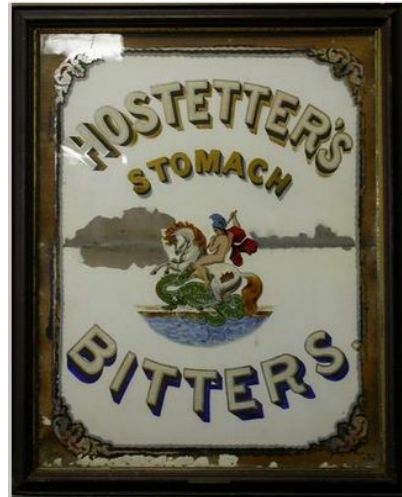


Health Tonic

Spirit rations in the United States have had a brief and contentious history. The first official spirit ration was ordered by Congress on March 27, 1794. They ordered that a half pint of 'distilled spirits' or a quart of beer was to be issued daily to every soldier, although the beer was taken out of the equation by 1797. Thanks to the lobbying efforts of the teetotaling movement, in 1831 a soldier was able to receive a cash payment of 6 cents a day in lieu of his ration. In 1832, Army rations substituted coffee and sugar for spirits, although the Navy managed to hang onto their alcohol by degrees until 1914.

Luckily for Union soldiers during the Civil War, the cessation of spirit rations coincided with the rise of patent medicines. Patent medicines take their name from the 'letters of patent' issued by the British Crown granting an official status or title to a merchant serving the Royal House. In the United States, patent medicines were rarely actually patented (although they were often trademarked). Patent medicines made sometimes outrageous claims about their efficiency, but in a time where bleeding and purgatives were the most common treatments for internal diseases, people became attached to the easier hope of medicine in a bottle. It was especially helpful that patent medicines were likely to contain significant doses of laudanum or alcohol.

Such was the case with Civil War soldiers and bitters. Faced with a plausible death from diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid, pneumonia, or tuberculosis, a Union soldier did his best to keep himself healthy. Soldiers who took tonics and pills and happened to survive often gave testimonials to the manufacturers, which were then printed in advertisements.



Trade sign circa 1880



19th c. bottle of Hostetter's Bitters, recovered from shipwreck

A brand called Hostetter's Bitters was particularly popular, and it advertised that its bottles of tonic were 'a positive protective against the fatal maladies of the Southern swamps, and the poisonous tendency of the impure rivers and bayous.' The mixture was created by Dr. Jacob Hostetter of Pennsylvania, then patented and marketed by his eldest son, David. The formula of Hostetter's Bitters was secret, but the most potent ingredient was its 47% alcohol by volume. It was so popular in the Union army, whose members knew it as 'The Soldier's Safeguard,' that the War Department authorized its distribution to the troops. Whole train-car loads were delivered to military bases throughout the country.

In 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act made Hostetter's cut its alcohol content to 25%, and during Prohibition the company increased the herbal components of the concoction, making it far less palatable. The closest you can get to a bottle of the original bitters today is to make an Old Fashioned, adding a dash of modern bitters to a glass of pure whiskey.