

## CASTOR OIL AND SPIDER WEBS OLD TIME CURES AND REMEDIES

On a beautiful afternoon in the late summer of 1953, the meadow near Hopewell Grange was abloom with wildflowers as Janet Hackney, her friend Harriet Day, and Harriet's parents, David and Olive Day, approached the grange building, where the adults were to attend a meeting. In a few short weeks, school would be starting, but as the two twelve-year-old girls watched the adults walk into the grange on that summer day, school was the farthest thing from their minds.

"Harriet and I did not have to attend the grange meeting," Penn-Craft native Janet Hackney Kinzel told me as she thought back to that afternoon so long ago. "We girls were left on our own, so we enjoyed the afternoon, roaming the fields, picking wild flowers, and just having fun being together and unsupervised."

During that delightful afternoon they spent immersed in the wonder of the great outdoors, Janet felt the inevitable call. Of Nature, that is.

"I needed to use the outhouse," she explained matter-of-factly. "It was a spiderwebby two-holer, and there was no toilet paper, so I yelled for Harriet to pick some leaves for me to use, and she did."

Not being in an arithmetical mood on such a carefree day, neither girl bothered to count the leaves that Harriet so kindly provided. Had they done so, they might have realized the significance of the "leaves of three" that Janet used to meet her unanticipated need. Their failure to do so soon provided a painful lesson: sometimes, counting counts!

"I missed the whole first week of eighth grade, lying in bed covered with calamine lotion," Janet lamented. Of course, "leaves of three" are a classic warning to hikers, explorers, and twelve-year-old flower pickers to beware of poison ivy!

Calamine lotion is still used today to treat the itch and rash of poison ivy. However, our parents' and grandparents' generations knew of other home remedies for treating the all-too-common itch that afflicted so many unwary children and adults every summer. Home remedies are neither scientifically tested nor clinically evaluated as modern medicines are. However, home remedies can boast many anecdotal testimonials

supporting their effectiveness in treating various afflictions.

As this series of articles about locally popular home remedies begins, readers are reminded that this column cannot vouch for the effectiveness or safety of the home remedies that will be described. They are presented as threads of the colorful historical tapestry that is southwestern Pennsylvania culture and lore.

Years ago, if a poison ivy rash made an unwelcome appearance on the skin of a local boy or girl, one tried-and-true solution was an immersion in Redstone Creek, also known as Sulfur Creek. The aptly named stream's reddish waters were an almost magical potion that soothed the maddening itch of poison ivy.

"It always brought a raised eyebrow from my associates at work," observed Chris Hatfield, raised on Brownsville's Catherine Avenue and now of Falls Church, Virginia, "when I would regale them with tales of curing poison ivy with a relaxing dip down at the sand bar, just downstream of Redstone Creek. It always worked for me!"

"I agree with the poison ivy remedy of taking a dip in Sulfur Creek," concurred former Shaffner Avenue resident Bea Teasdale-Lindsay of Mt. Gilead, Ohio. "I know first-hand that it works. I had poison ivy for a month, and within a week of my swim in Sulfur Creek, my poison ivy was drying up. I always felt that the cure was a result of the sulfur, which was a drying agent."

Luzerne Township native Harry Hackney carries the curative powers of Sulfur Creek one step further.

"The sulfur creek not only cured poison ivy," Harry declared, "it seemed to prevent me from even getting it. I demonstrated my immunity by washing my hands with poison ivy!"

Is there a scientific explanation for the ability of Sulfur Creek's waters to relieve the itch of poison ivy? A basis in science does appear to exist. Medical sources indicate that sulfur has long been known as a top remedy for rashes, eczemas, and other skin conditions. Babies born with eczema have been treated with sulfur to clear up the rash and relieve the unbearable itching and burning. Even in ancient Roman times, hot sulfur baths were recommended to vanquish scabies.

As a boy, West Brownsville native J. P. (Rocky) McAndrews and his friends found another way to harness the mystical powers of local creeks' sulfurous waters.

"In the summer," Rocky informed me, "when the miners went on their two-week vacation, we often swam in the creek by Alman's farm. We used the orange sulfur mud to help cure poison ivy by applying it thickly to our body and allowing it to dry, after which we would rinse it off.

“We also found another cure below the frog pond on McGrady’s farm, where the woods were damp and dark. The water ran down below the homes on Bull Run Road, and we found a certain weed growing down there. The weed had a bowl near its base, and we would bust that bowl and rub it on our poison ivy.”

Rocky did not name the plant he and his friends used, but there is no doubt that some plants do contain ingredients that can relieve the itch of poison ivy. Chuck Johnson of Brownsville swears by the curative powers of a commonly occurring plant in this area, one that he has recommended to many friends as a treatment for poison ivy.

“I have a friend who is a chiropractor,” Chuck told me. “While I was talking to him one day, he said, ‘Chuck, I haven’t been able to work for the past several days because I have poison ivy so bad.’ I told him, ‘You need to get some jewelweed!’”

“He laughed politely, then asked me what jewelweed was.

“‘Jewelweed will take care of your poison ivy,’ I told him, ‘and it is easy to find. Just about anywhere poison ivy is found, jewelweed will be growing nearby.’”

“And did your friend try it?” I asked.

“Yes, he did, and within two days, his poison ivy was gone.”

I was impressed. I’ve had poison ivy many times myself, so I was interested in learning more about this simple natural remedy.

“What does jewelweed look like?” I asked Chuck.

“It is several feet high and has small orange or yellow flowers that are about the size of a nickel,” he explained. “You slice open the translucent stem and rub the juice on your poison ivy. The juice is not real sticky and it has no smell. Within two days of rubbing it on, your poison ivy should be gone.

“I have recommended jewelweed to many friends over the years,” Chuck continued. “People call me all the time, asking me where they can find it. It’s found just about anywhere, although with the colder weather coming on now, you may not see it around here again until spring.”

After I spoke with Chuck, I decided to do some research to see if I could find a scientific explanation for jewelweed’s apparent curative powers. I discovered a web site called [altnature.com](http://altnature.com) that heralded the use of jewelweed for the treatment of poison ivy. It was only when the web site mentioned that the plant is also called “Touch-Me-Not” that I realized that I have often seen this plant on my own property.

“Jewelweed is best known for its skin healing properties,” explained web site editor Karen Bergeron. “It is a smooth annual that grows three to five feet high. . . . Pale Jewelweed has yellow flowers, and Spotted

Touch-Me-Nots have orange flowers with dark red dots. The seed pods will ‘pop’ when touched.

“The Spotted Jewelweed variety is most commonly used for rashes. . . . The leaves and the juice from the stem of Jewelweed are used to cure poison ivy and other plant induced rashes. . . . Poultices and salves from the plant are a folk remedy for bruises, burns, cuts, eczema, insect bites, sores, sprains, warts, and ringworm.”

And that’s not all this multi-talented plant can do. Another source indicates that jewelweed contains an anti-inflammatory and fungicide substance that is the active ingredient of Preparation H.

So where can you find this natural remedy for poison ivy? Jewelweed prefers moist conditions and is often found growing along streams or near poison ivy. In southwestern Pennsylvania, it blooms from May through October and is actually a wild variety of *impatiens* (“*impatiens capensis*”). It is said that even domestic varieties of *impatiens*, those grown in home flower beds, have some of the same curative qualities that jewelweed possesses, although to a lesser degree.

Next we will look at popular home remedies for treating the common cold – treatments that moms and grandmothers swore by, and which their patients, many of whom are now grandparents themselves, agree worked very well.

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### ***WHO SAYS THERE IS NO CURE FOR THE COMMON COLD?***

Scientists say they are still searching for a cure for the common cold, but if our readers are to be believed, their mothers and grandmothers have been using effective home remedies for years.

“My Bubba came to live with us on Second Street in Brownsville in the early 1950s,” recalls Alice G. Craven of Elkton, Maryland, “and she brought with her a home remedy for cold or flu in the form of a ‘hot toddy.’ On the second or third day of a cold, when we were stuffed up and congested, we would wait patiently as she got out her cache of rock candy and put it in the bottom of a cup. She would pour hot tea and whiskey over it, cover it with a cloth, and let it steep. We would drink it, and with Bubba sitting at the side of the bed, we would fall asleep to the touch of her hand.

“The neat thing was that at bedtime, along with the hot toddy you received the care of a loving grandmother, stories from her life in the old

country and here in America, and the best sleep that you'd had since the onslaught of the cold. The remedy was wonderful – especially the rock candy – but the tender loving care was the memory maker.”

Like Bubba's hot toddy, home remedies were administered with a potent dose of love, which may help to explain why they often worked so well. In many families, when a child came down with a chest cold, Mom or Grandma immediately prepared a mustard plaster.

“I remember the good old mustard plasters that my mom, Alice Lane Staib, used to slap on my chest when I got bad chest colds,” reminisces George Staib, who grew up in West Brownsville in the 1930s and 1940s. “I had frequent bouts of bronchitis and pneumonia when I was young, and my poor mom must have been frantic, as there were no antibiotics in those days. Any time I came down with chest infections, Mom would create a paste of flour mixed with Colman's yellow dry mustard.

“She would ladle the paste onto an old T-shirt or light towel, which needless to say would not be usable after that. Mom would put the plaster on me as it got hot, and when she took it off my chest, my skin would be pink from the heat. She would not leave it on me at bedtime, because if it were left on for too long, I know that I would have been burned.

“Mom would also give me a cup of hot blackberry wine to drink, and then she would pile blankets on me to get me warm. That treatment always broke my fevers.

“Mom is eighty-seven years old now and in declining health. I wish that I could do for her now what she did for me so many times when I was a child.”

The heat produced by a mustard plaster was important to its effectiveness, but the patient needed to be carefully monitored during its use.

“Years ago,” notes South Side-raised Hannah Millward Fisher, “the recipe for the mustard plaster was on the Colman's dry mustard can. As I recall, a paste of flour, water and dry mustard was put on a piece of cloth, which was applied to the chest and watched very carefully. If not monitored, the mustard could give a second degree burn to the chest. When the skin appeared pink, the plaster was removed and camphorated oil applied to the area where the plaster had been. If the patient had not improved by the next night, the plaster could be applied front and back to the chest.”

Over the past thirteen years, Elaine Hunchuck DeFrank, a staff member at the Coal and Coke Heritage Center at Penn State Fayette – The Eberly Campus, has conducted interviews with coal miners, coke

oven workers, and their wives and family members. Elaine has heard descriptions of many popular home remedies.

“A mustard plaster could be made by melting two tablespoons of lard in a large skillet,” Elaine explained. “To the melted lard, one would add one heaping teaspoon of dry mustard. The ingredients were heated on low heat and stirred to avoid scorching. The heated mixture was then poured on an eighteen-inch square of cloth, which was folded to make a poultice and applied to the area of pain, as this mustard plaster could also be used to relieve a sore back or aching muscles.”

Elaine related an amusing incident that happened when her own mother was seven years old.

“She went to the store and just pointed to what she thought was a jar of mustard on the shelf,” said Elaine, “and she took it home and gave it to her mother, who could not read or speak English. Her mother proceeded to make a plaster for her boarder’s sore back by smearing it on a cloth, warming it in the oven, then applying it to his back. The boarder reported that it relieved him of his pain, and he noted that the plaster smelled unusually good. It turns out she had made the plaster from peanut butter!”

Then there is the turpentine treatment, as described by reader Hank Greenberg.

“When I was about ten,” Hank recalled, “I had a sudden asthmatic attack while sleeping, and I awakened because I couldn’t breathe. My grandmother and mother heard my labored breathing and rushed into my room. My mother turned on the shower to get the steam going and took me into the bathroom.

“Meanwhile, my grandmother had disappeared. In a few minutes, she came back with a towel that reeked of turpentine. She wrapped a clean cloth around my chest, then followed up by wrapping the turpentine cloth around this. By inhaling these fumes, I was able to breath normally again in a very short time.”

Jefferson Township native Nancy Willson Komacek of LaBelle also got the turpentine treatment.

“My Mom would mix turpentine and melted lard, rub it on my chest and back, then cover it with a homemade wool vest which tied on both sides,” Nancy explained. “The mixture was the consistency of a salve and although you couldn’t see it, you could sure feel it. It was a cheap substitute for Vicks VapoRub.”

Vicks VapoRub! Nancy has mentioned the magical concoction upon which so many generations have relied to battle a cough or cold.

“My mom was a Vicks VapoRub fan,” declared Bill Johnson of Olean, New York, who was raised in the 1930s and 1940s on Bull Run

Road. “She used it for everything associated with a cold. She would put it on your throat, neck, chest, back, forehead, and in your nose. She would put some in a metal jar lid, heat it over the gas pilot on the stove, and make us breathe the heated vapors.”

Nowadays, some of the ways in which moms used Vicks VapoRub are strongly discouraged on the product’s label. For example, the label cautions against heating VapoRub and warns that it should not be taken by mouth or inserted into the nostrils.

“Mom had us ingest it,” continued Bill Johnson. “My wife doesn’t believe she made us do that, but I just turned seventy-five last month, so I guess it didn’t hurt me!”

“We had to swallow Vicks for a bad throat,” added West Brownsville native J. P. (Rocky) McAndrews. A third cold victim reported ingesting a spoonful of Vicks with a swallow of hot milk, while yet another told of boiling a small amount of VapoRub with water, lacing the resulting ‘tea’ with honey to mask the taste, and drinking two cups of it before bedtime. Of course, all of these techniques fly in the face of strong warnings on the Vicks label that the substance should not be taken internally.

Willard Peet of Poland, Ohio, recalls another cold cure that involved a homemade tea.

“When I was a boy,” Willard explained, “I caught a cold while we were on vacation in Potter County. My dad went out, got some dried herb called ‘boneset,’ and steeped it to make hot tea. I never in my life have tasted anything so bitter.”

Boneset (*eupatorium perfoliatum*) was a favorite herb of North American Indians, and it is considered by herbalists to be one of the best herbs for relief of flu symptoms, fever, congestion, and constipation.

“All I know is it helped cure my cold fast,” declared Willard, “despite the fact that I only took one dose because it was so bitter.”

Even a well-known Brownsville doctor got in on the act, coming up with his own remedies for cold symptoms.

“I remember a true Brownsville remedy,” reported Donna Edwards-Jordan of North Huntingdon. “Dr. Waggoner dispensed his own brand of cold medication, which he may possibly have patented. They were little grey tablets called ‘Calcidin,’ which may not be the correct spelling. They were supposed to ‘dry you out’ when you had a head cold, and that was an understatement! Your nose stopped running because they dried you out to the point that it became painful to breathe. I wonder if anyone else remembers Calcidin.”

“I found a prescription recently,” added reader Marilu Stapleton Copping, “that Dr. Leroy Waggoner wrote for my mother, ‘Dutch’

Stapleton, when we moved from West Brownsville to Phoenix in 1949. I believe it was a salve for the chest to aid breathing in the case of severe colds or chest congestion. When I took it to a pharmacy, they said they couldn't fill it because coal tar, an ingredient in the original prescription, was not available. The pharmacist said he could substitute something for the coal tar, but I firmly believe the coal tar supplied much of the curative powers, so I didn't want a replacement."

Whether relying on home-brewed 'tea,' a homemade plaster, or unconventional uses of Vicks VapoRub, many local folks have long depended on traditional remedies to treat everyday ailments. Next we will look at home remedies used to treat boils, burns, and other medical conditions.

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### ***SODA POP BOTTLE HELPED CURE PAINFUL BOILS***

This looked like it was going to hurt.

On the gas stove, an open pan of water bubbled noisily over the burner's blue flame. An upright empty soda pop bottle danced in the boiling froth.

Standing attentively next to the stove was a frightened little girl, her heart pounding as she watched the pop bottle get hotter.

After a few minutes had passed, the child stared in fascination as her mother took a folded towel and carefully wrapped it around the neck of the bottle. She lifted it from the bubbling bath, held it at arm's length in front of her, and turned nervously toward her wide-eyed daughter. The little girl was transfixed, unable to move as her mother slowly extended the steaming bottle toward the child's head.

Mother hesitated, holding the bottle just inches from her daughter's neck. Obediently, the courageous girl took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and tilted her head far to the left. Her long hair shifted and dangled to the side, exposing an angry red boil protruding from the right side of her neck. The child, her eyes closed tightly to keep her tears from spilling, gritted her teeth and braced herself.

The glass of the pop bottle was indeed hot. Her mother had tested it herself before carefully placing the bottle's open end against her daughter's neck, directly over the boil. Mother held it there firmly, maintaining a tight seal between bottle and skin, allowing the suction to build inside the bottle so that it could perform its magic. If all went well,



her daughter's painful boil would soon be just a memory.

"That was how my mother treated boils," remembers Low Hill native Dorothy Clayton Tennant of Waynesburg. "As the bottle cooled, it would draw out the core of the boil. Then my mother would mix evaporated milk and bread into a paste, place it over the open sore, and wrap it. This worked very well. In fact, since then I have successfully used this method myself."

Boils, which were quite painful to the touch, resulted from a staphylococcal infection that infiltrated the body at the site of a cut, scratch, or hair follicle, forming a tender red lump that swelled with pus. Over a period of about ten days, the swollen boil would usually burst, relieving the pain and pressure. If instead it became infected, a doctor would have to lance it and treat it with medication.

"From what I could gather from my older sister," Dorothy Tennant continued, "squeezing the boil like a pimple would only make the core go deeper. It had to be drawn out. Sis said that there was a drawing salve you could buy, but it was expensive. The only way Mom could get the infection out was to remove the core of the boil, and the pop bottle worked very well to pull the core out. Then the paste that Mom applied helped heal the open sore. Of course, nowadays they are treated with antibiotics."

According to the Mayo Clinic, the staphylococcus bacteria which causes boils exists on the skin of a significant percentage of the population and is contagious. Squeezing a boil can cause the infection to spread under the skin or get into the bloodstream, which can cause blood poisoning. Because boils can have such serious consequences, it is recommended that if a fever develops or a boil becomes very painful, a physician should be consulted.

Nevertheless, in an era when a trip to the doctor's office was the last resort for some families, the "pop bottle method" was a popular home remedy for boils. Another remedy that was tried involved – of all things – a dime.

"We would use adhesive tape to hold a silver dime on a boil," explained South Side native Chuck Hosler of Willoughby, Ohio, "which would draw the boil to a head."

Chuck grew up during the Depression. In that era, the sight of a dime taped to a boy's skin could be too great a temptation for him and his buddies to resist.

"The boy across the street got in trouble," Chuck revealed, "because we took the dime off his boil and spent it. A dime was big money to us kids! Of course," he added, "we were afraid to go home after we did it."

Readers have mentioned other methods used to "draw out" the core

of a boil. Hannah Millward Fisher recalled the use of Fels Naptha soap, which was cut into tiny pieces, mixed with granulated sugar and water, put into a piece of muslin, and placed over the boil as a poultice to “draw out the poison.” Former Bull Run Road resident Wally Mulligan of Pecos, New Mexico, noted that a boil was sometimes treated with the skin from the inside of an egg shell.

Elaine Hunchuck DeFrank, who has conducted many interviews on behalf of the Coal and Coke Heritage Center at Penn State Fayette – The Eberly Campus, was told by one veteran of the coal patch about the use of a “black drawing salve that looked like tar.” Another interviewee suggested soaking the boil in Epsom salt water, while a third advocated placing a ripened banana peel on the boil overnight, causing the boil to come to a head and rupture by the next morning.

Boils were not the only skin affliction that could be treated with a home remedy. Another was the bed sore.

“Dr. Wilt [former Brownsville physician] told us to use Milk of Magnesia on the back and elbows to relieve bed sores,” noted Barbara Davis, now of Malabar, Florida. “It was applied in a paste and helped keep the flesh from opening.” Others have echoed Barbara’s endorsement of Milk of Magnesia for bed sores, suggesting the application of a paste made of equal parts Vaseline and Milk of Magnesia.

Elaine DeFrank described a coal patch remedy that recommended covering a bed sore with white granulated sugar. Another suggested applying mercurochrome to the bed sore, then sprinkling the wound with sugar.

While on the topic of skin ailments, readers have submitted several home remedies for burns. One of the more unusual ideas was described by Hannah Fisher, who wrote, “When my husband’s aunt backed into a space heater at the age of three, her nightgown ignited and burned her back. They lived on a farm, and when the doctor checked the burn, he advised the parents to get some turkey feathers from the barnyard, dip the feathers in oil, and continually coat her back with the oil. She lived to be ninety-six and had no scars.”

A less serious but more common type of burn is sunburn. I heard from several readers who shared a similar remedy for that summertime affliction. Pat Oldfield of Palm Harbor, Florida, who was raised in Newell, wrote, “When my brother was about eight years old, he got a bad sunburn while swimming in the Mon. Blisters covered his back from shoulder to shoulder. I remember my aunt putting slices of raw potato on the blisters, but unfortunately I cannot recall whether they did any good. I would love to know if other folks tried this and whether it worked.”

The raw potato treatment worked wonderfully for Hank Greenberg, who was raised on Front Street in Brownsville.

“When I was about eight years old,” he explained, “we spent a few weeks with my cousins in New York at a beach called Far Rockaway. I was told to be careful, as the sun would burn my tender skin if I didn’t cover up or go indoors when I started to turn red. Those instructions went in one ear and out the other.

“On the third day there, I was out in the sun for most of the day. When I got back to our rental apartment, I was as red as a beet and started to cry from the pain. My grandmother went to the kitchen and ground up some raw baking potatoes. She laid me down on the bed and covered my body with the ground up potatoes. What a relief it was as the cool potato mush began to draw out the heat. It was a real life saver.”

As I share these various home remedies with my readers, I wish to emphasize that these remedies are discussed here because they have become an integral part of our region’s cultural heritage. They are not suggested as remedies that are recommended, even though some folks swear by them. One should consult with a physician if suffering from any of the maladies mentioned here, since modern medicine has come up with tested, effective treatments for many of these ailments.

The home remedies I have described thus far in this series have dealt with illnesses rather than injuries, but sprains, cuts, splinters, and other mishaps occurred just about every day, particularly to children. Next we will explore home remedies for those types of ailments.

We will also bring up a “preventive remedy” that will cause many readers to turn up their noses in revulsion when they read the following words:

Cod liver oil and castor oil.

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### ***SPIDERS PROVIDED A HELPFUL REMEDY FOR A BLEEDING WOUND***

What a strange idea.

“My mother’s grandmother had a leg ulcer that was bleeding,” a reader wrote recently. “According to my mother, her grandmother applied spider webs to the bleeding ulcer to stop the bleeding.”

Spider webs?

As it turns out, this unusual home remedy, as described in an email from medical librarian Hannah Millward Fisher, is not such an unheard-

of treatment after all. In fact, it may have a scientific basis. There were folks living in the coal patches around here who believed that it worked.

Elaine Hunchuck DeFrank has interviewed coal patch residents about their lives. One interviewee mentioned that “bleeding from a cut should be covered with a cobweb,” adding that “to avoid a scar, one should apply goose lard to the wound.”

Using spider webs to stop bleeding is an old idea. According to Penn State biologist Dr. Don McKinstry, who is quoted by Vicki L. Glembocki in a 1995 article entitled “Arachnicillin,” “spider webs have been used for wound dressings since the first century A. D.” Glembocki notes that William Shakespeare mentioned this remedy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when the character Bottom says, “I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good master cobweb. If I cut my finger, I shall make bold of you.”

Is there really a scientific reason why a spider web or cobweb might stop bleeding and help healing? According to Glembocki, it is not the web itself that supposedly protects against microbial attack. It is, rather, “a chemical coating on the silk, much like the sticky coating for prey capture, which is released from one of many glands as the spider spins the web.” Arachnologist Rainer Foelix theorizes that “the coating may protect old and abandoned webs from fungal and bacterial attack.” In other words, spider webs seem to have an antiseptic quality.

Of course, the practical question is: how does a person apply flimsy spider webs to a bleeding cut? According to instructions in home remedy reference books, one should ball up as much spider web as can be found and place it directly on the open wound. This should stop the bleeding faster than a bandage. Afterward the wound may be cleansed with peroxide.

As for any reader who plans to test this home remedy, I wish you the best of luck with your spider web gathering. Just be sure to check the webs for occupants before gathering them!

West Brownsville-born Ross Snowdon helped his parents weather the Depression by peddling a homemade remedy for cuts. Ross explained, “As a young boy during the Depression, I had my mother render ‘sheep tallow’ (sheep fat) into a soft salve for healing cuts and relieving itching skin. I put the salve in small white ‘Lady Ester’ jars with a pink screw cap and took the salve door to door to my regular customers in the West Brownsville and Brownsville area, selling each jar for twenty-five cents. I gave the proceeds to my mother and father to help pay for our meals. It was my way to help out at home.”

Another common injury for which home remedies were devised was a sprained ankle. Allison #1 native Tom Liberatore recalls his

grandmother's reaction when he limped into the house with an injured ankle.

"My early teens were adventurous and edged with an occasional bit of risk," Tom recalled. "The machinery and equipment at the nearby Allison mine works presented many dangers to the workmen, let alone to young kids. In spite of the chance of getting nabbed by the mine deputies, the mine works was often our favorite obstacle course and playground."

Tom described a risky childhood game that sounds like a giant-sized game of "Pick-Up Sticks."

"The game took place on the gigantic timber post pile, consisting of hundreds of eight-foot locust posts intended to be used to shore up the underground mine roof. We would test our skills and delicately climb up and over the log pile. On one occasion, I had almost completed the descent and was nearing safe ground level when I triggered a log slide. Some of the posts rolled over my left ankle and calf. The guys dug me out, and with their help, I managed to limp home.

"My dear grandmother realized from the swelling and skin discoloration that I had suffered a bad ankle sprain. After giving me a bowl of concentrated chicken fat soup, she coated my ankle and lower leg with frothy egg whites, a bit of salt, and some herbs and vinegar, wrapped it tightly with a kitchen towel, and sent me to bed."

Tom's grandmother made sure she covered all the bases, not relying solely on a home remedy to cure her grandchild's leg injury.

"I know my grandmother included some Cardale Catholic Church holy water in my treatment," Tom added. "I painfully knelt and recited my catechism prayers, and she recited her special Italian prayers. After a three-day application of the poultice, the pain subsided, then the swelling did too, and soon I was as good as new."

Another result of injury and frequent aftermath of a cut or open wound is infection. Naturally, local folks knew how to deal with such a complication. A frequently mentioned "cure" for infection used an ingredient more likely to be found on the breakfast table than in the medicine cabinet.

"If a toe was infected," explained Elaine DeFrank of the Coal and Coke Heritage Center, "a traditional remedy was to wrap a piece of bacon fat around the toe, which was then covered with a white cloth to draw out the infection."

"I remember," added West Brownsville native Thom Stapleton, "as I expect most everyone does, about using bacon fat on a sore foot to draw the poison out when you stepped on a rusty nail."

Reader Herb Wagener of Waynesburg chimed in, "When I was a

small boy and had a severe sore throat, at bedtime my parents would place a couple of slices of bacon on my throat and wrap it with a clean, white cloth. They said this would draw out the infection.”

In addition to bacon, another traditional remedy for infections utilized a plant that is found in everyone’s lawn (except for the lawn of a homeowner who diligently applies weed killer to his yard). Elaine DeFrank described this remedy, which uses a “weed” called plantain.

“It was another coal patch remedy for an infected toe,” explained Elaine. “You were to wrap an infected toe with a plantain leaf from the lawn. This plant was also known as ‘Babaliska,’ as the leaf had lines in it like an old woman’s face.”

It turns out that science can explain why plantain seems to work so well. Liz Johnson, an herbal specialist writing for *The Magus Herbal Corner*, noted that “cuts, scrapes, bruises, and other small injuries can be treated with plantain. Just picking the leaf, chewing it a bit, and putting it on the wound can stop bleeding, facilitate healing, and deter infection. The Shoshoni Indians would heat the leaf and apply it to the wound directly.”

What if a wound was already infected?

“Wrapping a gently chewed plantain leaf around the infected area can be a big help in healing the wound,” Ms. Johnson explained. “The leaf should be changed when it dries. One reason plantain works so well to help the body fight infection is the presence of aglycones, which are chemicals in the sap of plantain leaves that have been shown to fight infection.”

Bacon fat, in addition to battling infection, has been credited by its advocates with other therapeutic qualities. One true believer in the power of bacon recommended its use to remove embedded glass from under the skin. “Tape bacon fat over the site, and within a few days or more, the glass will be on top of the bacon when you remove the tape.”

Another enthusiast noted that it is “the greatest answer for removing wood splinters. Tape a piece of raw bacon fat over the splinter, leave it on overnight, and by morning the splinter will be in the bacon fat.”

Ah, those painful splinters! Was there any child who did not experience having mom or dad pick at a splinter under the child’s skin, using a sewing needle heated over the stove burner? There are other traditional methods of removing splinters that would be less of an ordeal than being stabbed repeatedly by a hot needle – and these other remedies also avoid the risk of having the splinter site transformed into a laceration by a nearsighted needler.

One of these home remedies is to apply BoilEase, an over-the-

counter cream used to treat boils, to the splinter site. The suggestion is to spread BoilEase liberally on the finger with the splinter in it, then cover the site with a Band-Aid. If all goes according to plan, by the next day the splinter will be on the Band-Aid, not in your finger. Those who have tried this method say it works.

A similar recommendation that would avoid a trip to the drug store to purchase BoilEase is to mix a paste of ½ teaspoon of baking soda and a few drops of water, apply it over the splinter, then put a bandage over it for a few hours. This should draw the splinter to the surface where it can be easily removed.

Having used the unpleasant needle method numerous times on myself and others, I plan to try one of these less painful techniques next time I have an unwanted run-in with a splinter.

Next, I will share the results of my informal survey on the use of cod liver oil and castor oil in local households. Just what was ingesting these two terrible-tasting substances intended to accomplish? We'll share some of our readers' colorful descriptions of their unforgettable encounters with cod liver oil and castor oil.

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***DAILY DOSE MADE CHILDREN SHUDDER!***

"It's good for you," cooed loving mothers as they extended spoons brimming with the unwanted liquid toward their very reluctant kids. Most of the youngsters on the receiving end of those spoonfuls are grandparents now, but the passage of time has not erased their memories of that oily liquid's taste.

It was awful.

"It just made me shudder," recalled Nancy Ramsay of Ashburn, Virginia.

"When I was a small child, my parents tried to give me a dose," remembered Brownsville native Marianne Stuart Schuhle of Chesterfield, Virginia. "I kicked and screamed so much that they never tried again."

"For two years, my mother had my brother and me line up every morning before going to Prospect Street grade school," remarked Brownsville native Jackie Ellis of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. "We had to take a tablespoon of it, which was followed by a piece of chocolate. It tasted like fishy, oily chocolate."

What was this terrible tonic that was forced upon so many unwilling children by their well-meaning parents?

It was cod liver oil.

And why was it being fed to squeamish siblings in countless area kitchens?

“My mother said it was ‘good for something,’” explained Ellen Ballas of North Huntingdon, “but I haven’t the foggiest notion what that was.”

“We took cod liver oil every night before dinner in the 1930s,” noted South Side native Eugene Allison. “This was before vitamin supplements were common, and the cod liver oil was taken to keep us healthy.”

“I attended kindergarten in the early 1940s at the red brick farm house in Penn-Craft,” observed Lois Artis Marks of Cape Canaveral, Florida. “Everyone in the class was given a big spoonful of cod liver oil every so often, along with graham crackers and a cold drink of milk in a tin cup. The cod liver oil had a strong odor and wasn’t especially tasty, but it gave me a good healthy start in life.”

Because cod liver oil was so foul tasting, devious parents tried a variety of methods to coax it into their children. Disguising the oil’s taste by administering it along with something flavorful was a common strategy. Is it any surprise that to this day, many otherwise rational adults absolutely will not drink orange juice?

“It was given with orange juice,” explained Hiller-born Wally Mulligan, now of Pecos, New Mexico, “and the heavy oils settled to the bottom of the glass. While the unsuspecting child was relishing the taste of the delicious orange juice, wham! Here came that awful stuff!”

“My father insisted that I take a spoonful of cod liver oil on a daily basis,” added reader Anna Lynn Cauffield Burns, “usually in orange juice. For years, every time I drank orange juice I imagined I smelled that oil.”

Brownsville-born Leslie Addis’ parents tried several ploys to sneak the cod liver oil into her, but little Leslie wasn’t about to be fooled.

“The first time, I was told that it was honey,” Leslie explained from Seattle, “and I remember spitting it out onto our kitchen’s linoleum floor. The incident made such an impression on me that I can still see the red and gray square pattern of the linoleum, and to this day, I don’t like honey.”

And the second time?

“It was cleverly concealed in a cup of hot cocoa,” she continued, “which I also spit out onto the floor!”

“We had to take Dr. Patch’s Cod Liver Oil,” lamented South Side



native Hannah Millward Fisher. “Every day before breakfast, a teaspoon of it was poured into your mouth, so the rest of the day you tasted fish oil.”

“Just seeing the words ‘cod liver oil’ in print turns my tummy inside out,” quipped former Brownsville resident Sam Loy of Mesa, Arizona. “Whoa, that was some bad tasting stuff!”

Surprisingly, a few readers reported that they did not find the taste of cod liver oil particularly objectionable. Reader Ellen Dunable of Wheeling wrote, “I know that I am one of the very few who loved cod liver oil! My mother did not need to give me anything to mask the taste. I remember waiting for my mother to dose out the right amount from the bottle that sat on the right side of her pie safe. The bottle had a fish on it the length of the bottle.”

Reader Virginia Murray Archer of Pittsburgh also found the taste of cod liver oil unobjectionable. It was administered to her in a product called Father John’s Cough Medicine, which Virginia described as having a slightly fishy taste.

“I seemed to be the only one who thought it was tasty,” she observed.

These very different reactions to the taste of cod liver oil may be partially explained by the fact that not all cod liver oil had the same taste. According to the internet-based encyclopedia Wikipedia, the quality of the cod liver oil determined its taste. Its flavor and aroma could range “from a mild sardine-like flavor to an intense and obnoxious odor of rotten fish and rancid oil. High quality cod liver oil is ‘a pale-yellow, thin, oily liquid, having a peculiar, slightly fishy, but not rancid odor, and a bland, slightly fishy taste.’”

Does cod liver oil truly have a beneficial effect on one’s health, or did generations of children suffer through their daily ordeal without reaping any health benefit?

The use of cod liver oil to promote good health originated in Scandinavian fishing communities, where it was believed to protect the villagers against their frigid environment. Over the years, cod liver oil became a popular treatment for rheumatism, stiff joints, and muscular aches, and during the 1890s it was recommended to treat rickets, which afflicted many malnourished children.

In the mid-twentieth century, two fatty acids found in cod liver oil (EPA and DHA) were discovered to play a beneficial role in maintaining the heart and circulatory system. Research has also indicated that the Omega-3 fatty acids in cod liver oil help reduce the joint pain experienced by sufferers of rheumatoid arthritis and possibly osteoarthritis.

But the main reason generations of parents gave their kids cod liver oil was related to nutrition. It turns out that cod liver oil is practically unmatched as a natural source of Vitamin A and Vitamin D, the “sunshine” vitamin. Vitamin A supports healthy eyes, skin, and the immune system, while Vitamin D nurtures healthy bone development and maintenance. Back in the days before milk was enriched with those two vitamins and before vitamin supplements were common, cod liver oil provided an important vitamin supplement for children.

Today many people take fish oil in the form of soft gel capsules, but cod liver oil is not quite the same as fish oil. While both have the beneficial Omega-3 fatty acids, cod liver oil has a much higher concentration of Vitamins A and D. The two oils are also produced differently. According to Wikipedia, “cod liver oil is made by cooking cod livers with steam and then pressing/decanting the cooked livers to extract the oil. By contrast, fish oils are extracted from the cooked whole body tissues of fatty fish during the manufacture of fish meal.”

Before you follow the example of your grandparents and begin taking a daily dose of cod liver oil, keep in mind that cod liver oil can have negative effects if not used properly. It is possible to get too much Vitamin D, because the body already naturally produces Vitamin D when exposed to sunlight.

For this reason, those who wish to gain the Omega-3 benefits of cod liver oil and fish oil without overdosing on Vitamin D often take cod liver oil in the winter and fish oil in the summer. Additionally, pregnant women, asthmatics, diabetics, and people taking blood-thinning medications should check with a physician before taking cod liver oil or fish oil supplements.

The recommended use of cod liver oil at only certain times of the year is not something scientists have recently revealed to the public. Old timers apparently knew all about that.

“Cod liver oil was supposed to give you a vitamin supplement in the winter,” noted Hannah Fisher.

“Mom gave us cod liver oil during the winter months,” recalled Theresa Garred McGovern of Chicago, who grew up on Union Street, “followed by a teaspoon of honey. Her reason was to keep us from getting chest colds.”

Today, cod liver oil is one of the best-selling supplements in Europe, and it is popular in the United States as well. A quick survey of three national pharmaceutical chains with outlets in the Brownsville-Uniontown area revealed that two of the three chains sell cod liver oil in soft gel capsule form. It is also sold in liquid form in some stores, with the taste issue having been addressed by adding mint, lemon, and other

citrus flavoring.

And what about the youngsters of yesteryear? Do they still take cod liver oil, despite their unpleasant childhood experiences with it?

“Among my daily ingestion of vitamins, I do take a fish oil capsule,” admitted Sam Loy. “It was recommended by my previous and current physicians. But because of my childhood memories of how cod liver oil tasted, I hold my breath and swallow!”

“I take one cod liver oil capsule with my vitamins each day,” noted Anna Lynn Burns, “and have been doing it on my doctor’s recommendation since my first child was born sixty years ago.”

“Today all of my friends, on our doctors’ recommendations, take fish oil capsules,” commented Eugene Allison. “They are in gel form, but if you accidentally bite into one of those capsules, it has the same taste as my childhood dose of cod liver oil.”

When I asked readers who recalled taking cod liver oil or castor oil as a child to contact me, I anticipated receiving a few calls or emails on the subject. What I didn’t expect was to receive over sixty emails, phone calls, and letters from readers, each anxious to describe his or her unforgettable ordeal ingesting those disgusting liquids. For that reason, I have reserved the final article of this series for readers’ anecdotes about the granddaddy of all the “it’s-good-for-you,” horrible-tasting, potent potions of yesteryear:

Castor oil!

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### *CASTOR OIL COULD GET THINGS MOVING*

“Drink some castor oil,” the veteran doctor advised the overdue pregnant woman. “It’ll make the baby come soon.”

“How much castor oil?” asked the young mother-to-be.

“Drink the whole bottle!”

That was the advice Dr. Ralph Garofalo gave to the wife of reader Sam Dingle back in 1967, and, Sam says, “It worked!”

“Dr. Garofalo had her drink a whole bottle of castor oil to induce labor,” he recalled, “and about an hour after drinking it, we had a beautiful baby girl. It worked fast, and she had hardly any pain.”

Lynne Moorhouse, wife of Brownsville native Russ Moorhouse, was on the receiving end of similar advice.

“When you asked about people’s experiences with castor oil, I had completely forgotten about this, but my wife Lynne didn’t,” Russ

informed me. “When she was overdue for the delivery of our first child, my mother gave her castor oil in hopes of inducing labor. She had to drink the entire bottle.”

I had been unaware that castor oil was used to bring prolonged pregnancies to a quick conclusion, but Laurie Morgan, writing for *The Compleat Mother* magazine, confirms it. Morgan wrote that “in midwifery and homebirth circles, ingesting castor oil is a commonly accepted way to induce labor.”

However, Morgan also warned that while many women have used castor oil for this purpose without disastrous results, there is a real possibility of dangerous complications such as “fetal distress due to dehydration via diarrhea.”

Castor oil and diarrhea – now there are two terms that go together. Most readers who responded to my request to share their memories of castor oil were not pregnant mothers, but rather were children whose mothers decided their kids needed a healthy dose of castor oil to restore them to good form.

Like cod liver oil, castor oil had a disgusting taste that mothers tried to disguise, often with orange juice or orange slices. Unfortunately, nothing could hide that taste. Here are just a few reactions of their now-grown children to the memory of taking castor oil.

“That stuff was so bad I’ll bet the Geneva Convention prohibits giving it to prisoners of war,” declared Warren Gaster of Brownsville.

“Oh, how I remember that little orange juice glass with the castor oil floating on top,” recalled Joyce Spark of Sutersville. “My mother would stir it rapidly, and then tell me to drink it quickly. I can feel myself gagging even now as it slithered down my throat. Maybe that’s why I don’t drink orange juice.”

“It tasted just like thick cooking oil permeated by something very awful, like dead rotting fish,” said Hopwood’s Rosalie Coughenour. “I would need to go to a hypnotist to find out why I took it. I apparently have pushed that into my ‘repressed memory file’ because the taste was that bad!”

“You have no idea what you missed, but be glad of it!” quipped Nancy Bender of Grindstone. “In our home, castor oil was given as a last resort, but milk of magnesia was a regular Friday night ritual. We three kids lined up in the bathroom and each got a tablespoon.”

“We got castor oil every other Saturday morning while we were still in bed,” Richard Quarzo of Brownsville told me. “I can still hear my mother coming up the steps with that coffee cup and the silver spoon she would twirl in that cup. When she gave it to you, you would quickly jam a wedge of orange in your mouth and bite on it before you got sick.”

Why did these and other children have to take a spoonful of castor oil? The reasons varied, but the results didn't.

"Castor oil was administered to us kids the evening we came home from Kennywood Park," explained Mildred Keppel of Wheeling. "We went to Kennywood by train once a year. When we returned, Mother gave us that dose of castor oil because she felt we ate a lot of 'junk' at the park and needed to get rid of it, if you know what I mean!"

Mildred was alluding to castor oil's formidable reputation as a powerful laxative. Marilu Stapleton Coppinger's mother also used castor oil to counteract her kids' unwise eating habits.

"My mother, 'Dutch' Stapleton, gave us kids a tablespoonful of castor oil before and after major 'candy' holidays," Marilu remarked, "such as Easter, Christmas, and even Thanksgiving, in the belief that it would 'clean us out and keep us from getting sick.' It sure cleaned us out! We could take it directly from the spoon or in orange juice. I usually preferred to slug mine back quickly and rinse the oil out of my mouth by swallowing the juice."

"Mom would make us take a big spoonful of castor oil," said Dorothy Clayton Tennant of Waynesburg. "She said that it was to clean out the germs. It did, because I spent many hours sitting in the outhouse. I did learn a very valuable lesson though. Never sneeze around Mom."

Surprisingly, castor oil was also a very powerful educational tool. Modern education experts have designed subtle strategies for tempting recalcitrant children to attend school regularly. But in the old days, it was castor oil that was used to coax kids to go to school. Castor oil may have been many things, but 'subtle' wasn't one of them.

"The thought of having to take castor oil made a lot of sick kids change their minds and go to school," declared South Side native Chuck Hosler.

"If you felt bad in the mornings and didn't want to go to school," echoed Bull Run Road native Bill Johnson, "out came the castor oil. Most of the time, it was better to go to school than take the castor oil."

"In our household, castor oil was only taken if you wanted to stay home from school," concurred another South Brownsville native, Eugene Allison. "Mother felt if we were willing to take castor oil, which made me gag, then we were sick enough to stay home. It was usually worth at least one school day each year for me."

Having forced down the castor oil, a child was then faced with two immediate problems: its horrible taste and the frequent dashes to the outhouse.

"If my memory serves me correctly, it worked and worked and worked," noted reader Ellen Dunable of Wheeling, "and there was no

choice regarding flavors. I don't believe there was anything that could take the taste of this medicine out of your mouth."

"My mother used to give us boys castor oil in a drink such as tea if we were constipated," remembered reader Willard Peet of Poland, Ohio. "It tasted awful, but it did the job, if you know what I mean."

Reader Levi Rinehart of Uniontown even wrote me to issue a challenge. "Why don't you get brave and try some?" he suggested. "Come on, it won't hurt you! At least that is what we were told."

No thanks, Levi. But Levi's suggestion did make me wonder if it would be difficult to buy castor oil today. I called three pharmacies in this area and discovered that the stuff is more popular than ever!

All three pharmacies carry castor oil, but two of the three pharmacies were completely sold out of it, and the third had only one bottle left.

"We have always carried it," one clerk explained, "but we are out of it right now. It has been back-ordered for three weeks. A lot of stores in the area are having a hard time keeping it in stock."

"Why is it in such demand?" I asked.

"People buy it for rubbing onto their arthritic hands and knees," revealed the clerk.

So castor oil isn't just for getting babies (and everything else) to exit one's body in a hurry. In fact, I have learned that castor oil is one of the most useful, versatile products in the world.

This vegetable oil, which is produced by processing the bean of the castor plant, is the primary raw material for the production of sebacic acid, which is in turn the basic ingredient in the production of nylon and other synthetic resins and fibers. According to Wikipedia, castor oil is used in manufacturing soap, lubricants, cosmetics, hydraulic and brake fluids, paints, dyes, coatings, inks, industrial adhesives, textiles, plastics, waxes and polishes, pharmaceuticals and perfumes. It can also be used to produce the deadly poison ricin, which is made from byproducts of the manufacturing process.

Have you ever heard of Castrol motor oil, the outstanding racing oil for high performance engines? Care to guess what one of its ingredients is or how it got its name?

In the U. S., one of the largest single markets for castor oil is the paint and varnish industry. Some experts say that dehydrated castor oil has qualities superior to linseed oil and tung oil, two of the most important drying oils. Its water resistant qualities also make it ideal for coating fabrics and for protective coverings, insulation, food containers, and guns.

Whew! And you thought castor oil was just for . . . well, you

know.

Oh, by the way. My research revealed that its use could be unsavory in another way. It was a tool of torture and execution in Fascist Italy under the regime of Benito Mussolini. Mussolini's Blackshirts force-fed it to political dissidents, who would experience severe diarrhea and dehydration, often resulting in death. Mussolini's power, it was said, was backed by the "bludgeon and castor oil."

If we discount Mussolini's sadistic use of castor oil, the odoriferous oil turns out to be a very useful product indeed. Who knows, maybe someday it will help the U.S. lessen our dependence on foreign crude oil. Wouldn't that be rich – our nation strengthened by a good healthy dose of castor oil.

That would be good for all of us!

Just like Mom said.