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Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup: The Baby Killer

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The following blog post was contributed by Alysha Strongman, who is the Museum of Health Care's Collections Technician for the summer of 2017. Alysha recently graduated from Queen's University in Kingston with a BAH in Classics, and is excited to be working with 'newer' artefacts than she is used to, as she helps to catalogue artefacts this summer.

Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup was widely marketed in North America and the United Kingdom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a cure-all medicine for fussy babies. Said to be originally created by Mrs. Charlotte N. Winslow while she was a nurse caring for infants, the syrup was first commercially produced in 1849 by Mrs. Winslow's son-in-law, Jeremiah Curtis, and his partner Benjamin A. Perkins.

The primary ingredients of the syrup were morphine and alcohol, with approximately 65 mg of morphine per fluid ounce. A teaspoonful of the syrup, then, had the morphine content equal to that of approximately twenty drops of laudanum. Given that the 1873 edition of *The Health Reformer* suggested that babies six months of age receive no more than two to three drops of laudanum, the dosages listed on the bottles of Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup are alarming: For a child under one month old, the recommendation was 6 to 10 drops; children three months old were to be dosed half a teaspoon; and children six months old and up were to be given a teaspoonful three or four times a day! The recommended dosage for children with dysentery followed the amounts outlined above but was to be repeated every two hours until visual improvement was noticed. A teaspoonful of the syrup would have contained enough morphine to kill the average child, so it isn't hard to understand why so many babies who were given Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup went to sleep only to never wake back up again, coining the syrup's nickname, "the baby killer". There is no statistic of the number of children that died from the use of soothing syrup, as many caregivers did not link the death to the syrup or they chose not to reveal the use of the syrup, but thousands of children are believed to have died from overdoses or from morphine addiction and withdrawal.

In the United States, the Pure Food and Drug Act instituted in 1906 forced companies to state the active ingredients on drug packaging, and to ensure that the purity level of the drugs did not fall below the levels established by the United States Pharmacopeia or the National Formulary. A similar



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Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup trade card, 1887 ([Accession #996001755](#))

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have happened since the mid-1800s. With easily accessible answers that are only a Google search away, it is hard for us in modern times to imagine not understanding the full effects of a certain medicine. Without this information, people living in the era of Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup put their trust in trained pharmacists, believing that these pharmacists knew about the drugs they were prescribing, and it would have been hard for patients to contradict that knowledge. Ailing people looked to those with medical knowledge – such as doctors, nurses, and pharmacists – for their help, but even those trained professionals may not have known the full effects of certain drugs.

Another factor to take into account is the high volume of advertisements that these companies produced. Mrs. Winslow became a household name because advertisements for the syrup were mass-produced and distributed on recipe cards, newspapers, calendars (as seen above), and trade cards. All of these advertisements were on useful everyday objects, which in part led to the company's success despite the fact that the company was selling a product that was controversial at best.

law, the Food and Drugs Act, was passed in Canada in 1920 in an effort to control the production of drugs and disclose the ingredients on labels, and to ensure that drugs were properly marketed so that an active drug component like morphine could not be sold as an ingredient in a “cosmetic” product.

After the Pure Food and Drug Act passed in the United States, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup was forced to remove morphine from their syrup and remove “soothing” from their brand name. Even with this major blow to the company's original recipe and name, and the denunciation of the product by the American Medical Association in 1911, the syrup was sold until the 1930s.

So the question is: Why would someone give their baby such a deadly medicine?

Prior to the Pure Food and Drug Act in the United States, the labeling on the majority of drugs didn't state their ingredients and sometimes the people creating these mixtures and patent medicines did not understand the full effects of the ingredients. Today, as we look back on history, we take for granted our modern labels that clearly state the ingredients, and we forget the advancements in science that

Marketed as a cure-all for a fussy baby's woes, at a time when morphine's dangerous effects were generally unknown by the public, it is easy to understand how a product like Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup would have been appealing to weary caregivers. The loss of so many children as a result of the wide marketing and dispensing of this syrup, and other drugs like it, is a tragic part of our medical history that informed many important changes intended to ensure that such a tragedy does not occur again.

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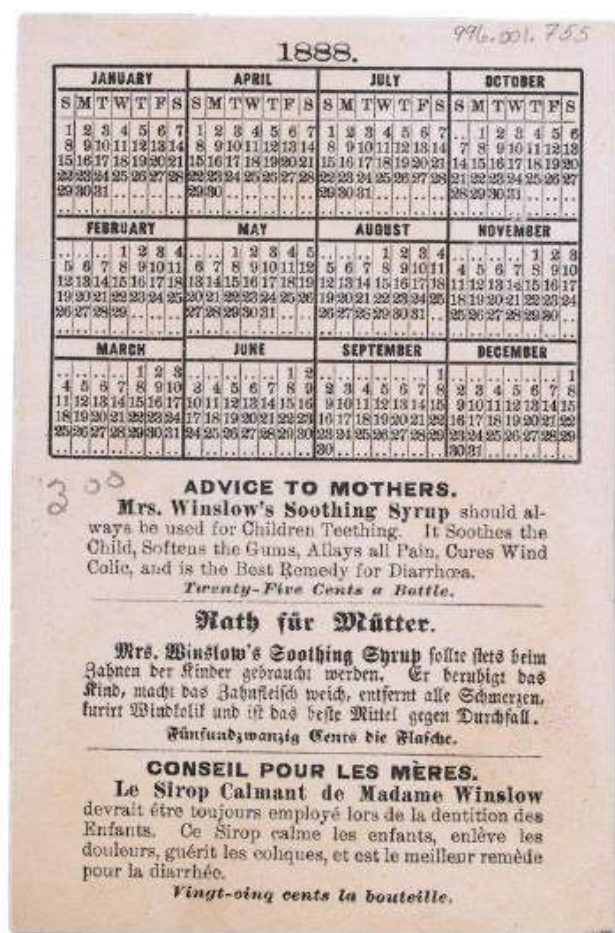
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Back of the trade card, featuring an 1888 calendar and "Advice to Mothers" ([Accession # 996001755](http://mhc.andornot.com/en/permalink/artifact2792))
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