

MERCHANT'S GARGLING OIL

By Bro. Henry W. Holcombe

Perhaps you may sometime have heard of Merchant's Celebrated Gargling Oil "A Liniment for Man and Beast"? The beasts, of course, were mainly horses which in those early days were indispensable on the farm and the roads. Maybe you have wondered how a suffering horse was cajoled into gargling the stuff? As a fact, at first the liniment wasn't intended for internal use, much less for gargling as we know and use that word, at all!

This doesn't sound like the beginning of a Masonic story, does it? But wait—the central figure over the years is no less a person than one of New York's Most Worshipful Grand Masters, John Hodge, who was elected to the Grand East in 1894.

Dr. George W. Merchant, a graduate of the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, is said to have devoted his time and energies for 20 years before his business was established in Lockport, New York in 1833.

The Erie Canal completed in 1827 passed thru the struggling community of Lockport, in Niagara County. The canal was enlarged (1835-40) and the town continued to grow around a series of locks built to carry the canal thru Lockport Gorge. Some years later there was a continuous chain of railroads from Albany to Buffalo, precursors of the present New York Central. An early account of Lockport read: "it is 340 miles west from Albany, by canal, and 285 by railroad; 62 miles west from Rochester, by canal, and 56 by railroad; 31 miles east from Buffalo, by canal, and 25¼ by railroad. The distance from Niagara Falls by railroad is 21½ miles."

We can assume the business struggled along in those early years and it seems to have met with some success. That success was the call for a number of imitators to set up business. Dr. Merchant didn't have any protection at all until 1845 when the New York Legislature passed a bill making the counterfeiting or imitating a preparation a criminal offense. The name "Celebrated Gargling Oil" was copyrighted in 1852.

About 1855 the sole rights to Merchant's Gargling Oil were sold to one M. H. Tucker for the sum of \$50,000. Tucker had the backing of three prominent men in Lockport and Buffalo. The new owners began to

push the business and develop its possibilities.

Soon afterward John Hodge went to work for the Company. He was still in his teens having been born in Lockport in 1838. After a common school education he began the study of law but gave it up when an opportunity to enter business presented itself. When the firm of M. H. Tucker & Co. was incorporated in 1858, John Hodge was elected Secretary—a position he held for many years. He soon took one of Mr. Tucker's daughters as his wife. Thus when Mr. Tucker died in 1865, Hodge who already had control thru his wife, obtained a large share of the business and subsequently all of it.

When the Revenue Act of 1862 became effective, the firm affixed stamps of the regular issue to their nostrums. In 1869 two private dies were engraved for them—1¢ and 2¢—and stamps from these plates were used until just before the Act was repealed in 1883.

John Hodge was indeed a progressive citizen and highly esteemed in Lockport. Civic projects always had his whole-hearted support. Invariably he was active in the work and often contributed liberally. He was also keenly interested in fraternal affairs. In 1861, at the age of 23 he was initiated, passed and raised in Niagara Lodge, No. 375, F. & A. M. in Lockport.

John Hodge was an ardent believer in advertising. He seems to have used every medium imaginable. The company first used envelopes with rectangular illustrated corner cards and still later some were back printed. Almanacs, note books, testimonials, and circulars of all descriptions were printed. Ads appeared in many publications of the time. Country fair programs invariably had a full page ad. Later on thousands upon thousands of special envelopes were printed at the instance of the firm, with their ad on the reverse and the corner card of the user on the front. These were sold to hotels, livery stables, merchants and probably anyone who would pay the nominal price of 60¢ per thousand—which was the cost. Even post cards were not overlooked, with a narrow ad at top of reverse and the user's name below.

Yes indeed, John Hodge, believed in advertising. He was the man who bought an old canal steamboat for the sole purpose of decorating it with blatant banners of Merchant's Celebrated Gargling Oil, and then sent the

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The following images applicable to this article were added. The Scott Catalog number for the stamp is RS179 (Private Die Proprietary Stamps). Ed.



Why limp about & pain endure,
When GARGLING OIL
is sure to cure?

MERCHANT'S
GARGLING OIL
A
LINIMENT
FOR
MAN &
BEAST.

SOLD BY
ALL DEALERS
THROUGHOUT
THE WORLD.

THE COPPER STATE OFFICIALS

FIRST INTRODUCED, 1833.

MERCHANT'S GARGLING OIL is the standard Liniment of the United States, and is good for Burns, Scalds, Rheumatism, Flesh Wounds, Sprains, Bruises, Lame Back, Hemorrhoids or Piles, Toothache, Sore Throat, Chilblains, Chapped Hands, and many other diseases incident to man and beast. Yellow Wrapper for animal, and white for human flesh.

Manufactured at Lockport, N. Y., by M. G. O. Co., and sold by all druggists.

OVER. JOHN HODGE, See'y.

boat triumphantly over Niagara Falls!

Over the years the business must have accumulated a wealth of correspondence—for in those early days nothing was thrown away. But where is it now? Here's the answer. In 1870 Hodge built a fine laboratory and office building on Market street in Lockport and shortly afterward the famed Hodge Opera House was constructed at the corner of Main and Market streets. These were indeed works to be marveled at in their time. But on January 5, 1881 the laboratory and Opera House were completely consumed by fire. Absolutely nothing was saved—except the vault contents. Had it not been for this catastrophe it is conceivable that one or more additional Lockport, N. Y. provisional stamps would have graced collectors albums today.

Twenty years after his raising, in 1881, John Hodge was Master of Niagara Lodge. In 1882 he was appointed District Deputy Grand Master and held that office three years. In 1885 came his election as Junior Grand Warden, to which he was annually re-elected for 6 years; in 1891 and 1892 he was elected Senior Grand Warden. During these years he was characteristically devoted to the building of the Masonic Home at Utica—where thousands of old people have been cared for and as many orphan children given an opportunity in life over the past six decades. In 1893 he held the office of Deputy Grand Master. And in 1894 at the Annual Communication of Grand Lodge, came his election to be Most Worshipful Grand Master of Masons in the State of New York. Before completing his term of office, he passed to his reward on August 7, 1895, at the age of 57. The records of Grand Lodge relate that on the day of his funeral "business was entirely suspended in the city of Lockport, and all the citizens of that place, irrespective of sect or creed, joined in doing honor to his memory . . ."

Under the guidance of Mr. Hodge the profits of the Gargling Oil business increased year by year and over the span of some 40 years amounted to many millions of dollars. But after his death the enthusiasm and brilliance of his leadership was lacking. The firm's intensive advertising was abandoned and sales fell off immediately—it could be said almost to the vanishing point. In succeeding years the automobile and tractors continued to replace the horse, and sales further declined.

In 1933—just 100 years after Dr. Merchant established the business—I was passing thru Lockport. Largely out of curiosity but of course ever on the search for proprietary items made during the Civil War stamp period and still with the private die stamp affixed I walked down Market street. I soon came to No. 28, a small store with almost opaque glass windows. Inside the smell of liniment at once assured me I was in the right place. Here—after a century of service to ailing farm animals—in a whisky barrel with a huge brass faucet, Merchant's Celebrated Gargling Oil was still being mixed, then withdrawn for bottling and shipment to the many who still prefer horses to tractors.

Reference: MP Vol. 12, No. 7, March 1956