

## Thomas S. McNeil: An Enterprising Pastor

by N.I. Alcodray and G.S. Bause

A Virginia native, born the fourth of eleven children, Reverend Thomas S. McNeil (1814-1874), became a minister in the United Brethren Church, considered the first American denomination not transplanted from Europe. After serving as a circuit preacher for that church in western Pennsylvania and southern Ohio, McNeil served as an unassigned United Brethren Church minister in the Parkersburg Conference (in present-day West Virginia) before retiring to Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>1,2</sup> Besides his contributions as a man of faith, T.S. McNeil had also compounded and peddled polypharmaceutical nostrums as panaceas. His celebrated “McNeil’s Pain Exterminator” was formulated in 1848. McNeil was “widely known through his medicine... for the alleviation of pain, and from which circumstance he received the [honorific] appellation of doctor.”<sup>3</sup>

Best known today as inhalational anesthetics, both ether and chloroform were pharmaceutical solvents and popular vehicles for liniments dispensed in the late 1800’s by those who skirted the boundaries of organized medicine. Driven by the potential for profit, many nonphysicians incorporated these anesthetics as solvents for nostrums or “patent medicines” targeting the afflicted who had limited access to physicians, such as many farmers in remote areas. Disadvantaged geographically or economically from securing proper medical care, such parties were vulnerable to the appeal of cheap cure-all alternatives. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was little federal regulation of medicinal remedies, so both nostrums and patent medicines were widely used across the United States, especially following the outbreak of that nation’s Civil War in 1861. Advertised from Pennsylvania to Virginia as a trusted home remedy in the late 1850’s, McNeil’s Pain Exterminator warded off pain, coughs and diarrhea for both Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War.<sup>4, 5</sup>

Because the ingredients of McNeil’s Pain Exterminator were not revealed in a patent medicine but remained secret components of a proprietary nostrum, examination of other pain exterminators may inform us of the ingredients with

---

<sup>1</sup> Loyer, M. “McNeil, Thomas S., Pennsylvania United Brethren Pastors.” Archives of the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church.

<https://www.lycomiong.edu/umarch/ub.pastors/m.htm>. Accessed July 10, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Phillips, P. “Virginia Conference Preachers of the United Brethren and Evangelical United brethren 1800-1969.” U.B./EUB Virginia Conference Archives, Vol. 9, pages 101-102.

<sup>3</sup> Death of Dr. T.S. McNeil, *The Shippensburg [PA] News*, March 14, 1874, page 3.

<sup>4</sup> Use Dr. McNeil’s Pain Exterminator. *The Franklin Repository*, April 7, 1858, page 2. [advertisement]

<sup>5</sup> Read One! Read All – Dr. T.S. McNeil’s Pain Exterminator. *Staunton [VA] Spectator*, April 12, 1859, page 7. [advertisement]

which McNeil likely formulated his popular analgesic. In 1867, D.W. Tindall, MD, published his formula for Thompson's Pain Exterminator as including ether, alcohol, opium elixir (laudanum), chloroform, etc.<sup>6</sup> In 1898, A. Emil Hiss, Ph.G., published the ingredients for his pain exterminator as including ether, alcohol, opium, etc.<sup>7</sup> Ingredients shared by both of these pain exterminators are ether, alcohol and opium. Because McNeil formulated his eponymous pain exterminator the year after the discovery of chloroform anesthesia, there is certainly a possibility that McNeil's concoction initially or eventually included chloroform in its slurry.

By combining opium elixirs with one or more volatile solvents, such as ether or possibly chloroform, McNeil's Pain Exterminator offered patients both rosy and thorny outcomes. With its high concentration of ethyl alcohol and opium, McNeil's nostrum taken internally as suggested, in sweetened warm water, could certainly relieve most aches and pains, at least transiently. Certainly, opium and its derivatives remain mainstays in modern medicine for their potent analgesic, antitussive and antidiarrheal effects. By applying McNeil's liniment as advised, "externally with friction," the nostrum's volatile solvents (alcohol, ether and possibly chloroform) could be massaged over aching areas.

On the thorny side, particularly for the very young or very old, and for those afflicted with co-morbidities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., tuberculosis, malaria, and rheumatic heart disease), combining so many agents of variable purity and in variable amounts could produce dangerous and potentially lethal results. This was especially the case, because patients decided both the route of administration and the dosage, without oversight from any physician or pharmacist. Except for the anti-Asian – and frankly racist – efforts to force opium smoking into opium dens, remarkably little federal regulation of opium occurred within the United States until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, with many of their patients racked by pain, tuberculosis, and/or dysentery, 19<sup>th</sup> century physicians welcomed the analgesic, antitussive, and anti-diarrheal properties of opium. The myriad alcohol-linked ailments are well known. Drinking chloroform chronically can lead to kidney or liver damage and even cancer; drinking ether, to gastritis and even burns from its flammability. Alcohol, chloroform, and ether can synergize with opium and contribute to the hazards of overdose, including falls, seizures, cardiac issues, aspiration of gastric contents, or death.

Unfortunately, for Reverend "Doctor" McNeil, as a clergyman who compounded nostrums, his career would be curtailed soon after he set out from

---

<sup>6</sup> Tindall, DW. Patent medicines. *The Prairie Farmer*, 1867:20(2), pages 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> Hiss, AE. *Thesaurus of Proprietary Preparations and Pharmaceutical Specialties*, CP Engelhand & Co., 1898, page 124.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, RH. The Opium Trade and Opium Policies in India, China, Britain, and the United States: historical comparisons and theoretical interpretations. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 2002:30(3), pages 623-656.

Charleston to New Haven, both of which are in present-day West Virginia. On March 11, 1874, McNeil sailed on the steamer *Active* from Charleston to Gallipolis OH. In order to attend the annual meeting of the United Brethren Church's Parkersburg Conference,<sup>2</sup> he sailed very early the next morning from Gallipolis aboard the sidewheel steamer *Katydid* for the brief remainder of what would be his fatal journey up the Ohio River to New Haven. As the *Katydid* steamed past Gallipolis Island around 5 a.m., McNeil opted to wash himself on deck in the morning darkness.<sup>9</sup> In an effort to draw water from the river, McNeil tied one end of a rope around his hand and attached the other end to a pail.<sup>10</sup> After throwing his bucket into the Ohio River, McNeil was yanked off balance as the rushing water struck the pail. The hapless minister toppled then over the low railing and was dragged overboard.<sup>10,11</sup> The crew of the *Katydid* dispatched their yawl in a rescue attempt; however, the cover of darkness foiled these efforts.<sup>9</sup>

A few hours after McNeil's premature disembarkation from the steamboat, his bucket was spotted by a young boy near Clipper Mills, about 4 miles south of Gallipolis. When the boy retrieved the bucket, he discovered the body of McNeil still tethered to the pail.<sup>10</sup> Dr. T.S. McNeil's identity was confirmed by the papers found on the recovered corpse. On Friday, March 13, Dr. Cromley, the coroner of Gallipolis, empaneled a jury. The coroner's inquest concluded that the cause of death was accidental drowning. Rev. McNeil's brother telegraphed Coroner Cromley with instructions to send the body to Parkersburg. The undertaker of Gallipolis, Mr. Skeese, accompanied the body by special train on its journey to McNeil's brother,<sup>11</sup> and by evening on Saturday, March 14, the minister's remains arrived in Shippensburg PA.<sup>9</sup> Held on March 15, McNeil's funeral was later described as the largest the town had witnessed. A heartfelt eulogy was delivered by his pastor, Reverend John X. Quigley (1844-1908), who remembered McNeil as a moral man with great generosity and loyalty toward their church.<sup>10</sup> McNeil was interred there in Shippensburg.

Remarkably, without skipping a beat, after burying his friend and parishioner, Pastor Quigley took over production of "Dr. T.S. McNeil's Pain Exterminator." After trade-marking the late minister's visage for advertising on McNeil's polypharmaceuticals,<sup>12</sup> Reverend Quigley handed production of the nostrum over to the Harrisburg PA firm which published the roses and butterfly trade card (figure 1), the McNeil Medicine Company. Their McNeil's Pain Exterminator would be advertised for sale from Harrisburg at least as late as 1930.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Accidental Drowning. *Gallipolis [OH] Journal*, March 19, 1874, page 2.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. Dr. Thomas Seddon [sic] McNeil. *The Perry County [Bloomfield PA] Democrat*, March 25, 1874, page 3.

<sup>11</sup> Death of Dr. T.S. McNeil. *The Shippensburg [PA] News*, March 21, 1874, page 3.

<sup>12</sup> Quigley, JX. Trademark 2114 registered 12/15/1874: medical compound. *The Commissioners of Patents' Journal* 1875, page 187.

<sup>13</sup> Clark's cut rate stores. *The [Harrisburg PA] Evening News*, March 25, 1930, page 2. [advertisement]



Figure 1: front and back sides of trade card for McNeil's Pain Exterminator

In summary, McNeil's personal demise did not terminate the business success of his pain exterminator. His analgesic nostrum sold long and sold well on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line and beyond both banks of the Ohio River, all of which had served as Civil War boundaries between the slave states and the free states. So, Reverend "Doctor" Thomas S. McNeil drowned, rather ironically, in the very river that he had crossed repeatedly to peddle nostrums to Northerners and Southerners.