The interior of a Hupa cedar plank house with the hearth in the foreground. Photo by Peter Nabokov

Secration of the home according to ancient ritual is as important as its construction. For instance, the newly built addition to a Zuni home is laid out to conform to the ceremony that blesses it. One long room is designed so that in late autumn a 10 ft. masked dancer, known as a Shalako, can perform a trotting, back-and-forth dance within it. During the Shalako festival, six such dancers bless six houses; only then are the homes ready for habitation.

The Hupa of Northwestern California utilize earth as an insulating material by building semi-subterranean plank houses. Photo by Peter Nabokov

Visitors entering the Indian lodges built at our Festival will notice the skillful use of available materials. These home traditions perpetuate practical adaptations to climate; also, they indicate man's impulse to invest his immediate environment with spiritual meaning.

Suggesting Reading


The Medicine Show

Brooks McNamara

Oh! I love to travel, far and near throughout my native land;
I love to sell as I go 'long, and take the cash in hand.
I love to cure all in distress that happen in my way.
And you better believe I feel quite fine when folks rush up and say:

Chorus:
I'll take another bottle of Wizard oil,
I'll take another bottle or two;
I'll take another bottle of Wizard oil,
I'll take another bottle or two.

Carl Sandburg,
The American Songbag

The traveling salesman is a fixture in our folklore, celebrated in stories, jokes, anecdotes, and cartoons. Within the ranks of the salesmen, a special sense of mystery and glamour surrounds the medicine showman—the itinerant patent medicine seller whose free performances were an important part of small town life still within the memory of many Americans.

The American patent medicine seller derived from mountebanks—wandering herb doctors and medicine vendors who drew crowds with songs or conjuring. They appeared in the New World as early as the 1600s, but it was only about 1850 that the idea of selling medicine between the acts of a free show resulted from the rapid growth of proprietary medicine companies, many of which sent advertising units on the road after the Civil War. These units were

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especially popular in rural areas
where regular theater companies
rarely appeared. There was money
to be made, and medicine shows
sponsored by leading firms such
as the Kickapoo Indian Medicine
Co. and Hamlin's Wizard Oil were
soon in competition with independ­
dent showmen who casually
brewed up their remedies in
boarding house bathtubs.

By 1900 medicine shows had
invaded every part of the country
where an audience could be found,
and the various types of medicine
showmen were vying with one
another to present novelties and
unique attractions. The basic
show was offered by street
pitch­
men performing alone or with a
partner. So-called "low pitchmen"
worked directly on the ground,
generally choosing a busy street
corner or a promising location at a
fairground. Most operated from a
Late low pitch operator, Port Gibson,
Mississippi, 1940. Photo by Post. Library
of Congress.

This sketch, by Anna May Noell, recalls
the stage and set up of her family's
medicine show of the 20s and 30s. We
have used it as our model to recreate the
setting for our performance on the mall.
(Editor's note—The use of American
Indian identification in medicine shows is
discussed in Rayna Green's article on p. 18.)

"tripes and keister"—a satchel or
suitcase containing the pitch­
man's remedies mounted on a
tripod. "High pitchmen" worked
from a platform or the back of a
truck or wagon. Like their ances­
tors the mountebanks, street
pitchmen presented only a simple
show, often just a few banjo solos
or magic tricks designed to attract
a crowd.

In addition to a pitchman who
sold remedies, more elaborate
shows carried an entire cast of
performers and musicians, as well
as a more-or-less completely
equipped tent theater. Some large
medicine show companies, in fact,
were capable of mounting several
hours of entertainment with a
dozon or more acts as well as half a
dozon intervals during which the
showman could sell his products.

By the 1920s the shows were
becoming less common. Increas­
ingly rigorous legislation con­
cerned with medicine bottling,
labeling, and advertising was mak­
ing medicine show business more
complicated to operate and less
profitable. Then, too, the au­
tomobile was bringing isolated
communities closer to the city;
and the phonograph, radio, and
talking pictures were providing
new forms of inexpensive and
available entertainment. But there
were those who continued to look
forward to visits from the medicine
showmen because they provided
the opportunity for visits with
friends and relatives and the
chance to hear time-honored
songs, jokes, and comedy routines.
But by the end of World War II,
most shows had disappeared.

The traveling medicine show
was an itinerant folk community
with its own traditions. The veter­
ans claimed to "know everyone in
the business," and they shared a
distinct jargon: "lot lice," for in­
stance, were show goers who came
early and left late but never bought
any medicine. The shows were the
only form of entertainment in
many rural American communities
and one of the few sources of
employment for folk musicians.
Many of our most celebrated folk
and popular performers like Bessie
Smith, Clarence Ashley, Har­
monica Frank Floyd, and Hank
Williams got their starts in
medicine shows.

Many skits were ancient acts
passed from European mounte­
banks to medicine shows. They
contain roughshod—often slap­
stick—country humor. Perhaps
the most famous "afterpiece" (piece
done after the show) is "Three
Healers, Curers, and Herbalists: Folk Medicine in America

Jack Santino

Disease, disorder, and discomfort, whether mental or physical, are inevitable. They must be addressed and alleviated, and people have invented elaborate systems for identifying, systematizing, and controlling them. These systems are most effective when they draw on a community's shared values, beliefs, and symbols. The tribal medicine man, the herbalist of folk societies, the doctors of contemporary America all do their jobs best when they understand that the faith their patients place in them and in their practices is derived from community-wide values and beliefs.

America is a complex land of many distinct ethnic communities, each with its own traditional medical beliefs, practices, and specialists. All people have home remedies. Who, in our society, for example, has not been told to drink ten sips of water or take some sugar or stare into a point of a knife to cure their hiccups? But when one really gets sick, he or she sees a doctor, a medical specialist who is legitimized by the authority of a formal organization, has earned a university degree, and has received practical training.

Other societies rely upon oral tradition as the legitimizing agency. Among the Eastern Cherokee, there are seven medicine men who are traditional healers, and each has a specific area of expertise. Some are more knowledgeable about herbs, others about spiritual power. They are all medical specialists within their community, and all serve the double function of preventing and curing pain and illness, on the one hand, and of calming and reassuring their patients and the community, on the other. They rely on the time-honored beliefs and practices of their people, and they share those beliefs with the patients they tend. Together, patient and healer work on effecting a cure.

Medical healing is always part science and part performance. The scientific aspect is comprised of knowledge about the curative powers of plant and animal substances and other means of correcting physical and psychological disorders (for example, the use of splints to mend broken bones). When combined with the ability to perform healing rituals, the patient receives a sense of security

Suggesting Reading


The country pharmacist knows his customers personally and dispenses concern and friendship along with medicine. Don Troutman, of Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, runs one of the oldest pharmacies in the United States. Photo by Barbara Reimensnyder for the Smithsonian.

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