to the son of the man who started and managed one of the largest and most successful medicine companies in the United States!

Look for Part 2 of this article in the July issue of *AB&GC*.



1/2 GALLON BOTTLE PICTURED ABOVE

WANTED!

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SPRINGS"**

**WYTHEVILLE,
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