

## **‘Dr. Mrs. Keck’ battled male-dominated medical establishment**

Back in the 19th century when miracle pills, plasters, creams, powders and tonics promised to cure all—from mild indigestion to pancreatic cancer—there were few patent medicine entrepreneurs as intriguing as Rebecca Keck.

The fiercely independent “Dr. Mrs. Keck” (as she was almost always called) promised that her herbal concoctions would eradicate innumerable chronic diseases and conditions, including asthma, consumption (tuberculosis) and even blindness.

By the early 1880s, Keck’s sprawling medical practice centered on her “Palatial Infirmary for All Chronic Diseases,” a converted mansion in the heart of Davenport, Ia. In addition, she operated “branch offices” in downstate Illinois communities such as Bloomington, Peoria and Quincy, where she made regularly scheduled stops.

“Her medicines are sent all over the country and her name is a household word in families many hundreds of miles away,” noted the Bloomington Leader newspaper in 1881. Keck was best known for her remedy for “catarrh,” a 19th century term encompassing a wide range of respiratory ailments. At its height, her mail-order business was said to reach anywhere from 12,000 to 15,000 patients.

Keck considered herself an “eclectic” physician, or one who emphasized herbal or botanical remedies, which were usually bottled and sold as tonics. As such, she was often at odds with the increasingly powerful and patriarchal “allopathic” (meaning modern and scientific) medical establishment.

What’s often forgotten today is the promise such eclectic practitioners (and even outright quacks of the snake oil variety) held for sick and long-suffering patients of the 19th century. After all, at this time allopathic physicians often resorted to “heroic” treatments involving noxious or outright poisonous dosages of lead, mercury and the like. Similarly, surgery was often little more than a crude and ineffective horror show.

Keck got her start in the medical trade as a housewife living in rural southeastern Iowa. When her husband’s foundry shop went under during the Panic of 1873, Rebecca, known in her community as an accomplished herbalist, began selling her homemade catarrh remedy to friends, neighbors, and nearby town and country folk. Although Keck’s education likely didn’t go beyond the eighth grade, she proved an adept businesswoman in the rough-and-tumble patent

medicine industry. A few short years after the Panic of 1873 she was advertising her catarrh cure in newspapers as far away as Chicago.

Much of what we know about this fascinating and mostly forgotten story comes from Greta Nettleton, a Keck descendant who inherited several trunks and bankers boxes containing correspondence, photographs, scrapbooks and other material from one of Rebecca's daughters, the precocious and independent-minded Cora. Several years ago, Nettleton wrote the award-winning book, *The Quack's Daughter: A True Story about the Private Life of a Victorian College Girl*. Nettleton is now working on a book on Rebecca Keck herself, and was kind enough to share some of her current research with this author.

In 1877, the Illinois state legislature passed the Medical Practices Act in an attempt to establish some order out of the chaos of 19th century medical education, certification and regulation. The Illinois State Board of Health, led by its secretary, Dr. John H. Rauch, aggressively targeted physicians such as Keck, who he deemed unworthy of the profession because they lacked formal medical education.

As both an itinerant, eclectic practitioner and a woman, Keck faced a steeper climb than most to gain a semblance of respect and recognition within the wider medical community. Nettleton says that while the drive to professionalize the ranks of doctors eliminated “bogus diploma mills, outright frauds, incompetents, and traveling medicine shows,” it also aimed at seizing “control of women’s health care by outlawing midwives, marriage counselors, birth control providers and abortionists.”

For her part, Keck did not shy away from indentifying herself as a medical doctor—and a female one at that! She boasted that her remedies were based on “an entirely new principle, and though discovered by a woman and never thought of or applied by professional men ... yet has the most essential principles and scientific truths underlying it.”

In early 1876, Keck began seeing patients in Bloomington, which back then was a regional center for patent medicine manufacturers. The most successful was Cyrenius Wakefield, whose nationally distributed Blackberry Balsam was used to treat diarrhea and other bowel complaints. Wakefield operated a factory to compound, formulate and package Blackberry Balsam and his many other remedies, as well as a sizable printing operation to churn out hundreds of thousands (and even millions) of promotional giveaways such as almanacs filled with glowing testimonials as to the curative powers of the Wakefield line of medicines.

Nettleton’s research tells us that Wakefield was a mentor to Keck, and that the two families were friends. And there is good indication that Wakefield bottled and shipped the bulk of Keck-labeled

remedies from Bloomington. The two entrepreneurs, Rebecca Keck and Cyrenius Wakefield, had much in common, observes Nettleton. For instance, both were “frontier naturopaths” well versed in herbal lore who “felt the sting of contempt from the brotherhood of regular physicians.”

In February 1878, an unidentified local physician confronted a visiting Keck at her Bloomington office, demanding to see her state credentials. Keck answered back that her attorney, Winfield Coy of Bloomington, handled all such calls.

“The demand being made upon the attorney, he [Coy] replied that when he was compelled by process of law to produce the certificate, it would be forthcoming—until then, never!” reported the Bloomington Leader.” “We expect this is the beginning of a long and tedious litigation between the ‘regulars’ and the ‘irregulars’ (that is, allopathic versus alternative practitioners) and the public will await the result with interest.”

Indeed, between 1878 and 1889, Keck appeared in court for practicing without a license at least five times in Illinois. But Dr. Mrs. Keck would not be denied. “She paid large fines but continued to practice, advertise and sell her remedies,” notes Nettleton.

Rebecca Keck passed away in 1904 at the age of 66, having only retired four years earlier.

Say what you will about Keck’s miracle cures, her unconquerable spirit was in many ways miracle enough.

“While Mrs. Dr. Keck is a very pleasant and genial lady, she has a plucky and indomitable disposition, which is the admiration of all who know her and the terror of all who attack her,” declared the Bloomington Leader in 1881. “Despite her womanhood, which ought to exempt her from the shafts of masculine malice, she has been the victim of malignant and unjustifiable abuse from the regular male profession. But such prosecution has only fanned the flames of her widening reputation. In all such professional controversies Mrs. Dr. Keck has proved herself more than a match for her enemies.”