

# **"Physic Opera" On the Road:**

## **Texas Musicians in Medicine Shows**

Gene Fowler



*"The stuff he was selling was black and evil-tasting," recalled Texas blues and R&B legend Aaron Thibeaux 'T-Bone' Walker, "but it brought the people out!" The "stuff" Walker spoke of was Dr. Breeding's Big B Tonic (or B and B Tonic). "Doc" Breeding pitched his nostrum in a traveling show that played Walker's neighborhood in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas in 1925. "(The doctor) hired me and another boy, Josephus Cook, to ballyhoo for him," Walker remembered, "and taught Seph and me to work up some patter about it and climb on the back of a panel truck to drum people in. I'd play and feed jokes to Seph, and he'd start in to dance...Then we'd stack up the bottles, and Doc would come on."*<sup>1</sup>

Though the patent remedies hawked by Dr. Breeding and other theatrical medicine men and women may or may not have possessed any restorative powers, the entertainment they offered definitely lifted folks' spirits. And, like T-Bone Walker, several of the state's finest musicians, including the future "King of Western Swing," Bob Wills, gained some of their earliest professional experience playing with "physic operas," as medicine shows were sometimes called. Years before he hired on with radio personality and Texas politician W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel and the Light Crust Doughboys, Wills ran off briefly with a medicine show led by a champion fiddler and banjoist named Frank Barnes. According to Barnes's son Oliver, a 22-year-old Bob Wills bested Frank in an impromptu 1926 fiddling contest held in Wills's hometown of Turkey, Texas, before briefly joining the show for \$25 a week.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, a shy 15-year-old named Orvon Autry auditioned for the Fields Brothers Medicine Show when it played his hometown of Tioga, Texas, in June 1923. "They carried a dancer, a singer, and a comic," recalled Orvon years later, after he gained fame as "Gene" Autry, Hollywood's most popular movie cowboy of the 1930s and 1940s. The performers were all male, Autry added, "for no one in our parts would tolerate



King-K Medicine Company of Cleburne, Texas, circa 1906. The man standing second from the far right with a decorated fiddle is Henry C. Gilliland. He would later gain fame in 1922 after he and fellow Texas-based fiddler Alexander "Eck" Robertson made the first commercial country recording in history. Photo courtesy of the Patricia Smith Boatright Collection.

a lady traveling with a show. One of the brothers, who called himself Doctor, was the barker, and he sure was persuasive. He sold corn cure and liver pills and salve to ease the rheumatism out of aching backs." Though he suffered from stage fright that derailed his debut during his first number, young Orvon Autry went on the road with the show, earning \$15 a week.<sup>3</sup>

Autry biographer Holly George-Warren notes that four of his films featured medicine show scenes, including his first, *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, the 1935 picture generally regarded as the genesis of the singing cowboy stampede on the silver screen. Two years later, Autry reminisced about his medicine show days in the press book for the film *Rootin' Tootin' Rhythm*. "I traveled with them for three months, softening up audiences with mournful ballads before the professor began pitching his wares: ointment and pills and his own product, a patent medicine called Fields' *Pain Annihilator*."<sup>4</sup>

Concerns over women performing in such shows had eased a bit by 1944, when a small outfit selling the alcohol-laden

tonic Hadacol played Paris, Texas. Future rockabilly spitfire Charline Arthur, born in Henrietta, Texas, pled so fervently for permission to go on the road with the Ray Smith Medicine Show that her father reluctantly signed papers allowing the 15 year-old to travel with the troupe. Arthur's younger sister recalled decades later that Charline "looked like a star" on the tiny medicine show stage.<sup>5</sup>

The medicine shows that began trekking across the Lone Star state after the Civil War ended in 1865 generally offered music that could range from a lone instrumentalist to a full brass band and minstrel performers. Often, the repertoire consisted of songs made recently popular back east, but regional fare did find its way into the medicine show playlists.<sup>6</sup>

When cowboy musicologist Jack Thorp made a song-collecting trip through Texas in 1889, he performed some of the tunes he discovered (some of which would later become western classics) with a medicine show in Waco. As Thorp recalled in his book, *Partner of the Wind*, he was carrying his

banjo into a downtown Waco chili joint when a man grabbed his arm and explained that "Professor Scott, Wizard Oil King, needed a man like me. His banjo-picker was drunk, and his show was due to open on the public square in a few minutes." The long-haired, long-winded professor "wore a scarlet coat and a huge sombrero," wrote Thorp. "Occasionally he would fondle a pet Gila monster that he carried around...and explain that among other mysterious powers he had a strange influence over dumb animals." Thorp played between medicine pitches and other bits, receiving \$5 for a two-hour show. And he collected lyrics to the song "Buckskin Joe" from the fast-talking professor, who "recited this barroom surprise story ballad with oratorical flourishes that would have astonished Shakespeare."<sup>7</sup>

As with many forms of early Texas entertainment, fiddle music was especially popular with medicine show audiences. Eck Robertson, who grew up near Amarillo, and his occasional musical partner Henry Gilliland, the two fiddlers who, together, waxed the first commercial country recordings in New York City in 1922, took to the medicine show circuit to refine their

Cleburne in 1915.) Furthermore, the high levels of alcohol and other psychoactive substances in patent medicines underscored the view of some that attending a medicine show might lure the innocent over to the "wild side" of life. Like many nostrums, the King K cure-all contained opium, which not only killed folks' pain, but made many of them repeat customers, as well.<sup>10</sup> One medicine showman's young daughter suffered the fate of many nineteenth-century children, when she died in Waxahachie, Texas, from an overdose of morphine after treating herself with too much cough syrup.<sup>11</sup>

The Kendrick Komedy Kompany, a western swing family medicine show band, toured such Texas towns as Floydada, Plainview, Ralls, Jayton, Roby, and Rotan during the late 1920s and early 1930s. As drummer Cliff Kendrick told western swing chronicler Duncan McLean, the Kompany sold "wonder cures...mostly vegetable oil, plus a little bit of whiskey; that's where the wonder came from."<sup>12</sup> Bob Kendrick remembered the medicine as "largely epsom salts in water."<sup>13</sup>

The Kendricks, like many Texas medicine shows of the

Eck Robertson...and...Henry Gilliland...took to the medicine show circuit to refine their artistry on the instrument that some called the "Devil's Box."

artistry on the instrument that some called the "Devil's Box." Robertson, who later had a long career as the colorful "Cowboy Fiddler," left his Panhandle home at age 16 to tour the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), developing his natural talent as a showman with pitches and trick fiddling. Henry Gilliland played before World War I with the King-K Medicine Company show based in Cleburne, Texas. At least one incarnation of the King-K outfit featured a lone banjo with a half-dozen fiddlers.<sup>8</sup>

A reporter attending a King-K concert in the nearby resort town of Glen Rose, Texas, observed that anyone "who had not lost the last microbe of enjoyment" would find pleasure in the performance. One attendee apparently had lost that last microbe, testifying in a letter to the local paper that he could not "see how mothers can sit under such uproar of folly and shame with their children by their side." Complaining about the audience's drinking at the show, the correspondent continued, "We should set better examples for our children and let all our efforts be to raise the moral standard and not lower it...we could see a great deal of devilry in the whole thing."<sup>9</sup>

The fundamentalist folk myth that credited the fiddle with satanic power helped to cast the medicine shows in an unsavory light in the eyes of many Texans. (The shows were outlawed in

1920s and 1930s, obtained their nostrums from the Gassaway Company of Fort Worth. However, some musicians were even called on to help manufacture the remedies themselves. Western swing fiddler Cliff Bruner joined "Doc" Scott's medicine troupe when it passed through Aspermont, Texas, where Bruner was picking cotton in the 1930s. The entire company, Bruner told music historian Joe Carr, would pitch in to mix the product *Liquidine* during the afternoon, so they could sell it at that evening's performance.<sup>14</sup>

Texas fiddler Prince Albert Hunt, whose late-1920s recordings are regarded by historians as important forerunners of western swing, exemplified the hard-partying style of some medicine show performers. Described by music historian Marshall Wyatt as "adept at comic and stunt fiddling," Hunt often performed in blackface with Chief Wahoo's Medicine Show. A fast-living rounder who claimed to be "drunker than a hoot owl" during some of his recording sessions, Hunt was killed by a jealous husband while leaving a Dallas dancehall in 1931.<sup>15</sup>

Medicine show songman Hunter Gassaway, who was likely a member of the Fort Worth family that provided tonics, liniments, and soaps wholesale to traveling troupes, also lived it up until he was killed crossing a street in 1945. As "lovable

a character as ever the police ran in for drinking," Hunter had "followed the medicine circuit since the turn of the century." As one observer noted, Gassaway was:

known throughout this area for his rich singing of the old South's songs, Negro spirituals, and folk ballads...On the little torch-lit stages in country towns he caught up his standing listeners with the songs of Stephen Foster and the rollicking verses of levee toilers before the 'doctor' passed among them with the medicine bottles aloft. Police figure he had been arrested more than 300 times in the last 23 years for drinking—just drinking. He never gave them 'trouble.' He came to the city jail singing, and he sang in his cell to his cellmates.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps because of its strategic location at the crossroads of the South, the Southwest, and the Great Plains, a number of these traveling shows frequented the Fort Worth area. In a 1993 oral history interview, Oliver Barnes, whose pitchman-musician father had once hired a young Bob Wills to perform with his troupe, recalled that Fort Worth was something of a

headquarters for Texas medicine show folk in the 1920s and 1930s. Some companies appear to have been based there and to have toured from the city year-round, while others only "wintered" in Cowtown.<sup>17</sup>

West of Fort Worth, one medicine man utilized music therapy in a different kind of theatrical atmosphere. Sometimes called the Indian Adept or the Long-Haired Doctor, R.G. Milling practiced his own version of magnetic healing, a drugless treatment that combined massage, faith healing, hypnotism, and showmanship. Describing Milling's pre-World War I sanitarium in a Spanish Mission Revival style hotel in Putnam (near Abilene), one historian noted that, "An orchestra was kept to furnish background music for all occasions and to help soothe the nerves of the many patients who came to drink the water and take the baths and treatments. Various groups negotiated with them to play for dances, usually held on Saturday nights or on special occasions. The ballroom floor was of maple. It was beautiful and also very slick when a little corn meal was added." In 1990, Milling's granddaughter recalled that fiddle bands from Ranger were often employed at the sanitarium. Postcard photographs of the part-Cherokee healer and patients include musicians holding banjos, fiddles, baritone horns, and harp guitars.<sup>18</sup>

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Dr. R.G. Milling with musicians and patients at his sanitarium in Putnam, Texas, circa 1910. Courtesy of Ova Withee. The author requests that any readers with further information about this photo contact him at: [genfo@email.com](mailto:genfo@email.com).

With the advent of radio by the 1920s, medicine shows took to the airwaves with programming sponsored by such outfits as the Crazy Water Company of Mineral Wells, whose natural health beverage, Crazy Water, got its name from the purported cure of a mentally-afflicted pioneer woman. However, the company marketed the water and the water's mineral residue, Crazy Water Crystals (which consumers mixed into their home water to make Crazy Water), primarily as a tune-up for sluggish systems. In addition to hillbilly and cowboy artists, the Crazy Water Company's programs featured big band and pop music, as well.<sup>19</sup>

*The Crazy Gang Show*, often broadcast live from the Crazy Water Hotel in Mineral Wells, was syndicated regionally in the 1930s via the Texas Quality Network and nationally over the Mutual Network.<sup>20</sup> *The Saturday Night Stampede*, a representative Crazy Water Crystals-sponsored program on Fort Worth's WBAP, aired live from Ranger Junior College in 1936. One evening's lineup featured everything from the Ranger American Legion

century and early twentieth-century skills. He could buck-dance, sing, play the old-fashioned Hawaiian steel guitar, do hundreds of vintage jokes and comedy routines, ad-lib commercials, recite poetry, and improvise dialogue.<sup>22</sup>

Brothers Hal and Carr Collins, purveyors of Crazy Water Crystals, also advertised their product over border-radio station XEAW in Reynosa, Mexico, which the brothers owned for a time in the 1930s and early 1940s. The Crazy Water Company bought XEAW from the controversial "Goat Gland Man," Dr. John R. Brinkley, who claimed to be able to "rejuvenate" men through goat gland implants. Chased out of Kansas in the early 1930s, Dr. Brinkley built XER (later XERA) in Villa Acuña, Mexico, which, for a time, was the most powerful radio station in the world. The popular Carter family moved to Del Rio, Texas, with a lucrative contract to perform on XERA in the

The medicine shows broadcast from these high-powered stations along the Texas-Mexico border also introduced many non-Hispanic audiences to Mexican folk and popular music.

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Tickville Band playing "Eyes of Texas," "Washington and Lee," and "Smile, Darn You, Smile," along with (the future star of *Peter Pan*) Mary Martin of Weatherford, Texas, singing "Put Away a Little Ray of Sunshine" and "Charmaine," to the noted pioneer of cowboy song scholarship and performance, Jules Verne Allen performing "Cowboy's Lament" and "Santa Fe Trail."<sup>21</sup>

Medicine shows sponsored by Texas-based companies also reached audiences well outside of the Lone Star State. *The Crazy Water Barn Dance* advertised the Mineral Wells elixir on radio as far away as Georgia and the Carolinas. Carried on fourteen stations, the show included such artists as the Tennessee Ramblers, the Tobacco Tags, and the Monroe Brothers, featuring the future "Father of Bluegrass," Bill Monroe. Wade and J.E. Mainer performed with Mainer's Crazy Mountaineers, and Homer "Pappy" Sherrill joined the Crazy Blue Ridge Hillbillies with Earl and Bill Bolick (the Blue Sky Boys). In 1935, future Canadian country star Hank Snow made \$10 a week singing cowboy songs for a Crazy Water Crystals show on CHNS in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The one-man variety show "Doctor Lew" Childre was also sponsored by the Crazy company for a time. As the late country music historian Charles Wolfe described Childre:

He was one of the last country stars to come up through the old-time medicine show and vaudeville circuit, and he was a master of the classic nineteenth-

1930s. A child at the time, June Carter later remarked that, because of the station's massive power, you could hear the Carter Family on any barbed wire fence in Texas. June Carter's future husband, country music legend Johnny Cash, first heard her singing on the border radio while growing up on his family's Arkansas farm. Sponsored by his own medical lectures and such patent medicines as the cold remedy *Peruna*, artists on Brinkley's border radio station (and others like it) included such hillbilly acts as the Pickard Family and W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel and his Hillbilly Boys, along with such singing cowboys and cowgirls as Cowboy Slim Rinehart, Patsy Montana, Shelly Lee Alley's Cowboy Band, and Doc Schneider's Yodeling Texas Cowboys.<sup>23</sup>

The medicine shows broadcast from these high-powered stations along the Texas-Mexico border also introduced many non-Hispanic audiences to Mexican folk and popular music. One fan reminisced about listening to Depression-era border radio stations as far away as South Dakota. While he enjoyed the cowboy singers, the listener wrote that, "the highlight of the program, for me, was the beautiful voice of the 'Mexican Nightingale' [Rosa Dominguez], especially when she would sing 'Estrellita'—this farm boy thought that must be how the angels would sound in heaven."<sup>24</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, border stations continued offering country music programming, but they also helped



The Cuban Medicine Company of Lampasas, Texas, near the courthouse in Georgetown, Texas, circa 1890. Courtesy of Clara Scarborough, from her book *Land of Good Water*.

popularize rock and roll and rhythm and blues (R&B) through programs sponsored by such health products as *Pounds On and Pounds Off*. One soothing voice offered a nation racked by Cold War-era stress at least some relief from anxiety with the sleep aid *Restall*. Laxatives and sex aids, staples of 1930s radio advertising, remained just as popular with music-program sponsors during the post-World War II years. In the 1960s, the "howlin'" DJ, Wolfman Jack, blasted many an R&B tune out into the heartland, coupled with a sultry pitch for a potency elixir known as Florex, which was later repackaged as *Mr. Satisfy*. "This stuff

hit like dynamite," Wolfman Jack recalled in 1986. "The day after it went on the air we got like four thousand orders." Despite the fact that the products were merely sugar pills with a little aspirin, the station received reorders for years even after the medicines were taken off the air. Clearly, this was a case of mind over matter, influenced by Wolfman's manic mojo and the raw roots music he spun from the border radio stations.<sup>25</sup>

Most medicine shows had traded in the road for the radio by the 1940s and 1950s, but the old traveling "physic operas" would have an impact on music and musicians for generations

to come. Biographical profiles of 1960s and 1970s country singer Marty Robbins, for instance, indicate that he caught the showbiz bug from his grandfather, Texas Bob Heckle, who told young Robbins about his colorful career as a medicine show performer. Even though another Heckle descendant and genealogical researcher claims that Texas Bob was a cowboy poet and never performed in medicine shows, the mere idea of participating in the colorful and often controversial medicine show environment seems to have helped inspire Marty Robbins to launch his highly successful recording career.<sup>26</sup>

Country Music Hall of Famer Hank Thompson, from Waco, Texas, paid tribute to the medicine shows on his 2000 CD, *Seven Decades*. His song, "Medicine Man," recalls his 1930s experience of seeing "old Doc Tate...elegantly attired in a high silk hat, split-tail coat, and ruffled shirt," expounding "on his miracle tonic from a large gaudy wagon" as "musicians, dancers, and rube comedians performed on the wagon's fold-down stage."<sup>27</sup>

The North Carolina vintage reissue label Old Hat Records has helped preserve and illuminate the musical traditions of medicine shows with its 2005 double-CD set, *Good For What Ails You, Music of the Medicine Shows, 1926-1937*. A lively compilation that makes a vital contribution to the ongoing

revelation of the true American avant-garde, the CD set includes tunes by Texas artists Prince Albert Hunt and the Dallas String Band with Coley Jones. Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas, a ramblin' man from Big Sandy, Texas, who performed along the Texas and Pacific railroad line, is represented by a track that features not only his guitar playing but also his chops on the quills, or pan pipes.<sup>28</sup>

A number of contemporary Texas musicians have been so taken with the colorful history of medicine shows that they have performed their own re-creations. In 2004, fiddler and Wild West humorist Doc Blakely hosted *Doc Blakely's Snake Oil Cowboy Show*, at the famous Hinze's Barbeque in the Colorado River town of Wharton, Texas, for six months of weekly performances. "Gather round, friends," Blakely announced when kicking off the two-hour fandango of music and comedy, "and behold the most wonderful potpourri known to mankind, a mixture of the rarest spices, herbs, and vegetation, potions from the far East, distilled swamp waters from Matagorda, secret remedies from as far West as Egypt...and Glen Flora." He was speaking, of course, about *Doc Blakely's Snake Oil Medicine*, guaranteed to relieve consumers of such ailments as "weak gizzard, fallen arches, limp liver," and most every ailment known to man.



Ray Smith's traveling medicine show in Hutch, Kansas. Courtesy David Dennard, Dragon Street Records.

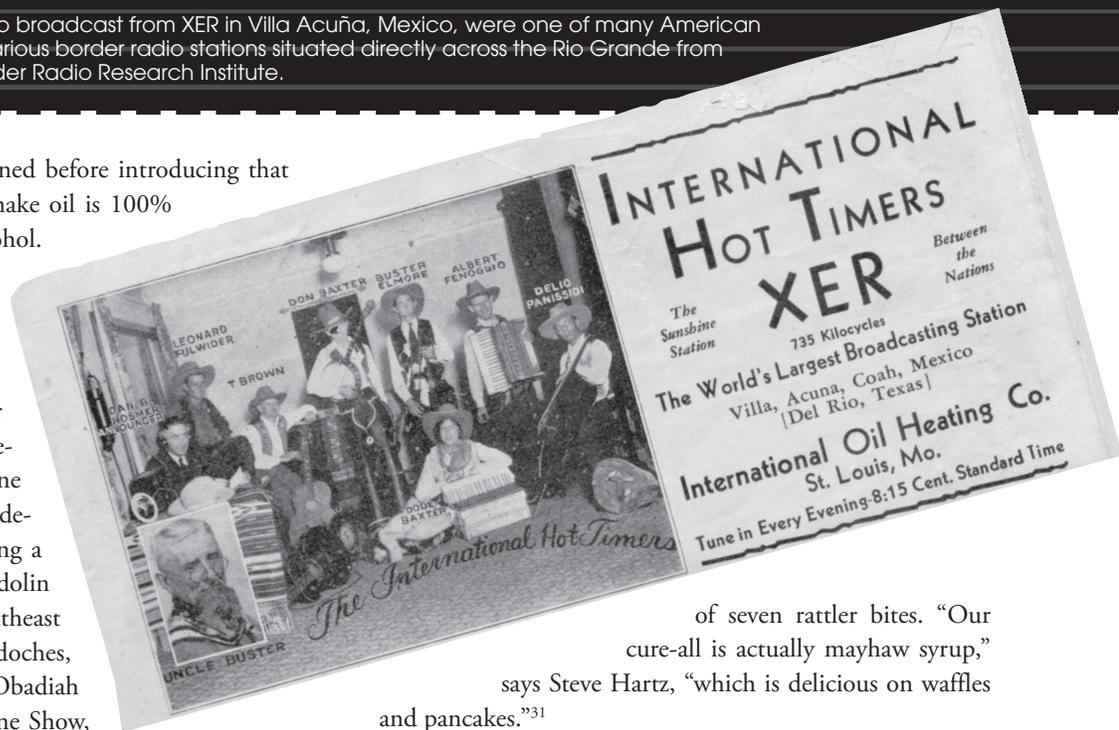


Charline Arthur playing fiddle for a mostly young medicine show audience in 1948.  
Photo courtesy of David Dennard, Dragon Street Records.

The International Hot Timers, who broadcast from XER in Villa Acuña, Mexico, were one of many American bands who performed on the various border radio stations situated directly across the Rio Grande from Texas. Photo courtesy of the Border Radio Research Institute.

"And by the way, gents," he intoned before introducing that week's special guest artist, "my snake oil is 100% natural ingredients and 45% alcohol. Nowhere else on the planet can you buy a bottle of Snake Oil that is 145% liquid."<sup>29</sup>

Others, including Dr. E.T. Bushrod sell "life-restoring" water in old-timey bottles with vintage-style labels. Bushrod's Medicine Show has been a fair, fest, and dude-ranch staple for 20 years, featuring a bevy of old-time fiddlers, mandolin pickers, and guitarists from Southeast and Central Texas.<sup>30</sup> A Nacogdoches, Texas, outfit known as Dr. Obadiah Bluefield's Attoyac Valley Medicine Show, has served fine old-time string music from Woodville to Waxahachie. Concocted by Steve and Sheryl Lynn Hartz, proprietors of the General Mercantile and Oldtime String Shop (where a Saturday afternoon jam has been a tradition for 25 years), the Attoyac Valley show features the snake-oil oratory of Professor Zebulon J. "Rattlesnake Jack" Whiloughby, as he relates the story of the late Dr. Obadiah Bluefield's discovery of *Nomomaladaise*, "one of the greatest and most inexplicable discoveries ever found west of the great Sabine River." While on a scientific expedition "deep in the East Texas piney woods," Obadiah contracted swamp fever and was rescued from "death's door" by friendly Caddo Indians, who gifted him with the secret formula. Rattlesnake Jack was similarly saved from the poison



of seven rattler bites. "Our cure-all is actually mayhaw syrup," says Steve Hartz, "which is delicious on waffles and pancakes."<sup>31</sup>

The faux elixir sold by the late Doc Toler, who lived near Martindale, Texas, until his death in 2005, packed a bit more punch. Performing with his family band as the "German-Choctaw Root-Doctor John-Crow Toler, Physician to the Governor, and Specialist in Cowboy Medicine," Doc Toler peddled a souvenir nostrum called *Torpedo Tonic*, which contained a mixture of cayenne pepper and grain alcohol. Despite his disclaimers that purchasers should not consume the stuff, Toler said that his pitches often proved dangerously compelling as audience members seeking instant health would sometimes take a Texas-size swig of the tonic. Fortunately for Toler and his audience, history in this case did not repeat itself, and his medicine did not cure anyone to an early grave.<sup>32</sup> ★

## Notes

1. Helen Oakley Dance, *Stormy Monday: The T-Bone Walker Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 17-18. T-Bone Walker explained that he and Josephus toured with Dr. Breeding during the summer break from school. Walker also provided a brief, first-hand account of life on the road with a 1920s medicine show. "Amen, brother! someone would holler down front [in response to Doc's spirited pitch], and first thing you knew, we'd be handing down bottles and Doc would be collecting a fistful of coins. Seph and I rode and slept on the truck. Doc and his wife drove a tin lizzie [Model T Ford] old as sin and set up at night in a tent. He had a fellow in charge of the truck who would build a fire and dish up some food. Of the fifteen dollars I got, I sent ten back to Mama, but if business was bad, we went hungry sometimes"; See also Helen Oakley Dance, "T-Bone Walker," in Roy Barkley, ed., *Handbook of Texas Music*, (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 348-349.
2. Oliver Barnes with O.E. Rooker, *Sold Out Doctor: Give Me Some More!* (Canton, Oklahoma: O. E. Rooker, 1989), 51-53. Confident of his musicianship, Frank Barnes had a standing offer on his medicine show circuit, promising to pay \$50 to anyone who could produce a stringed instrument on which he could not play a tune. In boomtown Borger, Texas, an oil field worker handed Frank a Bavarian harp, on which the med-showman promptly plucked a melody (Barnes, 91). Oliver also wrote that his father "could put on an extremely good exhibition with the banjo. He would throw it up in the air, holding it only by the neck. He would put it between his legs, lay it flat on the floor, put it behind his head and all the while he continued playing and never missed a note." (Barnes, 122)
3. Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21-22. George-Warren unearthed the article "Hereford Man's Medicine Show Paid Gene Autry First

Dollars," *Amarillo Daily News*, Dec. 12, 1951. "Doctor Luke Fields told reporter Bessie Patterson, "When I tell people that I paid Gene Autry his first dollar in show business, they look at each other and wink and grin—they really don't believe me."

4. Ibid.
5. Mary Curry of Joshua, Texas, telephone interview with author, 2002.
6. As an entertainment medium somewhat on the fringes of American culture, medicine shows were not documented as extensively as more "respectable" theatrical forms. References to late nineteenth-century med-shows indicate that brass bands and minstrel singers were not uncommon, along with the occasional "cowboy band." In 1933, for instance, when an "old settler" returned to San Antonio and reminisced about the entertainment offered by Dr. J.I. Lighthall (aka the Diamond King) on Military Plaza, circa 1886, he noted that the band played "Johnny Get Your Gun," a popular tune published in New York that year and composed by F. Belasco (aka M.H. Rosenfeld). Lighthall dramatically pulled teeth, free of charge, during the musical performance, as a pounding bass drum drowned out the patients' cries (*San Antonio Express-News*, November 5, 1933); More conservative traveling troupes advertised the liniment *Hamlin's Wizard Oil*. Dressed in pinstripe suits, bowler hats, and spats, the Wizard Oil chorus performed sentimental or comic songs, such as "The Old Red Cradle," "Listen to My Tale of Woe," "The Agricultural Irish Girl," and "Grandfather's Old Brown Pants." See Brooks McNamara, *Step Right Up* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 67. The "Wizard Oil King" encountered by N. Howard (Jack) Thorp in this article appears to have been a maverick Wizard operator, probably not associated with *Hamlin's Wizard Oil*. Unlike the Cuban Medicine Company, which sent small troupes out in wagons from its home in Lampasas, Texas, most medicine shows seen in the Lone Star State prior to the automotive age were imported from the north. Their visits increased, of course, as railroads reached various parts of the state. The Hamlin Company sent its musical advertising units through much of the country from its headquarters in Chicago, and the Diamond King was based out of Peoria until he died in San Antonio, just days after his 30th birthday in 1886. The "king's" reign was cut short by smallpox, probably contracted from an audience member at his performance on Military Plaza. A general idea of the content of many of the touring med-shows seen in Texas in the late nineteenth-century can be gleaned from the contents of a representative medicine show songster, published in 1886 by Professor Lorman, "The Great Disease Detective" of Philadelphia. "The Lorman's Indian Oil Star Specialty SONGSTER" announced on the booklet's title page that it contained "an entirely new and original collection of Songs now being sung nightly by the members of the above named excellent company, together

with all the popular Songs of the day." Along with ads for Lorman's full range of medicines, the songster included a cast list introducing an "ever welcome Vocalist and Organist," a "celebrated Comedian and End Man," the "Funniest End-Man in the business in his Funny Sayings, Banjo Solos, and popular Songs of the Day," and the medicine-wagon driver, "admired for his dexterity in handling the Ribbons on the Golden Chariot." Song lyrics in the booklet include such tunes as "You Can't Do It, You Know" (music by George Schleiffarth, lyrics by Nat C. Goodwin), "The Letter That Never Came," (sung by Billy Cronin in the play *One of the Bravest*), "Paddy Maguire" (by Billy Hart), and original epics about Lorman's Indian Oil and Lorman's Little Liver Pills. The professor himself appears on the booklet's cover, sporting romantic Indian Scout locks and a chapeau suitable for cavorting about the Western frontier. On the back cover, the professor stands in the "golden chariot" with his performers. More homegrown troupes began touring Texas and surrounding states (often with homemade medicine for sale) in the early twentieth-century, often with string bands that played more regionally-influenced music.

7. N. Howard (Jack) Thorp with Neil M. Clark, *Partner of the Wind: Story of the Southwestern Cowboy* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1945), 36-38.
8. Peter Feldmann, *Eck Robertson: Master Fiddler* (Santa Barbara: Sonyatone Records, 1976); Dan Leach, *Johnson County, Texas: A Pictorial History, Volume 1* (Virginia Beach: Donning Co., 1998), 136; See also Jill S. Seeber, "Eck Robertson" and Kevin S. Fontenot, "Henry Clay Gilliland," in Barkley, ed., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 268-269, as well as Charles K. Wolfe, *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 1997).
9. W. C. Nunn, *Somervell, Story of a Texas County* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1975), 81.
10. Leach, 135; Author's phone interview with Patricia Smith Boatright, granddaughter of King K proprietor, George Cuthbert "Doc" Smith of Lancaster, Texas, 2002.
11. Dallas Morning News, February 4, 1888.
12. Duncan McLean, *Lone Star Swing: On the Trail of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 103. Interviewed at his home in Palo Pinto, Kendrick explained that "we were the band, me and my two brothers. Our old man—Doc he called himself, though he weren't a doctor no more than you or me—he sung and played guitar a little, and pitched the medicine to them. He'd been doing that since he was a kid." Kendrick further explained that the whole band blacked their faces at times. "That was what was expected in those days. We'd all get blacked up and play that jazz and sell those wonder cures!"
13. Joe Carr and Alan Munde, *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights: The Story of Country Music in West Texas* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1995), 31.
14. For more on Bruner's med-show days, see Cary Ginell

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- and Roy Lee Brown, Milton Brown and the Founding of Western Swing (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 179-180. Ibid, 30
15. Marshall Wyatt, *Good For What Ails You*, CD booklet (Raleigh: Old Hat Records, 2005), 48-49: See also Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 137.
  16. "Medicine Show Singer Dies of Crash Injuries," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 26, 1945. The Gassaway name appears in several Texas medicine show references. Patricia Smith Boatright recalled that her grandfather, Doc Smith, employed Hunter Gassaway as a clown and medicine seller with his King K show in Cleburne. (Leach, 133.) Oliver Barnes writes of one "Hunter Hathaway" with a serious drinking problem, in a likely reference to Hunter Gassaway. (Barnes, 132) Oliver also states that his father would drive right up to the E. G. Gassaway home in suburban Fort Worth to purchase the tonic, corn remover, dentifrice, ointment, and liniment that he sold on the road. He also maintained that the Barnes family used these same medicines for their personal health. It is not clear, however, whether the family utilized the electric belts, manufactured in Dallas, that they sold with the show (Barnes, 4). A light-hearted report on a bull session among veteran medicine show proprietors in a Chicago hotel lobby (W.A.S. Douglas, "Pitch Doctors," *The American Mercury*, February, 1927, 224) describes the gathering's Dr. Fred Gassaway of the Gassaway Medicine Company, who was "enjoying a weekend holiday from his pitch in East Bernard, Texas," as "the most prosperous man in all this strange fraternity."
  17. Rodger Harris interview with Oliver Rooker Barnes, Canton, Oklahoma, October 19, 1993. Oral History Program, Archives & Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society.
  18. John Berry, "The Mission Hotel at Putnam," 1963 *West Texas Historical Yearbook*; Gene Fowler, ed., *Mystic Healers and Medicine Shows* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1997), 135. Milling also practiced in Cisco, Stephenville, Gunsight, Rising Star, and perhaps Abilene. In 1912, he was found guilty of practicing medicine without a license in Stephens County, fined \$50, and sentenced to twenty minutes in jail.
  19. Gene Fowler, *Crazy Water – the Story of Mineral Wells and Other Texas Health Resorts* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1991), 42, 46, 52. Years after the publication of this book, I received a call from a niece of big band leader Jack Amlung, a Crazy Water programming mainstay. The family had never heard their relative's music, and as it turned out, a vintage radio/recording enthusiast friend in Houston, Gene Tognacci, had purchased dozens of Crazy Water Crystals program transcription discs from a Mineral Wells antique store. Some of the discs contained Amlung's music, and we were able to provide the niece with a recording of her uncle's band.
  20. Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio – Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 139, 140.
  21. Ibid., 141. An original performer's program schedule was found in a scrapbook purchased at an eclectic bookshop once located in a rather dismal strip center on the highway from Houston to Galveston. The 1930s scrapbook had been maintained by Dr. Harry Logsdon of Ranger. It contained letters, clippings, and other ephemera about Ranger's American Legion Tickville Band, a community string band that appears to have specialized in comedy, as well.
  22. Gene Fowler, "Crazy Water Crystals" and Charles Wolfe, "Lew Childre," *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 92-93, 118. This volume was compiled by the staff of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.
  23. Fowler and Crawford, *Border Radio*, 111-117. When I visited the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville in 1988, Bob Pinson played for me a 1930s transcription disc that had just been found in a Pickard Family smokehouse and donated to the museum. The Pickards tore a hillbilly-hot rave-up on the disc, leading into a Doctor Brinkley lecture on sex and health.
  24. Ibid., 219
  25. Ibid., 246, 267, 270. A collection of transcription discs at the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin contain border radio programming recorded at UT Radio House from actual broadcasts on Mexican border stations of the post-war era. Musically, the discs are primarily country and gospel, sponsored in at least one case by lengthy commercials for a Plainview clinic dedicated to the battle against "trenchmouth," a bacterial infection that causes inflammation of the mucous membrane lining the inside of the mouth.
  26. Ken Sikes, great-grandson of Texas Bob Heckle, email to author, 2002.
  27. Song notes, Hank Thompson, *Seven Decades*, HighTone Records, 2000. Oliver Barnes wrote about his father selling a tonic, *Tate Lax*, that was made in Waco (Barnes, 4), and Doc Toler spoke of tales gathered in the 1990s from seasoned musicians about a Doc Tate of Waco who combed the Central Texas countryside buying moonshine to pep up his medicines.
  28. For more on Old Hat Records, see [www.OldHatRecords.com](http://www.OldHatRecords.com); For more about Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas, see Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 72.
  29. Email from Doc Blakely of Wharton, Texas, to author, 2008. Also, in 2004, the Cowtown Opry presented "An Exposition of Dr. O. Lee Pettiflower's Balsongic Elixir" to celebrate Texas Independence Day in Fort Worth.
  30. Email from Gene Young of Huntsville, Texas, to author 2007.
  31. Email from Steve Hartz of Nacogdoches, Texas, to author, 2002; videotape of Attoyac Valley Medicine Show.
  32. Doc Toler, interview with author, Martindale, Texas, 2003.