



Historian Skip Sommer has restored many historic properties in Marin and Sonoma Counties including The Great Petaluma Mill, The Riverhouse Restaurant and Larkspur's famed Lark Creek Inn. Skip is an honorary member of Heritage Homes of Petaluma and has been the History Editor of The Petaluma Post for 20 years. He is a Realtor with CPS/Golden Land Realty in Petaluma. E-mail Skip at skip-sommer@hotmail.com

STORIES FROM THE PAST

Medical Practice in Petaluma, 1909

by History Editor Skip Sommer

One hundred years ago, the average life expectancy for men was 47 years. Only 14% of homes had a bathtub (zero showers) and the average U.S. wage was just 22 cents an hour. More importantly, 90% of doctors had NO college education and they made, at best, about \$4,000 per annum. In Petaluma, the 3 leading causes of death were 1. Pneumonia 2. Tuberculosis 3. Diarrhea.

In 1909, canned beer had not yet been invented -- but marijuana, heroin and morphine were all available over the counter! In fact, one Petaluma pharmacy advertised: "Heroin clears the Complexion, Gives buoyancy to the mind and regulates the Bowels." 95% of local births occurred at home, but The Petaluma General Hospital (ph. Main 102) provided "A first class operating Room" and had actual "licensed physician care for maternity @ \$25 Per week."

Dr. H. Ehrlick, "the

eminent eye, ear and throat surgeon, will visit Petaluma July 14th at the Continental Hotel. Deafness positively cured!" and the Petaluma Daily Courier carried an ad for Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, which would "absolutely cure female trouble and make a well woman of you." I am guessing that the fact it was 82% alcohol had something to do with those new attitudes.

Here are a few more examples of quick cures of the day: Doan's Kidney Pills were available at Clarks Drug Store (phone Main 1) for "dull back pain, headaches, dizzy spells or a tired, worn-out feeling." Halls Catarrh Cure offered a "\$100 reward for any case of catarrh that can not be cured." And Burdick's Blood Bitters "makes the blood rich, thick, red and pure." Oh yeah!

Doctors and dentists had no ethics problem advertising their services in 1909. Dr. H. Lorentzen, on Kentucky Street, offered: "Special attention given to diseases of women and children includ-

ing electric treatment and thermal light ray." ("Thermal light ray?") And Dr. R E. Perking was both a "Veterinary Surgeon And Dentist". One would hope he cleaned his instruments well between patients.

Meanwhile, the City of Petaluma was very busy. The Steamer Resolute ran from Petaluma to San Francisco daily. The Pacific Gas Company was laying a gas line on English St. "with a large force of men" and the Daily Courier Newspaper was conducting a "Petaluma Popularity Contest" -- the Grand prize being a REO automobile with genuine acetylene lamp -- a \$750 Value." After a spirited 7 weeks, the grand prize was awarded to Mrs. W.F. Bachelor and the runner-up was Mrs. E.W. Young. Interesting in that, there were only 7 automobiles in town then, and NO women drivers as yet. In other news, The Hill Opera House was offering "High Class Vaudeville" and J. Cory was arrested for "selling liquor to the Indians" and the "3 drunk Indians were arrested for Disturbing the peace of The Barlow berry pickers." (Pickers apparently liked their peace and quiet).

In wider focus, the first oyster beds were planted in Tomales Bay by C. Idleman of San Francisco and Jack London had just returned to Glen Ellen after 2 years of travel. It was noted the "he has abandoned ideas of a round the world trip on such a vessel as The Snark." (High seas, small boat). Meanwhile, for the first time, "oil production actually outstrips gold production in California!" and The Bank of Santa Clara Valley was robbed at gunpoint of \$7,000 in gold and "they escaped in an Auto machine at full Speed down the road." "Full speed" was probably 20 mph.

In New York City, the infamous Harry Thaw was undergoing an examination for his sanity. Thaw claimed the "jury acquitted him of the murder charge on account of their belief that Stanford White deserved his fate." You see, Mr. Thaw's wife, the beautiful actress Evelyn Nesbitt was having an affair with Mr. White, the architect who designed Madison Square Garden. Mr. Thaw, who knocked off Mr. White with 3 shots, was subsequently committed to an insane asylum. The case had made international news for months.

Locally again, L.H. Stone, who "for many years has been filling a position at the McGuire Pharmacy, left for Berkely to enter a course for medicine." And, "P. Sweed, the local capitalist, Contracted with Brainerd Jones", the local architect, for "the creation of a modern brick building at Main and 4th for the Rex Mercantile Co." Meanwhile, "12 loaded lumber schooners are laying in wait in the stream to berth at Camm & Hedges yard." I can't imagine 12 of these schooners anchored in the Petaluma River, at the

same time. These boats had beams of 25' + and there was No Turning Basin in 1909. It would have been fascinating to see those maneuvers. Backing-up was not an option.

Lastly, this tidbit from 1909: "Dr. Smith McMullin is moving his furniture from 418 Washington to 28 Main Street, where he is fixing himself up very cozily. He likes to have things Right." One hopes that some of the things the doctor had just "right" were his skills. Those practicing physicians and dentists, at that time, were just as busy as the physicians are today, but they made their calls by horse and carriage and, to facilitate that, they had to maintain stables at their offices, as well as at their homes.

1909 was a great turning point year for the Medical Profession to move to the automobile and most of the first auto owners were, in fact, doctors. That those early drivers also had to be good mechanics was an added problem. Often, the cry of "GET A HORSE!" was heard from anxious patients, awaiting a doctor no-show.

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Author Unknown

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