

The Bandera PROPHECY

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Frontier Tales

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As controversy swirls around us on how to treat the coronavirus, it's interesting to look back to see how those who lived on the Texas frontier treated their illnesses before the rise of pharmaceuticals. Some of the old-time remedies used by pioneers are curious if not death-defying. In 1880, a scourge of diphtheria was raging around the country. It was known as the "Strangling Angel of Death" for the thick secretions that were produced by the illness which would coat the throat and cause difficulties in breathing. Diphtheria was particularly deadly among children. Parents stood helpless as the greyish film in the throat first produced croup, then finally blocked the windpipe. Like today's coronavirus, the disease could be transmitted by those who displayed no symptoms.

One particular treatment which was reported to have had some success was the use of sulphur. Sulphur and flour would be mixed together in a glass of water and given to the patient to gargle and then swallow. If the patient could not swallow, sulphur powder was sprinkled on a piece of burning coal and the patient could inhale the fumes, following the notion that brimstone kills every fungus species known to man, beast and plant in a few minutes. Doctors believed diphtheria was a fungus, not knowing at the time about bacterial infections. For particularly bad cases, windows and doors would be closed off so the fumes could fill the room. This mode of fumigation was also used to cure severe cold cases and was recommended for treatment of consumption (tuberculosis) and asthma!

This may have been a more palatable option for a cough than the treatment of powdered cow dung dissolved in boiling water for the patient to drink or the less offensive, but just as smelly, hot onion juice. Open wounds could easily become infected before the days of in-door plumbing and the practice of good hygiene. Before antibiotics, the injury could only be cleaned with a good soaking in boiling salt water, kerosene or turpentine. Ant and mosquito bites were covered with wet chewing tobacco, boils were covered with either raw meat fat or sauerkraut, and to treat a balding head – cover it with wet cow manure. Animal droppings seemed to have been a “drug” of choice. There were many treatments touting their use, including placing warm cattle or sheep manure in a cotton bag and wearing it as a poultice around the neck or placing the bag on the chest of those suffering from whopping cough or pneumonia.

At least animal droppings could be said to be safer and more organic than the medicines purchased at the drug store or from a traveling salesman. Cocaine and opium were often found in over the counter remedies, even in children’s teething medicine. Magic elixirs said to cure everything from fatigue to nervous disorders were everywhere. For many of these miracle cures, grain alcohol or just plain whiskey was the main ingredient.

No wonder Grandma often had a smile on her face!