

# Learning History from Patent Medicines: Newbro's Herpicide in Early Twentieth Century Kansas

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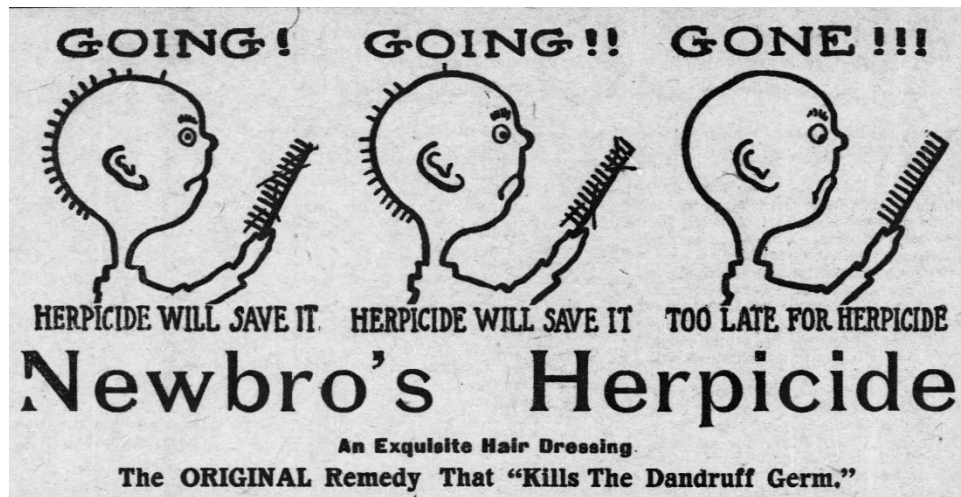


Figure 1: Part of a newspaper advertisement for Newbro's Herpicide featuring their signature "Too Late for Herpicide" cartoon. Note the statement that Herpicide "Kills the Dandruff Germ," the primary claim for the viability of this product and a major tenet of its advertising campaign. SOURCE: *Lawrence Daily World*.

Newspaper time is quite possibly your favorite time of the day. After a long day of work on the farm<sup>1</sup> and a hearty dinner, this is your chance to relax in front of the fireplace alone before going back to sleep to start it all over again. You pick up the most recent issue and begin on page one with the general news, and then continue through a religious article, one about youth and employment, past one about society. As you turn the page following a piece espousing the virtue of giving (December seems a little late to be writing with reference to Thanksgiving, but perhaps they were short on material), a small box in the upper left-hand corner of this new page catches your eye. What are those things in that picture? And what do they have to do with “Health and Disease?” Hair roots? Hmm. That makes sense. You read on. Their claim is new, but you’ve heard pieces before. With so many diseases now known to be caused by germs, it would make sense that dandruff is just another such ailment. And that it leads to baldness is common knowledge. But can this stuff really help? Your hand subconsciously rises and your fingers start to feel the fluff on the top of your head, reaching through to your skin. As you rub the top of your scalp, soft, greasy flakes begin to free themselves, sticking to your fingertips. It’s been bothering you for a while now. Helen, the dear woman, doesn’t seem to have noticed, but maybe she’s just being kind in not commenting, not wanting to make you self-conscious. How long will that last? You just flipped past an article debating whether women can ever love plain men. How much did they want for that stuff again? A whole dollar? Hmph. They’re awfully proud of it, but then again, they do seem to have reason to be. And if it costs so much, perhaps there’s a lot in one bottle of Herpicide. Enough to last. Enough to work. Maybe you’ll take a trip to town tomorrow.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Settlement in Kansas,” Kansapedia, last modified April 2015, <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/settlement-in-kansas/14546>. “Agriculture remained the principal occupation for Kansans until the 1920s.”

<sup>2</sup> *Atchison Daily Champion*, December 6, 1900, 1-8. The newspaper references in the above paragraph come from this issue.

Such would perhaps be considered among the ideal reactions to first reading an advertisement for Newbro's Herpicide (at least by those who made said ad). During the beginning of the twentieth century, these advertisements spread rapidly to newspapers throughout the United States and beyond, becoming most popular in Kansas, only to drop off rapidly near the beginning of the 1920's.<sup>3</sup> In order to better understand this product's short-lived glory in the minds of Americans, especially Kansans, and in the pages of their periodicals, it is necessary to examine the prevailing social opinions of the time regarding hair, beauty, and virility, along with the day's strange and thriving patent medicine industry and common hair care practices of the time. These in turn can help to reveal the values and beliefs of the people who were being sold this strange elixir, offering a brief glimpse into the world and inner thoughts of Americans a century ago.

It is also important to note briefly that, although there is information available on the product from other avenues, the principle sources, primary or secondary, that can be easily found today on Newbro's Herpicide are these advertisements which were so prevalent during the peak of its popularity. As this lack of source variety may impact the reliability of the narrative that it is possible to present on Herpicide today, it should be kept in the back of one's mind while reading the rest of this report.

### **Hair: That Most Precious of Treasures**

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, being attractive was inextricably tied to having attractive hair. Among both men and women, one's hair was one of the primary attributes considered when it came to physical appearance, and having tresses that did not make

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<sup>3</sup> "Search Results: Newbro's Herpicide," Newspapers.com, accessed May 10, 2018, [https://go.newspapers.com/results.php?query=Newbro%27s+Herpicide&s\\_place=&date\\_field=](https://go.newspapers.com/results.php?query=Newbro%27s+Herpicide&s_place=&date_field=).

the cut, or for men, being bald, was a thought that could bring pangs of fear to the heart. For a woman, her locks were her “crowning glory”<sup>4</sup>, and the main quality desired in hair was quantity.<sup>5</sup> The styles of the time consisted primarily of various elaborate updos, and the longer a woman’s hair, the more options she had for styling.<sup>6 7</sup> It is not insignificant that in O. Henry’s 1905 short story “The Gift of the Magi,” the heroine’s locks, “reaching below her knee” and “rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters,” were one of she and her husband’s two possessions “in which they took a mighty pride.”<sup>8</sup> In the 1920’s, when women finally began to abandon such styles in favor of the bob, one New York City salon kept smelling salts on hand because so many women fainted after seeing their lengthy tresses fall away.<sup>9</sup>

Among men, it was primarily the thought of becoming bald that brought concern regarding one’s hair. The “loss of vigor, and finally more or less pronounced atrophy” was believed even in the medical field to be “the inexorable result”<sup>10</sup> of male hair loss, which had in turn long been associated with the loss of virility.<sup>11</sup> Even in 1939 it was still believed that “[i]n a vigorous body the hair is usually thick and firmly set”<sup>12</sup> and it was not until 1942 that science began to realize that baldness is in fact associated with higher levels of testosterone.<sup>13</sup> As an

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<sup>4</sup> Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty*, New York (1983), 38, 210, **quoted in** Elizabeth L. Block, “Respecting Hair: The Culture and Representation of American Women’s Hairstyles, 1865–90” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2011), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Eliza Frances Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl 1864-1865*, ed. Spencer B., King Jr., (New York, 1908), 134, **cited in** Elizabeth L. Block, “Respecting Hair: The Culture and Representation of American Women’s Hairstyles, 1865–90” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2011), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Corson, *Fashions in Hair: The First Five Thousand Years* (London, 1965), 491-497, 600-608.

<sup>8</sup> O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi,” Raleigh, N.C., 2, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzEwODYxMTRfX0FOO?sid=e016e150-dbff-4933-a195-4c29c78fc1f9@sessionmgr4010&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Simon, *Hair: Public, Political, Extremely Personal* (New York, 1966), 27.

<sup>10</sup> “Baldness.” *Scientific American* 72 (24), (June 15, 1895), 377.

<sup>11</sup> David Graham, “Hair Playing Head Games with Men; Thin Hair, Not Thick, Should Signal Virility, Biologists Note Series: The Male Beauty Myth, Part 1.” *Edmonton Journal*, (August 12, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Charles De Zemler, *Once Over Lightly: The Story of Man and His Hair* (New York, 1939), 128.

<sup>13</sup> “Bald Virility,” *Time*, May 4, 1942, 44.

example of how pervasive this fear of hair loss was in men, an 1881 *Scientific American* article speaks enthusiastically of a “promising” new cure for baldness: surgically removing the scalp piece by piece and replacing it with skin grafts from the heads of those with healthy hair. The announcement raves of how “perhaps the day is not long distant when the shining pates of our venerable fathers will bloom with the flowing locks of youth.”<sup>14</sup> The optimism displayed regarding the possibility of using such a major operation to cure baldness, which today seems almost ludicrous, demonstrates the gravity and fear with which men of the time regarded this condition.

This fear found a welcome home in the world of patent medicines. A patent medicine is defined as “a nonprescription medicinal preparation that is typically protected by a trademark and whose contents are incompletely disclosed.”<sup>15</sup> Patent medicines first began arriving in the United States from England, and Americans started to make their own around the Revolutionary War period, with this production continuing to grow until “reach[ing] floodtide in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>16</sup> At the time, the educated doctors were few, especially in more western states such as Kansas, and those who were around often disagreed violently as to the causes of disease.<sup>17 18</sup> Especially in these frontier states, the high prices charged by many of the doctors in the region, along with “suspicion and scorn for members of the educated professions” helped to keep people mostly reliant on patent medicines and solutions made at home.<sup>19</sup> This surge of questionable

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<sup>14</sup> “New Remedy for Baldness.” *Scientific American* 44 (26), (June 25, 1881), 401.

<sup>15</sup> “Patent Medicine,” Merriam-Webster, last updated April 29, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patent%20medicine>.

<sup>16</sup> James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires* (Princeton, N.J., 1961), vii.

<sup>17</sup> Gerald Carson, *One for a Man, Two for a Horse: A Pictorial History, Grave and Comic, of Patent Medicines* (Garden City, N.Y., 1961), 6.

<sup>18</sup> James Harvey Young, “Patent Medicines: The Early Post-Frontier Phase,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 46 (3), (Autumn 1953), 255.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 255-256.

cures was the scourge of the professional medical community; however, the sale of patent medicines remained virtually unregulated until the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.<sup>20 21</sup>

The patent medicine industry attempted to capitalize on concerns regarding the appearance of hair in a variety of ways. Products purported not only to make the hair soft, shiny, and long (a particularly amusing case touted the merits of bear grease), but also to cure baldness, reverse hair graying, and remove hair from less desired areas (neck, upper lip in women).<sup>22 23</sup> In 1881, Mrs. Mary S. Robinson lamented in an article for *The Western Christian Advocate* of Cincinnati how “[t]he newspapers [were] filled with advertisements for nostrums of the hair,” advising women to simply use home remedies and wash their hair instead.<sup>24</sup>

### **A Scourge of the Scalp**

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Americans faced one particularly insidious threat to the everyday health of their hair. In 1872, “[t]here [were] doubtless few persons, especially among gentlemen, who [did] not suffer from the inconvenience of dandruff.”<sup>25</sup> However, there was no clear consensus regarding exactly how to cure this plight. Multiple articles from the medical journals of the time recommended homemade solutions containing everything from sulfur to alcohol to borax to castor oil to actual soap.<sup>26 27 28</sup> While very few people are generally pleased to find these flakes accumulating on the scalp and falling onto the shoulders, at the time the presence of dandruff brought an extra degree of concern to men. The

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<sup>20</sup> James W. Long, “Patent Medicines and Private Formulas,” *Scientific American* (December 1872), 535.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley B. Burns, “Wizard Oil Patent Medicine Salesmen,” *Clinician Reviews* 12 (7), (July 2002), 43.

<sup>22</sup> Carson, *One for a Man*, 13-16.

<sup>23</sup> “Hair Nostrums,” *Prairie Farmer*, November 1851, 497.

<sup>24</sup> Mary S. Robinson, “Treatment of the Hair,” *Western Christian Advocate*, September 7, 1881, 282.

<sup>25</sup> John L. Davis, “On a Simple Remedy for Dandruff,” *Scientific American* 26 (5), (January 27, 1872), 69.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> “Dandruff,” *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health* 71 (2), (August 1880), 110.

<sup>28</sup> Long, “Patent Medicines,” 535.

condition was linked, even in the medical field, to the onset of baldness, especially when it occurred before old age.<sup>29 30</sup> This in turn led back to the fear of the loss of vigor and virility mentioned before, making the sight of dandruff flakes coming from his own scalp a decidedly frightening one for many a man of the time.

However, for all of their fears of dandruff, late nineteenth and early twentieth century men and women had a great many practices in their daily lives that would in all likelihood have led to its proliferation. Today dandruff is believed to usually stem from one of several causes. It may come from simply not shampooing enough, leading to a buildup of oil and dead skin cells on the scalp, or from a skin condition known as seborrheic dermatitis which affects the “scalp and other areas rich in oil glands” and causes “red, greasy skin covered with white or yellow scales.” It can also stem from a fungus called malassezia, which is present “on the scalps of most adults” but for unknown reasons causes irritation and excess skin cell growth for some, from a sensitivity to hair products, or from simply having dry skin.<sup>31</sup>

From a modern perspective, it is clear to see that many attributes of late nineteenth and early twentieth century hair care may have in fact helped to cause this condition that was such a pestilence to the people of the day. First of all, hair washing and bathing in general were far less frequent occurrences in daily life then than they are now. While the Mrs. Mary S. Robinson noted earlier was advising that women wash their hair with soap and water “[d]aily, or not less than once or twice a week,” it would seem that she was rather ahead of her time.<sup>32</sup> A newspaper article from 1892 recommended bathing “once a week during the year, and oftener through warm

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<sup>29</sup> “Prevention of Baldness,” *The British Medical Journal* 1 (1464), (January 19, 1889), 147-48.

<sup>30</sup> “Hair Wash for Dandruff,” *Scientific American* 14 (18), (January 8, 1859), 146.

<sup>31</sup> “Dandruff: Symptoms and Causes,” Mayo Clinic, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/dandruff/symptoms-causes/syc-20353850>.

<sup>32</sup> Robinson, “Treatment of the Hair,” 282.

weather or when the employment is such as to render it necessary,”<sup>33</sup> and another piece from 1903 advises that women wash their hair anywhere from once a week to “two or three times a year,” and lists eggs, bicarbonate soda, borax, and ammonia as possible shampoos, along with the simple soap.<sup>34</sup> Another article, from 1898, notes that, despite the lack of consensus regarding how often to wash one’s hair, hair dressers often recommend once a month, although adding that “if your hair is dirty before that, it should be washed.”<sup>35</sup> This infrequency of both bathing and washing the hair would certainly seem to correlate with the modern concept of not shampooing often enough. By cleaning their scalps so rarely, and with such a questionable hodgepodge of possible shampoos, late nineteenth and early twentieth century Americans likely helped to cause, at least in part, the dandruff troubling their heads.

Some elements of the hair styles of the day, among both women and men, could also have helped to contribute to the issue of dandruff. As noted earlier, the primary women’s hairstyles of the day consisted more or less exclusively of elaborate updos, and a hair advice article from 1881 notes that, in general, “[t]he arrangement of the hair need not be disturbed,” when washing it with soap and water, implying that women would likely often left their hair up for extended periods of time, not even taking it down to wash it.<sup>36</sup> Along with simply making it more difficult for the hair and scalp to be thoroughly cleaned, leaving one’s hair up in such a way would likely also make it more difficult for the scalp to cool itself in hot circumstances, causing it to release greater amounts of sweat which would then become trapped within the piled nest of hair.

Among the men, another possible contributor to dandruff would have been pomade oils.

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<sup>33</sup> “How Often to Bathe,” *News and Citizen*, August 11, 1892, 1.

<sup>34</sup> “Various Shampoos for the Hair,” *Saint Paul Globe*, April 16, 1903, 7.

<sup>35</sup> “My Lady’s Locks,” *Times, Washington*, June 19, 1898, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Robinson, “Treatment of the Hair,” 282.



By the 1850's, American men had begun using various forms of these products, both purchased and homemade.<sup>37 38</sup> Advertisements for such items began to grow rapidly in the country during the late 1840's and remained fairly common until they began to drop off near the start of the 1920's. Kansas was the state with the third-most advertisements for pomade (17,178), coming in behind only Pennsylvania (22,719) and New York (19,593).<sup>39</sup> These ads first popped up in the state beginning in 1855 and remained common until the early 1920's, experiencing particular spikes in 1890-91 and later in 1914.<sup>40</sup> Such greases and waxes for the hair, being made in one set of recipes primarily from lard, would almost certainly have greatly increased the overall level of oil on men's scalps.<sup>41</sup> This excess oil would likely also have increased these men's chances of having to deal with dandruff, their concern over the appearance of their hair inadvertently helping to activate their fear of its loss.

Both men and women's dandruff were possibly also affected by one other element of the style of the day: hats. The fact that, throughout the nineteenth century, men would take off their hats as a sign of respect to those who were of a higher social status or older than they, along with ladies, indicates that they generally wore these head garments when in public. Women of the time were expected to wear hats when in church, outdoors, and even indoors in circumstances when taking them off and then putting them back on again would create too much of a hassle.<sup>42</sup> The fact that head coverings were worn so constantly, especially when outdoors in the heat, would likely have led, similar to the case of updos in women, to increased sweating and the oilier

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<sup>37</sup> Septimus Piesse, "Varieties: On Perfumery," *American Journal of Pharmacy* 4 (2), (March 1856), 175.

<sup>38</sup> "Search Results: Pomade," Newspapers.com, accessed May 12, 2018, [https://go.newspapers.com/results.php?query=pomade&s\\_place=&date\\_field=](https://go.newspapers.com/results.php?query=pomade&s_place=&date_field=).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> "Search Results: Kansas Historical Society, Pomade," Newspapers.com, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://kansashistoricalsociety.newspapers.com/search/#lnd=1&query=pomade&silo=8>.

<sup>41</sup> Piesse, "Varieties," 175.

<sup>42</sup> Fiona Clark, *Hats* (London, 1982), 86.

skin often associated with dandruff.

Kansas and other largely agricultural states also had one more potential factor affecting the prevalence of dandruff for their occupants. Spending most of one's time working outside on a farm, as the majority of Kansas's residents did until the 1920's, would almost certainly have correlated with an increased amount of sweat, especially during the hotter portions of the year, and this would likely have increased the amount of oil generally present on their scalps, and thus also their chances of encountering dandruff.<sup>43</sup>

In the late 1890's, science came to a discovery that would have long-lasting impacts on the worlds of both dandruff and patent medicines. The 1870's-80's brought to the world of medicine the development of germ theory, and in the early 1890's, the Dr. M. Sabouraud had devoted his time to researching what types of maladies these microbes might be bringing to humankind.<sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> Specifically, he was investigating the possibility of a connection between microbes and baldness. Eventually, not only did it seem that he had discovered a bacillus that led to alopecia areata, or the loss of patches of hair, but it appeared that this same microbe in fact caused dandruff. He could not help but notice, after discovering his bacillus, that it looked uncannily similar to another believed to be the cause of acne. This led in turn to the conclusion that the two bacilli were in fact one and the same and were the cause neither of acne nor just of baldness but also that of seborrhoea, or an excessive oily gland discharge associated with dandruff (such as the aforementioned seborrheic dermatitis). The 1897 journal article announcing the discovery stated the conclusion that seborrhea thus led, depending on the circumstances, to

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<sup>43</sup> Kansapedia, "Settlement in Kansas."

<sup>44</sup> Frank N. Egerton, "History of Ecological Sciences, Part 46: From Parasitology to Germ Theory," *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 94 (2), (April 2013), 136.

<sup>45</sup> L. Wickham, "The Microbial Origin of Baldness: Sabouraud's Researches into The Relations Between Seborrhoea, Alopecia Areata, and Baldness," *The British Medical Journal*, 1 (1895), (April 24, 1897), 1028-1030.

either the patchy hair loss of alopecia areata or a gradual baldness occurring over one or two decades, although Sabouraud himself apparently felt that more evidence was needed for such a specific conclusion.<sup>46</sup> From the fact that dandruff and baldness were caused by a microbe also followed that they were contagious, and Sabouraud claimed to have facilitated the onset of alopecia areata in sheep, guinea pigs, and rabbits.<sup>47 48</sup> The long-feared connection between seemingly innocuous dandruff and the complete loss of one's hair had received new medical evidence, and it seemed that a microbe was to blame.

### **The Rapid Rise of Herpicide**

Dupont Morse Newbro was a man wholly experienced in both pharmacy and business. Earlier on in his life, he first worked “as an apprentice to the drug trade” before officially studying pharmacy. He later opened his own drugstore and came to operate no less than five separate drug companies throughout his life.<sup>49</sup> However, today he is probably most likely to be remembered for the invention of a single product which bore his name: Newbro's Herpicide.<sup>50 51</sup> This item first began to appear in American newspaper advertisements in 1899, just two years after Sabouraud's microbe discovery, and this connection would seem to have been more of a correlation than a coincidence.<sup>52</sup> Newbro claimed that his product, “the first of its kind made in America,”<sup>53</sup> was capable of “kill[ing] the dandruff germ,” and this ability was what inspired the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Bacteriology of Baldness,” *The British Medical Journal* 1 (1895), (April 24, 1897), 1047-1048.

<sup>48</sup> Wickham, “The Microbial Origin of Baldness,” 1028-1030.

<sup>49</sup> Clarence Monroe Burton, William Stocking, and Gordon K. Miller, eds., *The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701-1922, Volume 4*, (Detroit, 1922), 459-60,

<https://books.google.com/books?id=JW03AQAAMAAJ&dq=%22newbro%20herpicide%22&pg=PA459#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “Newbro's Herpicide,” Smithsonian: National Museum of American History, accessed May 12, 2018,

[https://www.si.edu/object/nmah\\_210014](https://www.si.edu/object/nmah_210014).

<sup>52</sup> Newspapers.com, “Search Results: Newbro's Herpicide.”

<sup>53</sup> Burton, Stocking, and Miller, eds., *The City of Detroit*, 459-60.

name, a word created by Newbro himself and trademarked in the same year the advertisements began. The word Herpicide was a combination of herpes, from the Latin “to creep,” as skin conditions were thought along the skin, and the suffix -cide, “to kill.”<sup>54</sup> (Another source referring to Herpicide, however, cites the “herpes” portion as coming directly from the usage of the term in reference to a variety of mild skin conditions.)<sup>55</sup>

Although Newbro was likely inspired by Sabouraud’s work, the extent to which the two men may have actually been connected is unclear. While Newbro “claimed that he worked with a bacteriologist to create [his] formula,” there is no evidence that said person was Sabouaud (or that he or she actually existed).<sup>56</sup> However, his use of germ theory in the creation of a patent medicine was far from extraordinary. The manufacturers of nostrums were quick to see the lucrative possibilities of the field and began selling products based in it even before the majority of the medical world had come to a consensus regarding its legitimacy. Many Americans began to first hear of germ theory not from a physician or public health announcement but through patent medicine advertising.<sup>57</sup>

With the prevalence of dandruff and the value placed on the appearance of one’s hair in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, it is not particularly shocking that Newbro’s Herpicide spread like wildfire. It became so popular so fast that on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1902, Newbro sold his original drug company, Newbro Drug Co., to focus on running the new Herpicide Co., centered solely around the sale of that product.<sup>58</sup> <sup>59</sup> Beginning with just 163 advertisements in American newspapers in 1899, Herpicide claimed nearly fifty-six times that number just six

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> United States v. Kinsel, 263 F. 141 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 662 (1918).

<sup>56</sup> Smithsonian, “Newbro’s Herpicide.”

<sup>57</sup> Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 144.

<sup>58</sup> Burton, Stocking, and Miller, eds., *The City of Detroit*, 459-60.

<sup>59</sup> Smithsonian, “Newbro’s Herpicide.”

years later, boasting a whopping 9,094 advertisements published in 1905.<sup>60</sup> The product also began to reach out into international realms, with ads appearing in Canada, Panama, and Puerto Rico, and it also became popular in Europe and the Philippines as well.<sup>61 62 63 64</sup> Although clearly prominent in many locations, these Herpicide advertisements reached their peak prevalence, at least within the U.S., in Kansas. They first began to appear there in 1900, and the state eventually ended up having entertained a grand total of 6,027, with the closest runner-up, Pennsylvania, claiming only 5,349.<sup>65 66</sup>

However, the prevalence of these advertisements was in all likelihood not just a reflection of Herpicide's popularity but a key element in bringing it about. Advertising was a primary component of the patent medicine success formula, and Herpicide was no exception. The manufacturers of nostrums, due to the general prevalence of ill health among humans and the virtually endless string of potential cures (and ailments) that could be thought up, had long had plenty of experience selling and marketing to customers. The fear of illness among their clientele, and the lack of medical understanding and clarity at the time regarding many ailments gave them plenty of opportunities for frightening insinuations.<sup>67</sup>

When it came to patent medicine marketing, the first priority was of course getting the word out, the purpose of the advertisements. The products had to stick in the thoughts of the customers, to become firmly engraved in their subconscious (and conscious) minds in order to stand out above other products. One primary way to do this was to launch an advertising

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<sup>60</sup> Newspapers.com, "Search Results: Newbro's Herpicide."

<sup>61</sup> Smithsonian, "Newbro's Herpicide."

<sup>62</sup> "El Herpicide Newbro," Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Correspondencia de Puerto Rico*, April 3, 1906.

<sup>63</sup> "Customs Decisions," *Office of the Collector of Customs for the Philippine Islands* 6 (1), (July 31, 1904), 173.

<sup>64</sup> Newspapers.com, "Search Results: Newbro's Herpicide,"

<sup>65</sup> Newspapers.com, "Search Results, Kansas Historical Society."

<sup>66</sup> Newspapers.com, "Search Results: Newbro's Herpicide."

<sup>67</sup> Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 165-66.

campaign of an enormous scale, an idea of which those at Herpicide Co. were clearly quite fond.<sup>68</sup> Along with simply employing a large number of advertisements, the company also made sure that the size of the ads themselves would catch the eye. These, at least in their earlier days, often stretched the width of a newspaper page and would frequently include almost identical information repeated on opposite sides of the page, apparently just to take up more space.<sup>69 70</sup> Another way to try to cement the presence of a product in people's minds was to have a consistent, visual trademark.<sup>71</sup> Herpicide, while running many different types of advertisements, did have one that functioned as a logo of sorts, a familiar image that could bring about the thought of Herpicide along with the fear of what would happen if one did not use it. The drawing features a cartoon man losing his hair in a series of images with "Going," "Going," "Gone!" displayed above. As he loses his hair, the poor fellow also loses his chance to save it, with "Too Late for Herpicide!," a slogan of sorts for the company, written below the final bald figure. This logo can be seen in Figure 1 on the title page.

Besides just trying to make sure that people remembered their advertisements, the Herpicide Company also employed a variety of more specific marketing techniques popular throughout the world of nostrums. One of these, still popular today, was the use of testimonials, by both celebrities and everyday folk, all of them vehemently espousing the virtue of the product. However, hopefully unlike the testimonials of today, these endorsements were sometimes less than authentic. While some of the people, famous and otherwise, who appeared in the advertisements for patent medicines were indeed legitimate fans, celebrities were known to

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 166-67.

<sup>69</sup> "Herpicide Destroys the Dandruff Germ," Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Anaconda Standard*, March 25, 1900, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 25, 1901, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 167.

be bribed or blackmailed into giving statements, or sometimes simply used as a spokesperson without their permission, and average citizens were at times just made up.<sup>72</sup> While it is not certain if Herpicide ever fabricated any support in this way, their advertisements certainly featured their fair share of glowing reviews. The product was used by Annie Oakley, opera stars, and the barber for the members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and it contained the principle ingredient used in the hair tonic of Queen Victoria.<sup>73 74 75 76</sup> Besides these recommendations from the famous, Herpicide also received endorsements from everyday citizens who had been amazed by its incredible results. Women's hair grew long and dandruff free, and men found their bald spots suddenly disappearing.<sup>77 78</sup>

One of the primary strategies, as mentioned earlier, involved invoking fear, or possibly shame, in the minds of those reading the advertisements, often then pointing out to the viewer that these emotions could be easily alleviated by simply buying their product.<sup>79</sup> This was, in Herpicide, often separated between fears praying on men and those designated for women. Among men, it was, of course, the fear of baldness that was primarily used. They were reminded of the social stigma that was placed on men without hair, especially in the eyes of women. In a particularly frightening suggestion, it was noted that their baldness could already have cost them

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 187-88.

<sup>73</sup> "Annie Oakley," Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Quad-City Times*, October 13, 1907, 8.

<sup>74</sup> "Ladies of the American Stage Endorse Newbro's Herpicide," Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Wichita Daily Eagle*, March 27, 1910, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Washington Post*, November 23, 1905, 13.

<sup>76</sup> "Queen Victoria's Hair," Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Atchison Daily Champion*, December 20, 1900, 15.

<sup>77</sup> "A Woman's Gratitude," Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Anaconda Standard*, September 20, 1899, 9.

<sup>78</sup> "Your Hair Do You Want to Save It?," Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Detroit Free Press*, September 14, 1902, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 181-84.

love and marriage, as seen in Figure 2. The simple fix was, of course, to buy Newbro's Herculicide.

Women, in turn, were reminded of the inextricable link between their hair and beauty. A beautiful woman of course had luxurious hair. Upon having this maxim pointed out to her, she would ideally begin to question her own hair. Was it beautiful? Had its lackluster appearance been having a negative impact on her social life? The advertisement would attempt to convince her that this was a very real problem in her life, and that she needed to purchase Herculicide to fix it, as seen in Fig. 3.

The fact that Herculicide became so popular, and remained such, at least for a time, raises the question: What actually was in the stuff? Like many other patent medicines, Herculicide was in fact composed largely of alcohol. <sup>80 81</sup>

**She Refused Him!**

But do you blame her? She was young, and he appeared, at first sight, old enough to be her father. It grieved her deeply, too, to realize that she could never tell him that the cause of her refusal was his single misfortune--- baldness.

**...NEWBRO'S HERPICIDE...**

Kills the germ that causes the dandruff and falling hair, but it must be used before the hair follicles are completely destroyed. Consider why the change was wrought. You'll find it his misfortune, not his fault.

Addison's familiar lines apply particularly to the unfortunate gentleman portrayed in the drawing, for when he was a boy, Fred. Thom, Europe's greatest dermatologist, had not yet discovered that a microbe is the underlying cause of dandruff, falling hair and baldness. Indifference to baldness on the part of some young men is one of the surprising conditions formerly met with, but there was a good reason for this indifference. The world did not know dandruff to be a very contagious disease. In fact, it was regarded as a perfectly normal condition. The falling hair and itching scalp, that followed dandruff, was regarded as a matter of course. Baldness often appeared to "run" in certain families, but a single overworked hair-brush usually arranged this misfortune by planting the dandruff microbes in one scalp after another. Prior to Dana's discovery, medical men shot the entire pharmaceutical alphabet at falling hair, but it still continued to fall. Alcohol headed the list, then came Bay Rum, Borax, Bitter Apple, and Bear's grease. C proved a favorite letter for hair treatment: it brought Castor Oil, and the beautiful green blistering bugs from Spain, called Cantharides. Cantharides was the king pin of all hair preparations during the dark ages of scientific knowledge, but fortunately for the people, its use is now confined to raising blisters on the skin. Speaking of it, a well-known scalp specialist says: "What on earth gave Cantharides its reputation in hair tonics is more than I know. It is the tradition of a century, and it is all nonsense. It cuts into the scalp, causing inflammation, and it is made out of dead bugs, so that it furnishes the elements of decomposition upon which scalp microbes thrive, its use upon the scalp should be forbidden by law." Quinine was a popular hair tonic when the discovery of the dandruff microbe completely exploded the "hair tonic" fallacy, and proved the absolute necessity of a germicide in hair care and preservation. Newbro's Herculicide is the first and only successful scalp germicide ever offered. It has been tested by hundreds of physicians, who continue to use it in their daily practice. Once kill the scalp microbe with Newbro's Herculicide, and dandruff will disappear, itching scalp will cease, and falling hair stop, thus permitting NATURE, the only true "hair grower," to do its work. In many cases of acute baldness, if the hair follicles are not completely destroyed, a full new crop of hair may be grown. Dr. N. A. Herring, of Benton Harbor, Michigan, writes: "I have tested Newbro's Herculicide in several extreme cases of dandruff, and the results were very satisfactory."

**A Delightful Hair Dressing.**  
**Warning.**  
The success of Newbro's Herculicide has caused the market to be flooded with so-called dandruff germ destroyers. Don't expect satisfactory results from something the druggist assured you was "just as good." Conscientious druggists never recommend substitutes. Applications of Herculicide at principal barber shops. Price \$1.00 at leading drug stores, or direct from 7127 HERPICIDE Co., Detroit, Mich. **Destroy the cause---you remove the effect**

**It Stops Itching of the Scalp Almost Instantly. Get a Sample Direct from the Factory.**

**CUT THIS OUT**  
I enclose 10 cents in stamps to pay postage and packing upon a sample of Newbro's Herculicide.  
Name.....  
Street and No.....  
City and State.....  
Address The Herculicide Co., Detroit, Mich.

**A Healthy Hair.** **An Unhealthy Hair.**

Figure 2: A newspaper advertisement for Newbro's Herculicide featuring a man rejected by a woman for his baldness. Note the large, eye-catching font near the top which then fades into the solution of purchasing Herculicide. SOURCE: *Arizona Republic*.

<sup>80</sup> Carson, *One for a Man*, 42-43.

<sup>81</sup> "North Dakota Agricultural College Government Agricultural Experiment Station," 1904, 92, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=iau.31858048096410;view=1up;seq=30>.



<sup>82</sup> In 1904, the product was noted in North Dakota to contain a shocking 44 percent ethyl alcohol. However, included with this statement was the information that the product had recently changed from containing methyl alcohol to comply with the law of that state, and the fact that it was also noted that shipments containing the methyl variety still

sometimes made it into the state would seem to suggest that such was still being sold elsewhere.<sup>83</sup> By 1916, a more thorough analysis, also from North Dakota, concluded that Herpicide contained 36.75 percent ethyl alcohol by volume, along with salicylic acid and “possible traces of glycerin.”<sup>84</sup> While these listings of ingredients are likely in the second case and certain in the first to be incomplete, it is still possible to use them to ascertain a potential reason why Herpicide appeared to be so successful despite a lack of verified medical support.

**NEWBRO'S HERPICIDE**  
Is the original remedy that "kills the dandruff germ"

WITHOUT dandruff the hair must grow luxuriantly, except in chronic baldness, which is incurable. Dandruff is a contagious disease caused by a germ of microbe. To cure dandruff, this germ—a tiny vegetable growth—must be destroyed and kept out of the scalp by Newbro's Herpicide.

**A WOMAN TO BE PRETTY**

A woman to be pretty must have pretty hair. Beautiful locks have a subtle charm, for the poet says, "fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare." The unpoetic and intensely real dandruff microbe makes the hair dull, brittle and lusterless with later dandruff, itching scalp and falling hair. Newbro's Herpicide destroys this enemy of beauty and enables the hair to resume its natural luster and abundance. Almost marvelous results sometimes follow the continued use of Herpicide. Overcomes excessive oiliness and makes the hair light and fluffy. It contains no grease or dye. Stops itching of the scalp almost instantly.

Discriminating ladies who have used Newbro's Herpicide speak of it in the highest terms, for its almost magical effect upon the scalp, and also for its excellence as a regular hair dressing. It is delightfully fragrant and refreshing.

"I have found Newbro's Herpicide excellent for the hair. The first application stops itching of the scalp and it leaves the hair soft and silky."  
(Signed) EDNA D. ALLEN,  
Syracuse, N. Y.

AT DRUG STORES  
Send 10c in stamps to the Herpicide Co., Dept. N., Detroit, Mich., for a sample.

FOR SALE AT ALL DRUG STORES.

Figure 3: A newspaper advertisement for Newbro's Herpicide featuring a woman who has supposedly used the product. Note the larger font drawing the reader's eye to the fact that there is something in particular she must do to be pretty, along with the extremely long hair common at the time. SOURCE: *Oakland Tribune*.

<sup>82</sup> "Nostrums and Patent Medicines," *North Dakota Agricultural College*, November and December, 1916, 220, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=iau.31858048096410;view=1up;seq=1>.

<sup>83</sup> "North Dakota Agricultural College," 92.

<sup>84</sup> "Nostrums and Patent Medicines," 220.

Focusing on the solution's high content of ethyl alcohol, it can be noted that another form of alcohol, isopropyl, is recognized to possibly "dry excess oils trapped in the dermis" when applied to the skin.<sup>85</sup> The ethyl alcohol present in Herpicide may have similarly helped to dry out the scalp, relieving at least some of the dandruff, if not the baldness.

### **Too Late for Herpicide**

Despite how it flourished, at least in its advertising, during its heyday, Newbro's Herpicide eventually began to fade from style. Advertisements for Herpicide had begun to decline steadily since experiencing their peak year in 1905, and in 1921 they dipped down into a mere 265 after the near over 9,000 of sixteen years before.<sup>86</sup> After 1922, they disappeared from Kansas completely.<sup>87</sup>

It is difficult to determine an exact reason for this demise; however, there are several factors that would seem to have possibly played a role. First of all, the popularity of patent medicines in general decreased dramatically after and leading up to the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which required companies selling pharmaceuticals to reveal the presence of substances such as alcohol and opiates in their products and for their concoctions to contain all ingredients these proprietors claimed.<sup>88</sup> While Herpicide itself would seem to have been able to evade this edict by identifying as a perfumery instead of a pharmaceutical product (these did not fall under federal regulation until the passage of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938), public opinion was beginning to turn against patent medicines during the early twentieth century, in part thanks to the Progressive movement and the work of muckraking journalists, and stricter

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<sup>85</sup> Charlie Gaston, "The Effects of Rubbing Alcohol on the Skin," Our Everyday Life, last updated September 28, 2017, <https://oureverydaylife.com/the-effects-of-rubbing-alcohol-on-the-skin-12210587.html>.

<sup>86</sup> Newspapers.com, "Search Results: Newbro's Herpicide."

<sup>87</sup> Newspapers.com, "Search Results: Kansas Historical Society."

<sup>88</sup> Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 225, 243-48.

regulation of many of these concoctions after 1906 likely helped to eventually move public approval farther away from nostrums.<sup>89 90 91</sup>

Somewhat similarly, the fact that the product contained such a high level of alcohol had caused it some trouble throughout the first two decades of the century, and this could have also contributed to its decline. In addition to having to switch from making its product with ethyl instead of methyl alcohol near the beginning of the century, in 1918 its high alcohol content caused it some trouble with Prohibition.<sup>92 93</sup> While the company itself was not involved in the court case, a man who had sold a bottle of Herpicide to a private in the military was charged with selling him illegal whiskey. This man was in fact convicted, although it is unclear the effect that this event may have had on the Herpicide Company itself.<sup>94</sup>

Finally, the general appeal, for women, of a product spouting as one of its major attributes the ability to help grow longer hair would have lost a lot of appeal at the beginning of the 1920's. In a hair revolution, the women of the time began to bob their tresses, completely abandoning the lengthy locks of the past decades.<sup>95</sup> During one week in one New York

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<sup>89</sup> "Custom Decisions," 173.

<sup>90</sup> House of Representatives, "Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act," April 14, 1938, 2.

<sup>91</sup> Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires*, 205-06, 225.

<sup>92</sup> "North Dakota Agricultural College," 92.

<sup>93</sup> United States v. Kinsel.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Corson, *Fashions in Hair*, 608-09.

barbershop in 1924, 3,500 different women received the haircut.<sup>96</sup> With such short tresses all the rage, Herpicide would have lost a large portion of its appeal to women, and the center of its advertising strategy for them. While it is unclear the extent to which this contributed to the eventual death of Herpicide, it seems that it would certainly have been a detriment to the company.

However, Herpicide did not completely fall off the face of the planet, or even Kansas, after the beginning of the 1920's. The product was still showing up in newspaper advertisements, albeit smaller ones and for cheaper prices, throughout the 1930's and 1940's.<sup>97 98</sup> In 1986, a bottle of Newbro's Herpicide arrived at the Clay County Museum in Clay Center, KS still two-thirds full.<sup>99</sup> The bottle would seem, due to its labeling, which can be



Figure 4: A photograph of the Herpicide bottle brought to the Clay County Museum. Note the location of New York at the bottom, indicating the date was at least 1933, and the slight discoloration at the bottom of the bottle, having possibly come from the Herpicide itself. SOURCE: Lizzy McEntire.

<sup>96</sup> Simon, *Hair*, 27.

<sup>97</sup> "Herpicide," Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Chehalis Bee-Nugget*, August 16, 1935, 8.

<sup>98</sup> Newbro's Herpicide, Advertisement, *Daily Mail*, July 11, 1940, 2.

<sup>99</sup> Discussion by telephone with Jeff Gaiser (Clay County Museum Director), March 2018.

seen in Fig. 4 above, to have come from 1933 at the earliest.<sup>100</sup> Due to the amount of time that presumably passed between the purchase of the item and its arrival at the museum, it is possible that the person who bought it simply used one-third or so of the solution, found it unsatisfactory, and returned it to a shelf where it was discovered later, perhaps by a relative after the original owner had passed away.<sup>101</sup> Additionally, 1933 was significantly after Herpicide had stopped being advertised in Kansas in 1922.<sup>102</sup> This helps to show the continued existence of Herpicide, although likely on a smaller scale, even when it was not indicated in newspaper advertisements, both clarifying and clouding the narrative of Herpicide's prevalence in both the U.S. and Kansas. While this brings to light new information, is also simply points out the incomplete nature of the advertisements as a source.

Even as it was dying out regarding its sales during the 1920's, Herpicide still appeared to live on in the popular culture of the United States, specifically through its slogan. The desire of Herpicide's advertising to make people remember the product had worked, although maybe not in the way they had intended, and people began recognizing that it's no use crying over spilt milk by saying it as "Too Late for Herpicide," continuing through the 1950's when Herpicide was no longer on the shelves."<sup>103</sup> <sup>104</sup> In 1922, a rather downtrodden *Life* magazine article used the term to describe Congress, and, in 1931, the editor of a small town Oklahoma newspaper applied the term to the situation of former residents leaving for the city.<sup>105</sup> <sup>106</sup> In 1925, a satirical story featured a long-haired, elusive heroine whose dropped Herpicide bottle became a clue in the hunt

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<sup>100</sup> Smithsonian, "Newbro's Herpicide."

<sup>101</sup> Discussion with Dr. M.J. Morgan, Kansas State University, May 7, 2018.

<sup>102</sup> Newspapers.com, "Search Results: Kansas Historical Society."

<sup>103</sup> Smithsonian, "Newbro's Herpicide."

<sup>104</sup> "Words and Wisdom," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 1, 1978, 14.

<sup>105</sup> J.K.M., "On Pennsylvania Avenue," *Life*, August 24, 1922, 27.

<sup>106</sup> "The Safety Valve," *Democrat-American*, December 3, 1931, 2.

for her and who in the last chapter tragically subjected herself to a bob.<sup>107</sup> As late as 1978, a woman was writing to an advice column to ask about the origins of the phrase; her mother had used it when she was growing up.<sup>108</sup>

Newbro's Herpicide burst onto the American medicinal scene with (misplaced) zeal and briefly captured the attention of a nation and even beyond before beginning its fade into relative obscurity. By examining this product's rollercoaster ride through advertising, it is possible to get a glimpse into a portion of the culture and world view of early twentieth century America by looking at exactly how these values were manipulated in the cruel schemes of the ads.

Examining the weird, wacky, and generally concerning world of patent medicines can make one better appreciate the regulation of the drugs prescribed today while also raising questions of certainty regarding present knowledge (the concept of a dandruff germ was not definitively disproven until 1953).<sup>109</sup> The prevalence of this product in the United States, and especially Kansas, also points to interesting trends and opinions in hygiene and fashion, along with just the ones regarding medicine and advertising credibility. Even today, nearly one hundred years after Newbro's Herpicide finally fell into undeniable decline, it is still possible to examine its history to learn more about the people of that time: their lives, fears, and loves. Which really begs the question: Is it ever too late for Herpicide?

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<sup>107</sup> Corey Ford, "Three Rousing Cheers!!! The Parody Adventures of Our Youthful Heroes," *The Bookman; A Review of Books and Life* 62 (1), (September 1925), 28.

<sup>108</sup> "Words and Wisdom," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

<sup>109</sup> F.A. Whitlock, "Pityrosporum Ovale and Some Scaly Conditions of the Scalp," *The British Medical Journal*, 1 (4808), (February 28, 1953), 484-87.