

A PATENT MEDICINE MADE IN MUKWONAGO COMANCHE INDIAN MUSKWA

by Henry Hecker

photos from the author and Ancestry.com



ny fan of vintage Western movies and television shows can conjure up the image of the snake oil salesman hawking his potion on a dusty street while townspeople gather around him. They are entranced by his promises to heal a variety of ills with his unique concoction. He extolls the virtues of the ingredients, some exotic, some just plain bizarre. He often refers to Native American recipes that he has obtained. Sometimes, the salesman plants a shill in the audience to testify to the restorative powers of the elixir being pitched.



A MEDICINE SHOW SALESMAN.

Often the medicine was pitched as “info commercials” between acts of Wild West or burlesque shows and the more sophisticated ones took place in opera halls or social clubs that had the facilities to host these events.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a virtual explosion of so-called patent medicines created by entrepreneurs. They ranged from those legitimately trained in contemporary medicine to those who stopped at nothing to make a buck.

At a time of only minimal pharmaceutical knowledge and virtually no regulations, the “medicines” were sold to a desperate population suffering from every malady imaginable. The medicines sometimes contained harmless plants and herbs, but could also be addictive - containing cocaine, opium, or mercury. Almost all used alcohol as a dissolvent which provided temporary relief.

Early Mukwonago was visited by these traveling sales shows and some members of the public were fleeced by these frauds. The proof is in the number of early patent medicine bottles that are found in excavations of privies and dumps in the area. It is also apparent that early bona-fide pharmacists, such as the Clohisy family and two physicians, Alexander and Stone, did their best to dispense medicines of proven benefit.

A recent discovery of an unusual bottle in the Lake Geneva area adds a local color to the patent medicine era with what at the outset was a mysterious Mukwonago connection. Subsequent investigation, however, reveals that at one time

in the 1890s, Mukwonago briefly served as residence to one of the most sensational performing duos of the Wild West and Medicine Show era.

Mukwonago had its own patent medicine manufacturer! Quite a creative one too in terms of the fanciful branding of the product. The bottle shown was recently found in an old collection of pharmacy items, and to the author, a collector of local bottles for half a century, a quite significant one. The aqua glass bottle exhibits glass blowing technology of the late 1880s to about 1905 and is 8 5/8" tall.

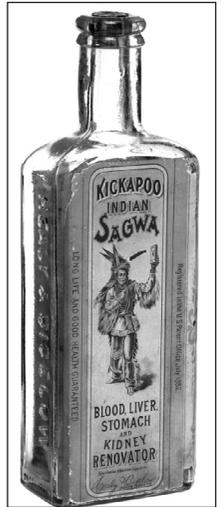
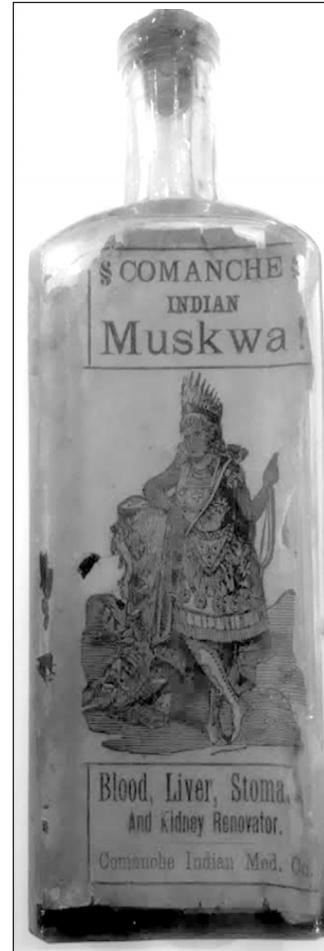
It is paper labeled with graphics announcing "Comanche Indian Muskwa! The Great System Renovator. Blood, Liver, Stomach, and Kidney Renovator. Manufactured by the Comanche Medicine Co., Mukwonago, Wisconsin." A finely adorned female Native American leaning against a tree stump is used as an eye-catching logo. The labeling of the Comanche Muskwa has striking similarities to a well-known national brand called Kickapoo Indian Sagwa made by the Healy & Bigelow Company at the same time. Clearly the creator of the Muskwa Renovator was playing off the popularity of the Sagwa product claiming the same renovating powers for the "Blood, Liver, Stomach, and Kidneys."

Several observations and conclusions were drawn from the information provided by the bottle at the outset. First, the manufacturer was likely a small-time operator and probably did business for a very brief time. The label only aspect, versus a more costly private molded embossed bottle, indicates a need for keeping costs to a minimum. The business owner took great license to exploit the Native American attribution of the recipe. First of all, the reference to the Comanche tribe, a people indigenous to the Southwest United States, has no local connection to the Mukwonago area. Borrowing from Native Americans inhabiting the Pacific Northwest, "Muskwa" is the Cree word for black bear. One can make a slight connection because one version of the origin of the name "Mukwonago" is derived from the Potawatomi word meaning "Place of the Bear, or Bear Clan, or a place where bears were killed." There is debate of this origin and translation but it is the one that has survived at least since the mid-nineteenth century. At the time of the first Anglo settlers, the Potawatomi had a large village on the Mukwonago River here.

Another intriguing element of the labeling is that the directions are not just in English and German, very commonly done at this time in Wisconsin, but they



EARLY PATENT MEDICINE BOTTLES WITH NAMES SUCH AS "MAGIC FLUID" AND "ELECTRIC LINIMENT."



LEFT: TWO VIEWS OF THE MYSTERIOUS MUSKWA BOTTLE WITH DIRECTIONS IN ENGLISH, GERMAN, AND FRENCH. IT BEARS A RESEMBLANCE TO THE NATIONALLY POPULAR KICKAPOO INDIAN SAGWA BOTTLE.

are also in French. The author has never seen another Wisconsin bottle with directions in French. What target market was the Comanche Indian Medicine Company trying to address?

No information on this company was found in the Mukwonago Historical Society and Museum collection. A search of *Waukesha Freeman* text of the period revealed no advertising from this company. However, research provided by Mary Jo Isely of the Mukwonago Library, a number of the puzzle pieces about this medicine company fell into place. A scan of *Mukwonago Chief* newspapers revealed several brief, but unmistakable references to the company. A *Chief* article from October 5, 1892 reported "Mr. and Mrs. Hicks returned last Wednesday from an engagement in some of the northern towns. The Capt. goes out this week or next with a newly organized medicine company and will no longer show under canvas. He expects to work southwest and may go as far as his native state. Mrs. Hicks (Princess Nenetah) will remain here for the winter."

Other reports from the time revealed that Mr. Hicks was Harry Hicks (aka Capt. Hicks or Tex Hicks), a sharp shooter of legendary skills and imagination to match. His wife, "Princess Nenetah," was part Comanche possessing ample musical and fortune telling talents. They had established performing careers before arriving in Mukwonago.

While no actual records have been found that show unequivocally that the Hicks couple owned the Comanche Indian Medicine Company in Mukwonago, the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming. The image on the bottle is strikingly similar to Princess Nenetah pictured in the photograph on this page. In the January 26, 1893 edition of the *Mukwonago Chief* reported that "The Comanche Indian medicine headquarters and laboratory is a busy place, it requiring all hands to keep up with orders."

Newspaper accounts in other Wisconsin cities indicate the Hicks' were conducting Indian medicine shows in the area. A March 1893 edition of the *Mukwonago Chief* reports, "The Comanche Indian Medicine is drawing crowded houses at East Troy, the people from the rural districts turn out in crowds to buy the medicine and enjoy the 'refined' performance which we understand is free to all. Glad to hear it."

The very nature of their business is no doubt the reason they stayed in Mukwonago for just a couple of years or less. As soon as the market was saturated with "Muskwa" it was best to move on to new territory.

Additional research by Mary Jo Isely revealed more newspaper accounts of the Hick's activities - all colorful, if not outrageous. The earliest record she



CABINET PHOTO OF TEXAS HARRY HICKS AND PRINCESS NENETAH. THE SILVER CROSS ON HER COSTUME MAY BE THE ONE GIVEN TO HER BY POPE LEOPOLD.

The Comanche Indian medicine headquarters and laboratory is a busy place, it requiring all hands to keep up with the orders.

JANUARY 26, 1893 - FIRST MENTION OF THE COMPANY IN THE *MUKWONAGO CHIEF*.

The Comanche Indian Medicine is drawing crowded houses at East Troy the people from the rural districts turning out in crowds to buy the medicine and enjoy the "refined" performance which we understand is free to all. Glad to hear it.

MARCH 1893 - THE COMPANY'S SHOWS IN EAST TROY WERE MENTIONED IN THE *MUKWONAGO CHIEF*.

Texas Harry and his Indian wife Ne-Ne-Tah gave a street entertainment here Friday night of last week and sold several bottles of their medicines. They gave an exhibition of some very fine rifle shots. Ne-Ne-Tah does the William Tell act shoots a small potato from the head of Harry. They drew a big crowd. Notice by an advertisement elsewhere, they will give an entertainment in Oddfellow's Hall next Tuesday night.

THIS 1883 ARTICLE FROM THE WINCHESTER, KANSAS *ARGUS* ESTABLISHES THAT THE HICKS' WERE ADEPT PERFORMERS YEARS BEFORE THEIR TIME IN MUKWONAGO.

IT ALSO MENTIONS SELLING MEDICINE.

found of Harry and Princess Nenetah performing together was in 1883. It suggests they were already adept at entertaining crowds with marksmanship and selling medicine.

In 1891, prior to their stint in Mukwonago, "Texas" Hicks and Princess Nenetah were performing in Norfolk, Virginia. A story published in the *Norfolk Virginian* provided a helpful insight into their act. The program opened with a lecture by Texas Harry, "who looked very handsome in an outlandish costume, the front of which was covered with medals gained in many a shooting match." Princess Nenetah then entertained the crowd by singing several popular songs. The couple then entertained the audience with examples of the marksmanship. The show ended with Indian songs and dances.

The story also indicated that "Tex" was actually born in Norfolk, despite his Western persona, but other accounts have him being born in the West. He went by many aliases, but it seems these articles are all covering the same man (or

TEXAS HARRY AND PRINCESS NENETAH

at the Opera House--They Give a Delightful Entertainment-- Sheriff Clayton Srenaded-- Found in the Creek, Etc.

[Correspondence of The Virginian.]
NEWPORT'S NEWS, Va., January 1.
—About the best entertainment ever held in this town was one given last evening at Johnson's Opera House by "Texas Harry" and his charming wife, Princess Nenetah, under the auspices of the Methodist Church. Despite the rain, good advertising brought out a crowd, and they were all glad they went. After an interesting lecture by "Texas Harry," who looked very handsome in an outlandish but exceedingly picturesque costume, the front of which was covered with medals gained in many a shooting match, Princess Nenetah came on the stage arrayed in regular Indian princess style, looking stately and beautiful. She sang an Irish song, "Barney Come Home," which brought down the house. She responded to several encores with comic songs, which were well selected, well rendered and kept the audience in roars of laughter. "Texas Harry" then displayed his ability as the champion shot of the world, eliciting by his prowess the admiration of all the gentlemen and boys. Princess Nenetah also took some wonderfully good aims. "Texas Harry" did some wonderfully dexterous throwing and catching of a loaded revolver. An Indian song followed by an Indian dance, was much admired.

Texas Harry is the son of one of our merchants, and his wife is a real princess on her mother's side. Her father was a French Canadian, and as they are here, will remain here all winter. They will probably give the people of the town another opportunity of enjoying a most agreeable evening.

ONE YEAR BEFORE SETTLING IN MUKWONAGO, THE *NORFOLK VIRGINIAN* DESCRIBED THE ACT.

a whopping case of stolen identity). Hicks told so many versions of his supposed exploits that it is beyond the scope of this article to sort out what is real and what may have been created by his limitless imagination.

Before coming to Mukwonago, Harry Hicks, by his own accounts, lived with Western Native American tribes from a young age. He was a Texas Ranger or at least a scout for them. He served under General Crook as a scout and supposedly narrowly avoided being burned at the stake. He claimed to be at the Battle of the Little Big Horn serving as a scout and messenger for Custer. Even his birth date and place vary dependent on the source. His accounts of meeting Princess Nenetah, his narrow escapes from mortal danger, his awards for marksmanship and feats of travel by horse and on foot all read like dime novels of the time. Without the benefit of the internet and “fact checks,” gullible reporters wrote what Hicks told them. He seemed to thrive on embellishment at every opportunity.

In one account, published after their Mukwonago stint, Hicks was severely beaten by “Denver Dick” in Atchison, Kansas, in 1895. The altercation erupted over a dispute about Princess Nenetah’s fortune telling sessions.

While his sharp shooting is not in dispute, he once skipped town after fatally shooting a woman at one of his shows. In 1894, he supposedly helped capture Geronimo; and there is an account of his wife performing alone in Akron, Ohio, that same year.

After Princess Nenetah ran off to elope with a circus performer, Harry Hicks returned to Milwaukee in 1898 and announced he was joining the Rough Riders to fight in Cuba. Either that adventure was very brief or he never followed through, as later that year there is a story of him performing in Kansas.

His later years are documented in several newspaper accounts describing exploits at points in history that put Forrest Gump to shame!

There is strong evidence that his real name was William Boaz McAlpin and that he died in Oklahoma in 1941. In later years, he owned an 800 acre ranch. He also spent time in Leavenworth Prison on a sexual assault charge.

Princess Nenetah’s singing, shooting, and other comedic skills evoked rave reviews at the time. There is an account of her receiving a silver cross from Pope Leopold in Europe while she traveled with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. The cross may be the one she is wearing in the cabinet photo. Princess Nenetah also fatally shot a fellow performer in one undated account. Apparently the man was



NEWSPAPER AD FOR THE SHOW IN WINCHESTER, KANSAS.

filling in for Harry and was not as steady. Nenetah seems to disappear in 1898 but then reappear in the early 1900s, still as Harry’s wife. Harry had at least four wives in total, at least two after Nenetah. He performed with them as well.

In addition to performing on their own, the couple performed with Buffalo Bill, Denver Dick, the Campbell Bros. Circus, and Healy and Bigelow Medicine Show. But while in Mukwonago they seemed to be working on their own.

The author speculates that perhaps the couple was “hiding out” in Mukwonago in 1892-93, after their shooting accidents. Harry escaped prosecution because he ran off, but Nenetah was tried and forbidden from shooting a gun again. If more research can determine the dates of these accidents, it may shed light on the reasons they were in Mukwonago and performing alone.

The author contacted a fellow researcher of Hicks’ life and legend through Ancestry.com. David T. Lewis has compiled a fascinating timeline of Hicks’ life - a life filled with contradictions, exaggerations and conflicting dates and events.

Lewis wrote:

“Curley Hicks was an interesting character. ... The best I can figure out is that he became an entertainer who over time merged his acting persona with his real life. Facts about him are difficult to nail down partly because he used several different aliases. Some of those names were William (Willie) McAlpin, William Hicks, Eagle Eye, Crow Scout Curley, Captain Jack Hicks, Captain H. B. Hick, Washosha Hicks, Captain W. B. Hicks, Quana Washosha, Curley Hicks, and William Boas McAlpin.”

Any information from readers of this article will be greatly appreciated. Residing in some dusty attic in the area may be other ephemera from this company or other labeled bottles.

Special thanks to Mary Jo Isely, John Schoenkecht and David T. Lewis for the research that solved much of the mystery that the bottle could not solve. □

For more information and additional newspaper articles, please visit the Mukwonago Historical Society website:

http:

or the Milwaukee Antique Bottle and Advertising Club website:

http:



THE WEDDING OF WILLIAM BOAZ MCALPIN AND MARIE C. SAUNDERS IN JULY OF 1917.