Griggs County is very fortunate that we had Myrtle Porterville living here. This article about her was written by Tom Isern, Professor of History at NDSU in 2004. There are over 20 boxes of her material at the Institute for Regional Studies in Fargo and we will be using a lot of it to help with the Historical Highlights articles.

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Myrtle Bemis, although born in Wisconsin in 1880, grew up in Griggs County (Cooperstown the county seat), North Dakota. She taught in rural schools for a while before attending Valley City Normal College. After another interlude teaching, she went on to the University of North Dakota, attaining a master’s degree in history. Back in 1909, it was truly a remarkable achievement. After that she married Charles Albert Porterville, a farmer, and settled down with him back in Griggs County.

Only she never settled down. A historian through and through, she became an avid collector and writer. During the 1930s she collected and wrote for the WPA. I’m glad she did because eventually her research materials found their way into the collections of the Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University.

It’s amazing the things Myrtle Bemis Porterville accumulated. Obviously she operated with none of the constraints of liability, human subjects protection, or rights to privacy that bind researchers today. For instance, she collected some remarkable material on the drinking habits of her neighbors during the days of legal prohibition.

I’m talking about Box 8, Folder 2, “Alcohol for medicinal purposes.” What Porterville did was go around to the pharmacies and somehow gain access to their prescription records. She copied down every prescription filled for alcohol, recording the date, the name of the thirsty patient, the type of alcohol administered and the malady for which it had been prescribed. Her transcriptions comprise 388 prescriptions during the years 1905-06.

So, who was doing the drinking? In the first place, as you might expect, almost all the recipients of alcohol were men. Of course, a man might obtain for a woman and vice versa. Sometimes prescriptions were recorded by initials only, but the overwhelming evidence here is that the men were the tipplers.

I expected Anglo-American surnames to predominate because I figured the doctors and pharmacists would likely prescribe for their friends in town. The surnames and addresses indicate this happened, but also that at least half the alcohol was going to Norwegian farmers who, presumably, were good evangelical Lutherans!

This indicates to me that the enterprise of issuing and filling prescriptions for alcohol was not any clubby affair, but rather definitely a moneymaking proposition.

The prescriptions varied somewhat as to the form of alcohol administered. Most prescriptions were either for “alcohol” (grain alcohol, which could be doctored up in various ways) or for “whiskey.” Some had more esoteric tastes. There was the occasional specification for “brandy” (one of these, “brandy for wife”), “gin,” “port wine” (for “sacramental purposes, one insisted), or “sherry wine.”

And just what sort of maladies, you may wonder, required the administration of alcohol for relief? (Possibly you’re thinking this might be useful information for a personal rationale?) Here’s a list of things alcohol could cure: LaGrippe, influenza, “tight hoof on horse,” swelling of man or beast (requiring lineament), confinement, colic, cramps, stomach trouble, dyspepsia, diarrhea, scalp disease, indigestion, cold, rheumatism, old age (I’m not kidding, old age!), throat trouble, neuralgia, weakness, “female trouble,” catarrh, asthma, headache, kidney trouble, backache, measles, “summer complaint,” appendicitis, consumption, nervousness and hay fever.

Doesn’t this just set your imagination dancing? What sort of dialogues took place in the doctor’s office, and after that in the drugstore? “More lineament, Mr. Erickson? Why, if I had a horse that went lame as often as yours does, I believe I’d sell him.”

Perhaps I’m being overly suspicious.

Source file:

<http://www.ext.nodak.edu/extnews/newsrelease/2004/031804/04plains.htm>

March 18, 2004

**Plains Folk: Porterville**

**Tom Isern,** Professor of History  
North Dakota State University

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