

Old Leonard

Colebrook's most famous (or infamous) character was without a doubt Leonard Gillette, or more commonly known as "Old Leonard" by the inhabitants of the town. His father Levi begins to show up on the pages of various Colebrook tax and property lists in the 1820s. Leonard married Phebe Hart, of Colebrook, on April 20, 1840.

The person who wrote most extensively about Levi's son, Leonard, was Henry Hart Vining, and it is his account that we will republish here for the reader's enjoyment. He named the article simply "Doctor Quack".

"It is a common and true saying that every country contains the best cures for its own diseases. No other part of the globe can afford stronger proof of all the truth of the remark than this very country of the United States of America, the paradise of freedom in which to dwell. Instead of sending our ships to foreign climates after costly, unnatural medicine, why is it we do not open our eyes on the vegetable kingdom around us as being more natural to our constitutions? What then, is the use, in the name of common sense, of importing Peruvian bark from South America, when the common Boxwood of our country produces the same effect? Or, of sending to Europe for Spanish flies, when the American potato flies, which may be collected in large quantities, are far better, and will draw a blister without poisoning, which the Spanish fly is very apt to do, you all very well know."

"This was the philosophy of Leonard Gillette, who lived in a little house at the corner of the roads, on top of Beech Hill, in the Town of Colebrook, in northwestern Connecticut. [The house no longer exists, but it was the one I was born and raised in. In modern terms, it was at the eastern side of the intersection of Beech Hill Road and Moses Road.]

'Old Leonard', as he was called by everyone, was tall, loose-jointed, lantern-jawed and painfully cadaverous. His shock of white hair added to his strange appearance and when his sense of humor produced an open smile, his face was positively ghastly. He lived in his little old house beside the road for many years and grew quinces, which he sold for miles around. These quince bushes grew near the road and bore huge crops of wonderfully-smelling fruit, which were the envy of all the neighborhood. Why did they grow so profusely? Old Leonard would say 'Why, you see, they get all the wash from the kitchen sink and all the surplus from my herb medicines; if herbs are good for folks, why not for quinces?'" [Two of those quince bushes still grow and produce a bumper crop every year for my daughter. Quinces are very particular where they will grow; at one site they will flourish, while one hundred yards away they will flatly refuse to survive. Whether Old Leonard's thrived there because of the reasons stated is accurate or not, the fact remains that no better explanation has come to light in the past 175 years.]

"Yes, Dr. Leonard Gillette was an herb doctor and peddled his cures and tonics throughout all the county and over the border into Massachusetts. He also carried essences and Yankee notions. Slung over his shoulder was a pair of saddle bags. In one of these he carried his essences (which were of excellent quality). In the other were 'Yankee notions'; needles, pins, thread, shoe laces and, as he called them, 'hanks' of linen thread. In his right hand he

carried a wicker-covered demi-john of alcohol as a solvent for his essences and camphor gum. He had the reputation of being the demi-john's best customer.

He was a keen trader and would haggle over a penny in a sale, but if he could not win it, would give in with a fatalistic smile.

One cold night he arrived at the home of Rev. Mr. Russell. [667 Colebrook Road today] He was so much under the influence of his potations that Mr. Russell did not dare to refuse him shelter, for fear he would freeze to death. It was a somewhat embarrassing situation, as Mrs. Russell had company, and the old man was sick and noisy most of the night. The next morning Old Leonard was given a warm breakfast and then Mr. Russell charged him ten dollars for his night's lodging. Old Leonard was amazed and distressed to the point of tears, and pleaded to have the charge reduced, but Mr. Russell was insistent and threatened him with arrest for drunkenness unless it was paid. It was pitiful to see the old miser dole out the money, a half dollar at a time, vainly hoping to the last that his enemy would relent. It is needless to say that he never called at the minister's house again. [This account was recorded by Jane Smith, a resident of the Russell home, [“See Memories of Colebrook, Connecticut – 1868-1877 by Jane E. W. Smith”]

Many and varied were the remedies which Dr. Gillette used on his patients. If a child had Whooping Cough, he took moosewood bark [also called Hobblebush], made a very strong tea, sweetened it well with honey for constant drink. Then he braided a band of the same bark and put it around the neck, keeping the patient from the damp air until cured.

For deafness – take a black ash sapling four feet long and six or eight inches through, put one end in a fire. Save the sap from the other end, let stand till it settles clear, take equal portions of the sap and olive oil and put in a phial, add castile soap, the size of a large pea, shake well together before using. Put two drops into the ear at night and stop with cotton till morning.

For sour mouth or lips, caused by a cold, select three white flint stones about the size of a common pea, swallow them; this will almost always effect a cure.

Old Leonard had a book published entitled “*The Botanical Physician, a collection of Useful Prescriptions*”. It was a book of 37 pages, filled with remedies, symptoms of diseases and a description of roots, herbs and plants. Many curious remedies appear in this book, some of which we will reprint next time:

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg

Continuation of “Old Leonard”

Last time we ended at the point of giving some of Old Leonard’s medicinal remedies. I certainly hope that the delay has not in any way caused any medical emergencies among the readership due to the inaccessibility of a sure-fire cure!

King’s Evil. [Have you ever noticed how many old terms are completely meaningless today? This is true of recipes as well as medical terminology. Here is what the dictionary has to say about “King’s Evil”: The title reflects the ancient belief that this disease was curable by the touch of a reigning sovereign. The disease is today called “Scrofula”, a constitutional disorder of a tuberculous nature, characterized chiefly by swelling and degeneration of the lymphatic glands, especially in the neck, and by inflammation of the joints.]

King’s Evil – take a muskrat skin, roll it up, the fur side in, put a wire around it so as to hold it, place it in the fire and burn to a coal, bathe the patient’s neck with vinegar, then sprinkle on the powdered coal; repeat this twice a day.

Sore Eyes – take garden chamomile, sage, shed rose leaves; equal parts, steep them strong; wet a cloth, fold five or six times and bind on the temples, and wash the eyes with urine.

For a weak stomach – Take an oyster shell, wet it in water and heat it at the fire, then put it into a bowl of cold water for common drink. When gone, wet and heat again and again.

Shingles – bathe the patient in the blood of a black cat, where affected, and bind the skin on, and make a tea of golden seal (two tablespoons-full of the white root), put into one quart of boiling water, for common drink.

(If you are squeamish, just pass over this next one!)

Croup – take up the white of hen manure, what can be taken up on the point of a pen-knife blade, and mix with honey; one dose is almost always enough to effect a permanent cure.

One of his favorite remedies was frog’s oil. Take green frogs and chop them up, put them into water, simmer slow for two hours, then set away until cold, then skim off. Another was made from earth worms. Take one half pint, put in a junk bottle [what’s that?] add one pound of loaf sugar, hang in the sun until the worms turn to oil; the oil is used as ointment on the throat in epilepsy, and cramp convulsion fits. Dose of half a teaspoon is good for cough and weakness at the stomach, also for callus or stiff joints.

For Red Erysipelas – [This is defined as an acute febrile infectious disease, caused by a specific streptococcus.] Catch some female or white-bellied frogs, keep them alive; take two of them and hold near enough to the person’s mouth for them to take the person’s breath; hold them there for the space of four or five minutes, then put them into water; repeat the operation every ten minutes for one hour. Then let the person rest one hour; then repeat the operation the same as before. Continue this treatment for five days or a week.

Piles [hemorrhoids] For bloody piles, put a shovel-full of coals in a kettle, roll up a ball of sulphur in woolen cloth and put in the fire and let the patient sit over the smoke, and anoint with the universal salve at night [Do you suppose he means Vaseline?] after sitting over the smoke; repeat every night until cured.”

“There are many recipes for all the various ills of man and woman, too, made up of herbs and plants, which might be very helpful, if you had the courage to try them. A full description of all the herbs and plants is in the back of the book.”

[I haven't seen this in print anywhere, but right next to the quince bushes still growing in his old back yard, are some small, brushy-type trees, sparsely covered with sharp thorns very similar to those of the Black Locust. This is Prickly Ash, also called the Toothache Tree, the bark of their roots contains a strong anesthetic; chew a small amount of this and your mouth will feel as though you just had a shot of Novocain. I have dug down to the roots (three or four inches) and removed a quarter-inch wide strip of bark an inch long, put it in my mouth next to a cold sore or sore tooth, and the pain almost instantly stopped. It doesn't address the problem, but the pain goes away.]

“On the back page ‘Doctor Leonard Gillette’ writes to the reader: ‘After many years experience and practice, through the advice of friends, and my own solicitude for the welfare of the human race, I am ready and willing to admit that we have many able and experienced physicians in our country, but I can safely say also that there are very many persons also who are practicing medicine, and style themselves physicians, who know no more about the human system and the diseases it is subject to, than a dog knows how to perform some fine mechanical piece of work.’ [Could we perhaps interject here the old adage of “Physician, heal thyself”?]”

“Now it certainly must be admitted that it is far better for every man, especially every man with a family, to have within his reach, a work that will enable him to combat and repel any disease which may attack himself or his family, than it would be to let the disease run, and by so doing endanger the life and destroy the health and may be have to employ a quack, and pay tens of hundreds of dollars for which he will receive little if any benefit. And I am certain if any man will follow the advice given in the foregoing pages, he will be able to combat and repel any disease which may attack himself or family, but I will let the work show for itself, which I am certain it will do if thoroughly tested.’

This eccentric old character died many years ago, and has been forgotten by all but a very few, but his remedies are occasionally spoken about with ridicule. Many of them were unreasonably fantastic, but others were good and we hope relieved the suffering of some ill person.”

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg