
A NEW SERIES BY
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# MRS. SOULE'S ERADICATOR
## THE FLOWER OR THE WORM?

It's so easy for me to imagine the scene in 1885: a young woman from Lynn, Massachusetts, has put in another long, hard day at the dismal factory. She runs a noisy, dangerous machine, repeatedly stitching soles to shoes as part of a large assembly line operation. She leaves the factory late in the afternoon, one of the many drained workers breathing the outside air for the first time since very early in the morning. Tired, achy, and hungry, she walks down the sidewalk, being bumped and jostled constantly by the crowd of people going in all directions, amid the additional confusion of yelling paperboys, peddlers, and sidewalk preachers, and the dizzying animation of horses, wagons, and omnibuses snorting and rumbling through the street. Worn out, she feels anything but pretty. Being noticed, was frankly the last thing on her mind—she was anxious to be once again hidden away in the privacy of her home.


Fully labeled Soule's Eradicator, trade mark, in a clear glass bottle with a milk-like liquid within. The paper box and label both support an illustration of Mrs. Soule. The product contained five per cent alcohol with net contents at 2 ½ fluid ounces. Recommended for the Removal of Moth, Tan, Freckles, and Pimples. L. M. Brock & Co. Proprietors were noted as the Successors of Mrs. C. A. Soule of Lynn, Massachusetts. Price 50 Cents. Registered in U.S. Patent Office, April 1, 1902.

While trying to avoid being stepped on or tripped by the stampeding herd of feet all around her, her mind replays the upsetting memories from earlier in the day, when she had noticed spots on the backs of her hands while running shoe parts through her machine at the factory. Then, when she walked by a smudged mirror on the factory wall, she glimpsed in her reflection some more unsightly blemishes on her cheeks and chin as well. Life seemed to be wearing her out and making her old before her time.

She finds some space between the bodies shuffling along the sidewalk and slips herself into Bergengren's drugstore, hoping there might be some cheap and sure solution for her stained skin—something that would help her feel more feminine and less like just another defeated face in the crowd. Feeling a little overwhelmed and lost among all the bottles, boxes, and signs that glare at her every-

where, she turns in Bergengren's shop; her eyes are then tenderly invited to a scene in a tall card on the counter. Rendered in soft colors, it appeals to her feeling of femininity, which she had worried might be disappearing.

There was nothing dark and harsh in the picture—nothing at all that dragged her thoughts back to the miserable factory floor where she slaved away each day. The two women in the picture understand her— both are her: the woman she is and the woman she wishes she could be. She doesn't have to analyze the scenes; her heart and mind quickly agree that the product advertised is worth a try. She really wants to be the beautiful, poised woman it promises she could be. The two hard-earned quarters in the bottom of her purse shine a little against the dark leather as if a sign that this purchase is, indeed, the right thing to do. She walks home with her purchase of Mrs. Soule's Moth, Tan, Freckle & Pimple Eradicator, hopeful about something in her life for the first time in weeks.

There are many pieces of Victorian advertising that have survived their century-and-a-half ephemeral passage through time, and I have seen thousands of them. Still, the Mrs. Soule's counter card that our young heroine saw is truly special and possibly the only surviving example. There had been a tremendous array of "before-and-after" advertisements for all sorts of products, from anti-fat pills to stove polish, and the creativity and artwork are often exemplary pieces of creativity and design. But the counter card for Mrs. Soule's Moth-Tan, Freckle & Pimple Eradicator, abbreviated on the bottle's embossing to Soule's Eradicator, is something very special and in a class of its own. The greatness of Madison Avenue advertising has never excelled this advertising masterpiece, and this blog post intends to give it the few minutes of reverent admiration that it rightly deserves.

"Subliminal advertising" was just being introduced in the early 1880s. For a century, the public had been amused and mesmerized by watching friends and family members become unwitting participants as hypnotists seemed to control the actions and words of their subjects without them being conscious of it. In the middle of the decade, Sigmund Freud began using hypnosis in his work to understand the subconscious and unconscious mind.


Mrs. Soule's Moth, Tan, Freckle & Pimple Eradicator. Die-cut counter card, about 1885 (Shown on a black background. Height: 9½ inches). The back side has a cardstock kickstand that can be manually angled to allow the display card to be freestanding on the store counter. (Collection of the author; gift of Barbara Rusch.)

This counter card had done far more than present an obvious before-and-after metaphor: the designer and artist had created an advertising piece that spoke eloquently without words, playing at depth with the potential customer's fears and dreams. Our factory worker decided to purchase after just a cursory perusal, but let's break it down like Dr. Freud might have been inclined to do.

The counter card image depicted two conjoined scenes apparently featuring the same woman. In the "before" scene on the left side, the young woman was still in her peignoir, looking self-consciously in her hand mirror as she tussled hopelessly with her hair, trying to figure out how she was going to overcome her real problem: the skin blemishes spotting all over her face and forearms.

She was shown in an interior part of her home, hiding behind a chair and a wall, not at all ready for the world. The "after" image on the right side shows the same

young woman, beautiful and ready for any social event: she doesn't have the slightest spot of skin blemish; her skin is flawless and she confidently shows it off with a sleeveless, bustled gown and a daringly plunging décolletage.

She has traded in her symbol of worry, her mirror, for a fancy, fashionable fan, and her other hand reaches not for her hair but for the drapery, purposely pulling it open to let the sunshine into the room where she had previously hidden herself; she is completely ready for a posh party or social.

Behind her were two healthy, lush green houseplants, one in full bloom with golden-colored flowers, while behind the morose "before" woman there is a vase holding only brown stems, suggesting no life, and a drab framed landscape on the wall, with vegetation also in brown.

Advertising trade card.

And lest the message wasn't clear enough, the artist superimposed three roses on top of the scene: the one on the "after" side was in perfect bloom, just like the ideal woman below it; the rose on the opposite side drooped towards the miserable woman, heavy with decay on its petals and worms on its stem. The third rose was perfectly positioned over the partition that separated the two scenes; in this neutral zone, it was still a bud, not yet bloomed, but pointing hopefully to the banner above that announced the miracle skin cure: "Soule's Moth-Tan, Freckle & Pimple Eradicator, L. M. Brock & Co., Sole Proprietors, Lynn, Mass. U.S.A." The counter card sign left no question about which woman represented the ideal Victorian lady, nor could any doubt remain about which skin care product was going to help her achieve the goal.

I want to think that my fictional customer would have had her dreams come true when she used her bottle of Soule's Eradicator, but alas, that would not have happened. The published ingredients had no dermatological benefits but did have something sinisterly bad for the skin and body.

The manufacturer, Lemuel Brock, a very successful medicine maker and a major candidate for Lynn mayor, promoted that it contained nothing dangerous:

> *"A great many people have the idea that all skin preparations contain either Bismuth, Arsenic, or Sugar of Lead, and are afraid to use [skin preparations for that reason]. We pledge ourselves that Mrs. Soule's Eradicator DOES NOT contain any of the above-named ingredients, and we warrant it not to injure the skin, and that a continuation of its use will restore the same to all its youthful fairness."*
> [emphasis as in original]

He also assured he had further helped his customers by keeping the cost of Soule's Eradicator way down through the use of a very simple bottle rather than some overcharged decorative container designed to sit prettily on a lady's vanity among her fancy perfumes:

> "This preparation is not put up in a cut-glass bottle, or fancy jar or pitcher, and then the price fixed to match the glassware. Say one or two dollars per bottle or jar, as the case may be—but a common white glass bottle that would not be out of place on any lady's dressing table, and is for sale by all druggists and fancy good dealers for fifty cents per bottle—one-third the price of any other preparation that comes near containing the virtues of the Eradicator."
> [emphasis as in original]

In 1890, Brock was taken to court for selling a bottle that contained 60 grains of corrosive sublimate, a chemical compound of mercury and chlorine that is very toxic to humans. Its toxicity is due not just to mercury but also its corrosive properties, which, according to Wikipedia, can cause ulcers to the stomach, mouth, and throat and corrosive damage to the intestines. It accumulates in the kidneys and causes acute kidney failure. It can also cause burning in the mouth and throat, stomach pain, abdominal discomfort, lethargy, vomiting of blood, corrosive bronchitis, insomnia, excessive salivation, bleeding gums, tremors, and dental problems – even death may occur in as little as twenty-four hours, or as long as two long and lingering weeks.

Lemuel Brock had sold the mercury-laden medicine to a woman who was an undercover agent for the government. Despite the state chemist's careful chemical analysis and the female agent's testimony, the judge took the side of Lemuel Brock, "whom he knew[,] rather than that of the woman," whom he didn't know. Brock's case was discharged and he was exonerated.

The counter card for Mrs. Soule's Eradicator is the keystone of my collection—the quintessential piece of Victorian proprietary medicine advertising—and was the gift of a dear friend and fellow time traveler. I never assign or measure the monetary value of pieces in my collection but, if asked, the answer would be easy—it's priceless to me.

**Andrew V. Rapoza** is a magna cum laude graduate of Boston College (1977), with a Scholar of the College distinction in history. During his management career in purchasing, contracts, and technical publications, he also pursued his passion for collecting and researching health and medical history, especially as it pertained to Lynn, Massachusetts, where he and his wife, Gail, first raised their four children. Several of his research papers on Colonial, Federal, and Victorian health in New England have been published (some of which can be found on the web) and he has been a guest speaker on these subjects all over the Northeast, including at the Strong Museum, Rochester, New York, and at the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife. He has recently published a four-volume book titled *PROMISING CURES – the Pursuit of Health in a 19th Century New England Community: Lynn, Massachusetts.* It is available for sale in hardcover and softcover on Amazon.com and for free in digital format on FamilySearch.org.
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