The Miracle Medicine

Toxic or not, it sure seemed to do the trick!

By Neal Murphy

I grew up in East Texas during the 1940s. One of the medicines used on my cuts and scrapes, and even sore throats, was coal oil. Some people called it kerosene, but it actually was not. Kerosene was subsequently made from coal oil. A special type of coal known as cannel coal was required to produce this medicine of the early days.

Coal oil was once used as an internal and topical home remedy as a general cure-all for a myriad of ailments, including coughs, flu, cuts, abrasions and other wounds. Internal applications were administered by adding this decidedly toxic petroleum product to sugar cubes, molasses, honey or some other substance to mask the taste.

I recall one Wednesday evening when my mother and father had gone to prayer meeting and left me in the care of my grandmother, Mary Murphy. Earlier in the day, I had been working on my red wagon. Apparently I had oiled the wheels, as I had used the oil can and left it on the garage steps. This oil can had a 3-inch vertical spout and was quite narrow at the tip, typical of the old oil cans of yesteryear.

For some reason, I felt the need to run back home—about a 75-yard trek—to retrieve something. On the way out of the house, I stepped on the oil can with my bare left foot. I still remember the pain I felt as I had to pull the oil can spout out of my foot.

I hopped on one foot to Grandmother's house for first aid. She wrapped my foot in a clean cloth, then soaked the bandage in coal oil. The remedy must have worked, as I healed without any infection. But I can still feel the scar on the bottom of my foot some 63 years later.

My sore throats were often treated with coal oil or Vicks salve. When I announced that I had a sore throat or a cough, my mother would soak a rag in coal oil and wrap it around my neck at bedtime. The symptoms were usually gone by morning. She would sometimes get a wool rag and smear Vicks salve on my throat and chest, and wrap me up tightly.

Well, my hat is off to James Young, who first produced coal oil in 1850 in Scotland. This industry thrived in Scotland, creating much wealth for Mr. Young. It also helped heal me on numerous occasions when I was growing up.

You don't see coal oil used for much of anything these days. Perhaps the smell was just a little much for people to bear, much like the asafetida bags that some used to wear to ward off evil spirits.

Coal oil was truly a miracle medicine in its day. If you are over 60, it was probably used on you too. ❖

The author's grandmother treated his wound with coal oil after he stepped on an oil can similar to this one.

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