

Ponds: The Evolution of a Product; from snake oil to royal jelly

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Ponds is surely one company that over time has tried with its ads to project a beautiful, sophisticated image for its potential customers to emulate. John Watson's glamour ads from the twenties and thirties, featuring European royalty and famous, wealthy American women, might typify this kind of approach. There is debate over the effectiveness of these ads with real American women. (Peiss, 1998) Never the less they stand as one very good example of glamour ads featuring testimonials. However, it wasn't always this way. As our title implies Ponds ads run a very wide range. In the beginning Ponds was a patent medicine featuring simple, even crude ads but promising to cure a wide array of ailments, continuing to the glamour ads already mentioned to today's incarnation of those ads, and beyond.

We have 90 slides of Ponds ads covering the last 120 years of the company's history illustrating several trends. One is, of course, the increasing sophistication of the ads themselves but also the changes in the product itself. Before we show you the slides we need to tell you about the Ponds Company and its products. Originally the product was a witch hazel astringent called Ponds Extract, good for whatever might ail you. Invented by Theron T. Pond in 1846 and incorporated by him and several investors in 1849, it was the first commercial witch hazel product (Gartrell, 2002) This late incorporation date allowed a Cambridge, Mass. physician, Henry Thayer, to develop and market his slippery elm and witch hazel products in 1847 and to claim to be the first and oldest in the country. This company, which is still in business, uses the claim to this day. They obviously did not benefit from the evolutionary processes that Ponds did. Cheap witch hazel appearing around 1910 showed the Extract had no future and Ponds began developing vanishing cream and cold cream, which they still sell. (Gartrell, 2002) The product called cold cream was allegedly invented by the Roman physician Galen in the first century. It was called cold because pharmacists kept it on ice. The products are now variously called cold cream, moisturizers, face cream, and cleansing cream. An informal poll of the Colby women psychology faculty members showed moisturizer to be the preferred

term and many of the younger had never heard of cold cream.

Ponds ads always had a high degree of topicality showing people acquiring sprains and the like by slipping on ice for which the extract provided the cure. They ran a whole series of ads featuring Polly and Peter Ponds, brother and sister away at school and their creative uses for Ponds. Peter went overseas during World War I, though not apparently as a soldier, however, his adventures were duly reported in the ads.

At this point we should mention the snake oil connection. Snake oil has become a generic term for quack remedies deriving from the old time, traveling, medicine shows. These were many and varied, but a good example is the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show featuring such products as cowboy Clark Stanley's "Snake Oil Liniment". Calling himself the "Rattle Snake King" he appeared many places but perhaps most importantly at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Dressed in his flamboyant version of Wild West attire he apparently mesmerized crowds while slaughtering hundreds of rattlesnakes and processing their juices into his tonic (Nickell, 1998) His and many other such products were widely sold into the early twentieth century. Collier's magazine launched a campaign against such stuff in 1905, and in 1907 the Pure Food and Drug Act put an end to it. The history of snake oil deserves its own treatment, but is beyond our scope here.

We exaggerate slightly, but only slightly, when we point to similarities between Ponds claims and those of the snake oil salesmen. Until almost World War I Ponds promised to cure just about whatever ailment you might have. The demise of the Extract led Ponds to develop their cleansing and vanishing creams. From there they seemed to set the standard for beauty products. Emphasizing glamour, romance and "creeping homeliness" Ponds sold to American women warning them of the dangers of "skin over 25" and announcing "she's lovely, she's engaged" but presumably only if she uses Ponds. The "famous women" ads started in the twenties, there were dozens of them and they ran for quite a long time. Although many

women reported they were not influenced by them, preferring the recommendation of a friend or neighbor rather than the untrustworthy queen of Romania who apparently would endorse anything if the price were right.

For the royal jelly connection, I must admit, that as far as I know, Ponds is not yet using it, but two other brands are. Can Ponds be far behind? That probably depends upon whether it becomes a big item with women or remains a short-lived fad. It is also being sold as a vitamin supplement, and I just couldn't resist the juxtaposition.

What can we conclude from all of this? In a very real sense this is a slice of Americana, showing changing styles and changing sophistication, certainly on the part of the advertisers but probably on the part of the buying public as well. Snake oil died, encouraged no doubt by the FDA, and the Extract probably would have as well, and inexpensive competitors might have played no role.

It is also part of the American horror of aging and our permanent quest for the fountain of youth, with advertisers only too willing to sell us products which will defeat Father

Time and keep us young, hip, and meaningful forever, and for women above all else, eternally beautiful.

We hope that the slides will illustrate the evolution of the product from a cure all making highly dubious health claims to a modern wonder product promising youth, glamour, and romance and find ourselves wondering if the more things change the more they stay the same.

REFERENCES

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