

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Frontier Tales

The Diamond King

Rebecca Huffstutler Norton

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The display case is hand-made and, judging by the two World War II ration stamps affixed to its glass front, it was most likely made during the great war. In the case sits elaborate, lacy Valentines once exchanged by Victorian lovers. A marriage license has been cut to look like a lace doily. Issued in 1817 to John Hughes and Sarah Burt, one wonders if Sarah was the one who carefully made her handwritten license into a piece of art. Amidst these tokens of romance, a small, simple business card looks a little out of place. The name Dr. J. I. Lighthall is written in a flowery script above the title, The Diamond King.

The business card is a rare token of remembrance of a consummate showman who billed himself as an Indian Medicine Man. Named the Diamond King for his wardrobe that included a full-length seal coat and a red velvet coat adorned with “diamonds,” Lighthall traveled around the country selling his miracle elixers he claimed could cure everything from a headache to a bad liver to hair loss. He arrived in San Antonio in December 1885.

The *Daily Express* advertised his arrival, “On Monday night he will appear on one of the plazas wearing \$300,000 worth of diamonds, the largest collection in the possession of any one individual in the world.” The “diamonds,” or what we call rhinestones today, were dripping from his fingers and sewn onto his costumes and hats. Making its way to Military Plaza, the Diamond King’s Indian Medicine Show was a bright

caravan of painted wagons and an ensemble of entertainers reminiscent of the era's popular Wild West shows.

While he claimed to have learned his natural recipes from an extended stay in the Indian territories out West, his healing tonics were actually made by his mother back in his hometown of Peoria, Illinois. The dark, amber liquid contained herbs, roots, bark and a generous helping of whisky and even morphine. In addition to exhorting the benefits of his potions, the "doctor" would give lectures on maintaining good health and would offer tooth extractions, entertaining the crowd with a dramatic flourish that the average dentist could not accomplish. While he may have enticed the gullible to hand over their money for what was essentially a whisky cocktail, he was also known for his charitable inclinations, occasionally passing out free medicine and money to the poor.

San Antonio is where the final curtain fell on the Diamond King's reign. Legend has it that a man suffering from small pox attended his show, seeking a cure for his ailment. In a bitter twist of fate, Lighthall contracted the dreaded pox himself. His own miracle tonic could not cure him and he succumbed to the disease in January of 1886 at the age of 30. His simple business card in the case among the Valentines is a small reminder of a shimmering individual who once commanded the frontier stage.