

# The Traveling Medicine Show of the 1890s

by Deborah Quail, with Canadian Champion research by Jim Dills

Just outside of the Rockwood Conservation Area are two natural wonders: the Devil's Well, a large, circular cut deep down in a limestone cliff that some believe was once a cave, and the Devil's Kitchen, a high overhang of stone that people have enjoyed visiting for over a century. As explorers of all ages do, they have carved their initials or names into the limestone walls, thereby preserving a piece of themselves for posterity.

One such gentleman was Tom Redleaf. He passed through Rockwood in 1899 and carved his name, date, and business into the exterior cave wall of the Devil's Well - a good arm span's length of work that must have taken hours to create.

The exact wording reads: "Tom Redleaf Kickapoo Ind Med Co 1899," an abbreviated version of The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company. The company undoubtedly toured Eramosa in the late 1800s.

Medicine shows had their origins in a gypsy style of life, where entertainers would draw a crowd to listen to the great merits of miraculous remedies - and then undoubtedly sell them some.

The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company is possibly the most well known of the firms. Kickapoo was headquartered in New Haven, Connecticut - in actuality far from any massive 19th century native population. They pub-

lished numerous booklets and advertisements to promote their products independently of the medicine show, some of which were rooted in American Indian life or lore.

At some point they grasped the concept of adding traveling medicine shows, employing Native Americans to "demonstrate Indian life," and of course, peddle their potions. In the mid 1890s, the company began carrying on a portion of business from offices in New York City, from which the traveler who carved his place in Rockwood's history may have come. At one time there were a reported 75 to 100 of the shows spreading through nearby countryside.

Although no mention of the company was found in a microfilm search of the available issues of *The Guelph Mercury* (the closest newspaper to Rockwood), *The Canadian Champion* of Milton had several entries in 1894 and in all likelihood the traveling medicine show may have stopped at various locales in other years, including 1899.

A small entry on June 14, 1894, states: "The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Co. will open a two-week's series of their celebrated free entertainment in Milton on Monday next at the Agricultural Grounds."

Medicine peddlers used numerous tricks and stunts, sometimes sending heralds in advance to advertise their arrival. The circus-

style atmosphere was very attractive to local pioneers, with exuberant music and a procession of wagons. After an audience had been collected to watch a skit or two, they were treated to a lecture on the virtues of all-natural cures.

A few days later, on June 21, 1894, *The Canadian Champion* relates: "The Wild West. At our very doors. The Kickapoo camp now includes Capt. Elmer E. Stubbs, the champion wing shot and his little son, Walter, the champion juvenile shot of the world; Eagle Eye, a Western scout, with fifteen Indians, squaws and papooses; Prof. F.L. Higgins, magician and ventriloquist; J.F. Dolan, black faced fun maker and Prof. A. Bailey, the able lecturer and tooth extractor. Saturday afternoon - a grand show - fire balloon races, wild west riding, cowboy sports, Capt. Stubbs and son, the rifle experts of the world, Indian acts, scalp dance, torturing a prisoner, the baby elephant. Two hours fun and show for 10 cents."

Items such as Kickapoo Salve, with buffalo tallow to heal fever sores, cancers, piles, and indolent ulcers, or Indian Oil, for the immediate relief of all kinds of internal and external pain, may have been pushed onto unwary and gullible local customers.

Undoubtedly the use of the oil must have caused relief from some pain, since it was reported to contain an amount of opium and 60



per cent alcohol. This item apparently had the most success of all the Kickapoo products sold in North America and was probably one of those aids offered with a wink and a sly remark about its "medicinal purposes."

The manufacturers never had to disclose the alcohol content of their cures, obviously winning testimonials from purchasers dragged on stage to report they immediately "felt better" after a certain amount.

Even children became involved through crafty advertising. Paper doll sets could be ordered by sending a wrapper from Kickapoo Indian Oil, Worm Killer, Indian Pills, or Salve and several 2¢ stamps. The inside of the folded paper doll was printed with information about the products.

However, by the end of their stay, either the group wore out their welcome or another - perhaps more jaded - Champion writer reported their departure.

July 5, 1894: "The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Co. left for Toronto on Monday morning after a two week stay here. Their entertainment at the Agricultural Grounds drew large crowds and the gate money must have paid expense independently of what was received for medicine sold. The remarkably

fine shooting done by Capt. Stubbs and his little son and the dances and other performances of the wild west Indians were the features of the show and the ventriloquism and slight of hand tricks were good, but the bald-headed and sometimes coarse jokes of the burnt cork performer seemed to have as many admirers as anything else. There is no accounting for taste."

One wonders what Tom Redleaf, who could have been a hired player in the show, thought of the rugged limestone cliffs, potholes and caves of Eramosa. Perhaps at some time during his stay in Milton he traveled up to the area to see the natural wonders outside a little village named Rockwood. He was obviously so enthralled that a carefully carved name, date, and place of work still reminds us about his unusual career 103 years later.

As hopeful purchasers found when they paid their hard-earned pennies for a "free" show and a little promised relief, in the great age of quackery those promises often came up empty. But perhaps throughout it all, Tom Redleaf found what he was looking for - a little posterity.

## May 4

KIDS - Drop by Lewiscraft from 11 am - 1 pm to "Make 'N Take" A CRAFT for Mom!  
(Please bring a dollar to cover cost of materials)

### Meet JIM DILLS

local author/historian  
Book Signing at Coles,  
12 noon

## May 11

SPRING FLOWER SHOW  
Milton Horticultural Society

### ART SHOW & SALE

Fine Arts Society of Milton



## Mum's the Word

## May 6 - 12

### PAMPER MOM CONTEST

ENTER UP TO 5 BALLOTS - available in stores TO WIN ONE OF 2 prize packages Valued at \$250 each

Assorted "Body & Bath" Products, get a new spring "do" at either Heady's or Hair Dimensions, plus dinner for 4 at Wright's Corners Restaurant.

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