

By Joe Terry and Mark Steinmetz

For every story told, there are countless more to be explored and portrayed. With this, the first full telling of a truly remarkable man, there is now one more brought to light. It is of a life spanning nine decades, three wars, quite a few presidents, and somewhat close to thirty of his local fellows in the drug business.

To say that Isaac L. St John was a pioneer would in no way do justice to him. Tiffin, Ohio was in its infant stages, and barely thirty years had passed since Fort Ball, the 1812 stronghold upon which the town was built, had arisen on the muddy banks of the Sandusky River. The 1840s were a busy time for the town, and every enterprising citizen was welcomed.

The first thing the young druggist discovered was that unlike back east, where he originated, there were few physicians here. Without doctors, there

was little need for prescriptions. People still needed medicine, but without a guiding hand, they didn't know what to buy. Instead of bringing in supplies of stock drugs and chemicals, an expensive and tedious chore, Mr. St John chose a different approach. As it was, Tiffin already had several drugstores to provide that service.

This situation did not deter the young man. He had a good grasp of his profession, and knew the profit potential for selling proprietary medicines. A full-blooded New Yorker, Isaac had served as apprentice to the great wholesale drug firm of Hoadley, Phelps and Company in New York City. Isaac started his apprenticeship at age sixteen, some time after his family had moved to Morristown, New Jersey. With them he learned all there was to know about drugs, compounding and clerking.

In 1837, at age nineteen and upon having fulfilled his commitments, he pulled up his roots and moved westward to Cleveland. The small but growing lakeside town was open to newcomers and entrepreneurs, and was likely a good place to be in business. Something must not have suited him, for an additional four years found him journeying a little further west. In a town named for Ohio's first governor, he hung up his shingle, and settled in for good.

Isaac's initial advertisements appeared in the local paper, *The Tiffin Gazette*, on April 21st, 1842. The first remedy sold under his name was St John's Anti-Bilious Pills. He soon followed with more remedies, catering to the needs of the local

ST. JOHN'S
ANTI-BILIOUS PILLS.

THESE pills are not held up as an infallible cure for every disease, but if timely administered, will be found very efficacious in Bilious and Remittent Fevers, Fever and Ague; Costiveness, Cholera, Worms, pain of the bowels, Flatulence, Indigestion, Heartburn, pain of the Head, Back or Breast, &c.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

Canonsburgh, March 24, 1842

DEAR SIR—I take great pleasure in informing you that the pills I obtained of you on the 2d inst. called *St. John's Pills*, meet with my entire approbation, and would recommend them to all persons of costive habits where a cathartic is required.

Doct. E. P. LESLIE.

WE do hereby certify that we have made use of *St. John's Antibilious Pills*, either ourselves or in our families, and give them the decided preference to any Pills with which we are acquainted, although we have taken nearly or quite all the noted Pills of the day.

<i>Jacob Flaughner,</i>	<i>Solomon Finch;</i>
<i>John Starb.</i>	<i>Jacob Ronk,</i>
<i>S. J. See,</i>	<i>Dan'l. Fisher,</i>
<i>Christopher Stone;</i>	<i>Nicholas Goetschius.</i>

For sale by
Tiffin, April 21, 1842

I. L. ST. JOHN.
52*tf

Figure 1

citizens. For example, if a little more intense internal treatment was needed, he also had his Blood and Liver Pills. Similarly, his Fluid Extract of Buchu was just the thing if the sufferer had the bloat.

In a malarial atmosphere such as existed in Northwest Ohio, St John's Vegetable Ague Syrup was likely a popular item. The bottles were 7.5 inches tall, with mildly ornate indented panels. On one side was embossed "Dr. I.L. St John's", the middle was "Vegetable" and the third was "Ague Syrup" [Figure 4, 5]. While among the first of Isaac's remedies, the earliest of them may have been paper labeled, as none have been found with a pontil. The pictured bottles date from the early 1870s.

Isaac must have liked the bottle style,



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

as identical to his Ague Syrup was one for his "Cough and Consumption Syrup." [Figure 6] The product was originally sold as just a "Cough Syrup" and came in two sizes, one 6.5 inches tall and the other an inch shorter. Many of these are pontiled, and all are eight-sided. The smaller bottles have a consistent spelling error, in which the "R" of "syrup" was left unfinished, leaving the word "sypup" [Figure 2 (larger), 3 (smaller)]. Later versions of the cough and consumption syrup were much smaller, and included a 4.5 inch tall aqua one [Figure 12] from the late 1870s which incorporated the word "magnetic" in the title [Figure 17], as well as a larger capacity one in clear [Figure 13] from the 1880s and 1890s.

Another popular article put up by Isaac was his Nerve and Bone Liniment [Figures 8, 9, 10] a must for those aching joints. The bottles were round, and were identical in appearance to many other

liniments of the day. The earliest can be found with an open pontil [Figure 8]. Bottles were colored green/aqua for many years, finally being manufactured in clear during the latter years. Their shape changed only marginally over the years and bottles averaged about 3.5 inches in height.

A further medicine, a carminative balsam, also dates fairly early as a few pontiled versions are known, including one with a label [Figure 14]. Newer versions can be found, nearly identical to its predecessors [Figure 15]. All are embossed "Dr. I.L. St John's" "Carminative" "Balsam" on three indented panels. The bottles are small, no taller than 4.5 inches.

Mr. St John's reliance on proprietary medicines was evident from the beginning. Other remedies were brought in from back east, including, but by no means limited to, the following: Rev I. Covert's Balm of Life, Dr. E. Humphrey's Vegetable Ointment, Dr. Starkweather's Hepatic Elixir, Dr. J. Newton's Jaundice Bitters, Dr. Libby's Bitters, Dr. Israel Delemeter's Nerve and Bone Rheumatic Liniment, James Slaughter's Sticking Salve and Wistar's Balsam of Wild Cherry. Proprietary medicines were to always play an important role in his business.

Isaac put himself wholly into his calling and began a long career; punctuated by his honesty and ultimately, by his eccentricity. He was apparently not a sentimental sort, as he never married. Neither did he keep in close contact with family, who consisted of a sister and her

descendants; nor with past friends. It seems likely that he evoked little emotion when, in 1849, his former employers were bought out. His one devotion was his business, and his business was making and selling medicines. He was so absorbed by his commitment that he never even bothered with a house, instead living at his store, regardless of its location.

The earliest Tiffin storefront he occupied was a wooden frame structure on Washington Street, down close to the river. By 1873, when the city directories started listing numeric addresses, his was 54 S. Washington, located between Market and Perry Street, on the west side. Proof of this surfaced in 1980, when an earthen ramp at the rear of the building was removed. Buried within were numerous bottles, many broken, but almost all of them embossed with "I.L. St John". It would appear that his business as a druggist took a back seat to medicines. Not a single embossed prescription bottle was found among the shards, and to this day, no known embossed druggist bottle has been found with St John's name on it.

By 1878, he had removed to the corner of Washington and Madison streets, farther south of his previous location and on the opposite side. Here he continued the production of his preparations. Perhaps the most famous and prolific remedy was "Doctor I.L. St John's Magnetic Oil". The cure, formulated in 1868, rode the wave of magnetism's popularity. The bottles proclaimed "Cures Rheumatism, Neuralgia, and Headache" right in the glass and came in two sizes.



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

It was probably around this time that the cough and consumption syrup became “magnetic”. The “magnetic” part was eventually dropped on that remedy, but was retained until the end on the bottles of oil.

As the years went on, the medicines retained a popular following, but only in a limited area. In 1877, Isaac hired Dr. Jacob Bridinger, a bona fide physician, as both promoter and traveling salesman. Jacob traversed Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan touting Isaac’s line of preparations. This made them both good money, and gave Dr. Bridinger a steady line of work for over twenty years. In 1885, the good doctor’s son, Frank, was hired on as drug clerk for Isaac’s store.

As business grew, there were other avenues to explore for expanding the market share for St John remedies. An outlet on the east coast was sought out and found, in the name of McKesson and Robbins. So it was that packaging and advertising in the 1890s now had a Tiffin address, and a New York City address of 91 Fulton Street. In addition to the old standbys, there were other medicines to be sold. There was a Great Rejuvenator, a Compound Syrup Sarsaparilla, an Eruptive Ointment, a Magnetic Salve, his Great American Pile Cure, Sweeney Mixture, Worm Syrup and St John’s Mixture (for skin ailments). There were also a few veterinary products; Poultry Powders [Figure 18], a Cough and Heave Cure, Cure for Foot Rot in Sheep, Condition Powders as well as a Bug Poison. He even manufactured and sold Eureka Hair Dye, for the vanity crowd.

By the time of this expansion, age was creeping up on ole Isaac. His body was failing and his eyesight was nearly gone. He was in his eighth decade and with no family, there was no one to carry on the legacy he had created. His only confidants were the Bridingers, so it seemed natural to sell over to them. Frank found his now twenty years of service repaid by the offer of the drugstore, along with the line of preparations. He became owner of both store and remedies with one constraint. Isaac would be allowed to continue living at the store, and the store would be promoted as the St John Drug Store. These conditions were willingly met.

Mr. St John continued life as he had been for many years. He daily walked to the Empire Hotel, where he took his meals. Every day he made his way to and from the drugstore, undoubtedly reflecting at times how the town had changed. His daylight hours were spent in the drugstore, which, while having passed from his possession, still retained his name. He had a comfortable, well worn chair in the back of the store which was his, and there he sat, watching the comings and goings of the customers, giving a wave or advice as need warranted, and occasionally regaling listeners with tales of days gone by.

Isaac L. St John passed away on April 7, 1908. He left no immediate family, just a few distant relatives. To them went an estate worth some \$50,000. His exact age at the time of his death was unknown, as in his later years he refused to divulge that information, not even to the official census takers.

His death took from the town one of its oldest citizens; a man who had seen thirty other druggists pass through his beloved town, whose medicines found a place in many a home, and who had become an icon, albeit an eccentric one, of what it took to survive the years. Frank Bridinger found following in those footsteps very difficult. He tried, however, and kept the store going until 1927, when it was closed. He manufactured the St John remedies for his first few years of business, but it would seem that his attention was more closely focused on his local clientele, and the preparations fell to the wayside, likely before 1915.

One unusual item of note - there is at least one, albeit damaged, pontiled ink that is embossed “I.L. St John & Co”. It was recovered from the Detroit River many years ago, and suffers a crack and a small hole. Like the cough syrups, it is eight-sided. Little in the way of any others has surfaced, so if any readers know of any, I would appreciate hearing about it.

I would like to offer many thanks to Mark Steinmetz and Mike Wagner, both of Tiffin, Ohio, who graciously opened up their collections for this article. Both are old hometown friends of mine who collect local bottles and ephemera. The author has St John bottles, but not in the number and quality of their collections. Without their assistance, this article would have been lacking a great deal in the way of visual accompaniments.



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 17

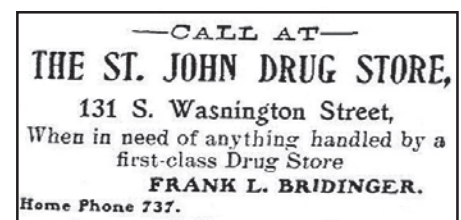


Figure 16



Figure 18