Lydia E. Pinkham

HER STO

Lydia Pinkham in Her Advanced Years.

By REUBEN PETERSON, JR.

IN LYNN, MASSACHUSETTS, this Christmas, a small family group will drink a silent toast to an American woman who sixty-four years ago began by brewing herb medicines over a kitchen stove and ended by creating an industry. The woman was Lydia E. Pinkham. The story of her success is as American in flavor as ham and eggs.

To the sophisticated younger generation of today Lydia E. Pinkham is known largely through the rollicking college song which celebrates her thus:

"Sing a song of Lydia Pinkham
And her love of the human race;
She invented her Vegetable Compound,
Now the papers publish her face."

Yet Elbert Hubbard, back in 1915, included her in a list of America's illustrious women which included Margaret Fuller, Julia Ward Howe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan B. Anthony and Clara Barton. Moreover she is the central figure in a book written a few years ago by Robert Collyer Washburn, "The Life and Times of Lydia Pinkham," and of an article in the American Mercury.

Mrs. Pinkham was born in Lynn in 1819, in the same year as Queen Victoria. The family were Quakers and had been among the pioneer settlers of Massachusets. She was an intelligent child and a good student, and later studied to be a school teacher. During the troubled period before the civil war she was active as an Abolitionist and for several years was secretary of the "Freeman's Society," founded to aid and educate escaped Negro slaves. Here she met and had as friends such famous Americans as Whittier, Garrison and Lowell.

In 1843 she married Isaac Pinkham. Within the next fourteen years five children were born to Lydia and Isaac Pinkham, four sons, one of whom died in infancy, and a daughter. Mr. Pinkham was a real estate dealer and he entered into the business on an extensive scale. He bought houses and farms as a speculator.

AN OLD SAYING "there is some bad in everything good and some good in everything bad" is borne out in the case of the Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company, for it was the panic of 1873 that wiped out the possessions of Isaac Pinkham, necessitating a change in the family plans if the family was to continue to exist, plans which required all the skill, resourcefulness and energy of Mrs. Pinkham and her three sons and daughter; for the father, as a result of the panic was land poor and was forced to liquidate. The disaster broke down his health and the task of sustaining the family fell upon the patient and competent shoulders of Lydia, the mother, whose name was later to be known in almost every corner of the civilized world.

At the time the panic arrived, the family lived in a small white cottage in Lynn, within a stone's throw of the present huge manufacturing plant which occupies about the area of an average city block. It was here in the small kitchen that Mrs. Pinkham first compounded a recipe, part of which had been handed down to her by her own mother. Mrs. Pinkham had taken her mother's recipe, had added some ingredients of her own and tried it on her family and friends, with no thought of commercializing it.

Doctors at that period were held in rather low esteem in the New England towns. This popular distrust was not unfounded. The profession was unorganized and full of quacks. Anyone could call himself a doctor. So Lydia, in common with many another New England woman, was a believer in home remedies, made many medicines in her kitchen, kept them on hand and gave them freely to her friends and neighbors in time of need. Principally, she manufactured the liquid medicine to benefit women. She profited by her knowledge of health-giving herbs, and it wasn't long before her fame spread.

Slowly the medicine began to acquire a local reputation. First one woman tried it and praised it, and then others. Soon the remedy became so well known that people drove in from quite a distance to get free bottles. Finally, a couple came to Lynn from Salem, took six bottles and insisted on paying five dollars for them. Lydia, indignant at first that she should be offered money for medicine which would aid another woman, finally accepted it, and decided that if people insisted on buying, it might be the solution to the pressing problem of finances. She continued to brew it over the stove. Money was scraped together and by the use of hand bills circulated by the children, Mrs. Pinkham began building up a business.

IT WAS NOT an organization which grew by leaps and bounds. Gradually sales spread to Boston, Salem and Providence. The three sons and the daughter helped with the business at night. The oldest son, Charley, was a conductor on a horse car; Will was a clerk in the post office; Dan was in the State legislature, where he was later defeated for re-election by a promising young Bostonian by the name of Henry Cabot Lodge. With their sister, Aroline, the three boys worked far into the night. Dan in his spare time travelled with circulars and then experimented with advertising in newspapers with gratifying results.

Every cent over the barest living expenses of the family was turned back into the struggling business. When a sixteen dollar order came from a wholesale druggist as a result of advertising in a Boston paper, it seemed as though the corner must have been turned.

During the six years that it took to get the business on its feet, Mrs. Pinkham was the inspiration of the struggling family. She prepared the medicine over the kitchen stove, wrote most of the advertisements, answered the mail from customers, cared for her helpless husband, and still found time to direct affairs in her home.

IT WAS WHEN the tide of the family fortunes had really turned in 1882 that Will and Dan died, aged thirty-three and twenty-nine. Both died of lung trouble brought on by starvation and exposure resulting from the struggles and strain during the period of the Pinkham family poverty. Lydia Pinkham died a year later without realizing that the business which she had begun and built up was one day to be known through the world. Almost from the moment of her death the business grew steadily, until today it is among the world's largest in its line, and recently a peak of production which amounted to three and a half million dollars was reached.

And what of the woman whose patience and fortitude was the basis of a great industry? Elbert Hubbard wrote of her:

"She carried her tall, spare figure with a queenly grace. Lydia Pinkham was an earnest, enthusiastic promoter of freedom. Undoubtedly her strongest trait, apart from devotion to her family was love of progress. The orthodox and conventional were obnoxious to her. She had no use for arbitrary authority—whether in medicine, religion or politics. She believed in advancement, in education. Her mind was always alert, her judgment clean and clear, her decision firm and decisive. To the last she preserved those qualities of discernment, clear thinking, quick action."

SO MARKED WAS the strength of character and dominant personality of Lydia Pinkham that they are reflected in the company as it exists today. It began as a personal business when Lydia first gave, then sold bottles of her medicine to relatives, friends and acquaintances. Those who benefited by the medicine wrote to Mrs. Pinkham and told her so. Strangers who bought the bottles wrote and asked her advice concerning their ailments, and these letters were answered, first by Mrs. Pinkham personally, and later by her daughter-in-law. When Mrs. Pinkham died, attempts were made to acquaint those, who asked her advice, of her death. But an ever increasing correspondence came addressed to Mrs. Pinkham, and continued to come addressed to her for years.

The personal relationship between purchasers of the medicine and the Pinkham company has continued through the recent decades. The plant as it exists today is as far removed from the kitchen stove as an ocean liner is from a clipper ship. Machinery has replaced hand methods. But while the grandchildren of Lydia Pinkham have utilized all the advantages of modern mass production, the atmosphere of the organization is still that of the nineteenth century New England, which their grandmother knew.

A STAFF OF fifteen women now answer the correspondence which Mrs. Pinkham and her daughter-in-law answered sixty years ago. Most of them are elderly women who have been with the organization for years—quiet, dignified and New England to the core. It is still a family business. Arthur W. Pinkham is the president; Daniel R. Pinkham, vice president; Charles H. Pinkham, secretary; Aroline C. Gove, treasurer; Lydia P. Gove, assistant treasurer, and Mrs. Lawrence Doty, second vice president—all grandchildren of Lydia, except Aroline Gove, who at 81 is the only surviving child of Lydia.

To the employees of the plant there isn't a *Mr. Pinkham* around the place. The president, vice president and secretary are addressed as Arthur, Dan and Charlie, respectively. From the very beginning the company has never had a salesman. In Mrs. Pinkham's time, advertising was done in small sheets handed out by members of the family and workers. Gradually newspaper, then magazine advertising was used, and according to Arthur W. Pinkham, since the incorporation of the company, in 1882, $40,000,000 has been expended in advertising, three fourths of which has been in newspapers.

A recent Associated Press dispatch from