



The North Texas

Skeptic

Volume 18

January 2004

Number 1

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

William Radam and the Microbe Killer

An Account of Classic Medical Quackery from the Heart of Texas

By Daniel R. Barnett

Since its annexation into the United States in 1845, Texas has provided a home to its share of medical quacks who made their living off of the desperate and the scientifically illiterate. Of the many Texan nostrum peddlers throughout history, however, William Radam probably perpetrated the biggest medicinal hoax of all with his celebrated Microbe Killer. This elixir was even more successful because it made its debut just as the link between microbes and disease was first being documented – but, as science would eventually demonstrate, the Microbe Killer was absolutely worthless.

William Radam was a native of Prussia, and once served in the Prussian army; however, his first love was gardening. Radam eventually moved to Austin, Texas, and established a gardening store and nursery, tending to his 30 acres of land for nearly two decades. Then he was taken ill with malaria, and sought out doctors who prescribed various drugs for him; in his 1890 book *Mi-*

crobes and the Microbe Killer, Radam stated: “I swallowed the contents of bottle after bottle, until their number became too great for calculation. I took quinine until it failed to have any effect.” Rheumatism and sciatica made Radam’s life even more difficult, and then two of his own children died. At that point, the broken-hearted and ailing Radam, no longer strong enough to attend to his affairs, began his own quest to cure himself.

Perusing through medical journals, Radam found no remedies within their pages, but he did discover microbes. For the first time in history, physicians and scientists such as Pasteur and Koch were able to prove a definitive link between certain microbes and disease, and Radam was convinced that all of his illnesses, including his rheumatism and sciatica, were caused by multitudes of microbes that had invaded his body. Harkening back to his gardening background, Radam got the idea that killing microbes in the human body was similar to killing bugs that attacked plants. “Disease is fermentation,” Radam later wrote, “and fermentation without microbes is impossible. Therefore disease must be accompanied by microbes.” Using his gardening books and his microscope to try and find a cure for human ailments, Radam finally produced

a liquid that he considered a universal and non-poisonous antiseptic, and Radam dubbed this new discovery the Microbe Killer.

“The microbe killer,” Radam later wrote, “cannot be compared with ordinary drugs. It does not contain any of them. It is pure water, permeated with gases which are essential to the nourishment of the system, and in which micro-organisms cannot live and propagate, or fermentation exist.” The new concoction could be imbibed in almost the same way that water could, enabling the patient to continue using the Microbe Killer until “the tissues shall be thoroughly soaked with it, and the

EVENTS CALENDAR

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Our newsletter, *The North Texas Skeptic*, is
 published monthly by The North Texas Skeptics, P.O.
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blood becomes perfectly purified.” Radam began drinking the liquid for six months, after which he claimed a full cure of all of his ailments after the last noxious microbe in his body bit the dust.

Radam was convinced that his discovery could cure anyone, but also wary that he could face manslaughter charges if he gave the Microbe Killer to someone who eventually died from the doctor-prescribed medications he took along with Radam’s elixir. Thus, he discreetly gave away a couple of jugs filled with Microbe Killer to a few ailing patrons, who claimed a full recovery from their ailments soon afterwards. People began traveling to Austin, begging the gardener for the Microbe Killer; soon Radam was so busy making Microbe Killer that his garden was overrun with weeds, and Radam decided to make his new discovery his full-time occupation.

Radam patented the Microbe Killer on September 28, 1886, but stressed that the liquid’s ability to “kill all fungus, germs, parasites, and other matter producing fermentation or decay” was meant for preserving food, not for treating disease. After reportedly showing off the Microbe Killer in Dallas at the State Fair of Texas, Radam began selling his new elixir by the jug. The first Microbe Killer jugs appear to have been salt-glaze jugs manufactured by Meyer Pottery in Atascosa, just south of San Antonio. Radam’s first printed advertisement for the Microbe Killer may have been in the August 30, 1887, issue of the *Austin Statesman*; he secured the trademark for Microbe Killer on December 13 that same year.

And what a trademark! It featured a healthy young man, clothed in a business suit, swinging a club at a fearful skeleton whose scythe already lay at its feet, smashed to pieces. If Radam was ambivalent at that time about claims that the Microbe Killer could cure disease, the trademark seemed to drive the message home: the Microbe Killer could conquer death.

How would the medical profession respond to the German gardener’s panacea? Radam warned that physicians “have known how to blindfold the people and keep them in ignorance of the first principles of Nature’s laws and operations, just as the Salvation Army misleads the ignorant and rules its devotees with the terrors of an alleged Satan.” The surgeon’s tools “are the means of destroying more lives in our hospitals and colleges than are the weapons of all our desperadoes and lawbreakers.” Champions of natural science like Pasteur unlocked the secrets of microbes, but they were so intent on theories instead of facts that their shortsighted observations allowed a humble gardener to step forth with a sure cure for all of mankind’s afflictions. Even nostrums that claimed to purify blood were just as dangerous as doctors; Radam observed that “The public likes to be humbugged.” Better to simply try the Microbe Killer and start destroying the microbes that plagued oneself rather than waste one’s time with anything else.

Enough Americans were so willing to try the Microbe Killer that in 1888, Radam used some of his new fortune to build the Koppel Building on the site where his old nursery once stood. By 1890, Radam had taken leave of Austin for New York City, setting up his laboratory and main office at No. 7 Laight Street while settling into a mansion on Fifth



Trademark for the Microbe Killer. Note the broken scythe lying at the skeleton's feet

— *Microbes and the Microbe Killer*

glass of the Microbe Killer to anybody who walked in. Potential customers could also see pictures of the dreaded microbes in Radam's new book, the distinctive Microbe Killer logo stamped in gold on the front cover of each copy.

And then the first serious challenge to the Microbe Killer presented itself. R.G. Eccles, a physician and pharmacist from Long Island College Hospital, published a report detailing his own analysis of the Microbe Killer. Eccles reported that the Microbe Killer was merely water mixed with miniscule amounts of hydrochloric acid and sulfuric acid. Radam immediately went on the warpath while defending his Microbe Killer at the same time. The 1886 patent revealed that Radam manufactured Microbe Killer by mixing powdered sulfur, sodium nitrate, manganese oxide, sandalwood, and potassium chloride and burning the mixture in an oven; the vapors mixed with vapor from water located in a closed tank in which the oven sat. After the treated water was allowed to condense and then filtered to remove any sediment, a tiny amount of wine was added to give the Microbe Killer a light pink tint. Radam swore, "I have never bought nor used one dollar's worth of sulphuric or muriatic acid to make my Microbe Killer." He conferred with his attorneys to launch a libel suit against Eccles.

Eccles was not deterred. He called Radam a "misguided crank" who was intent on "out-quacking the worst quacks of this or any other age" while realizing profits of 6,000% from his worthless cure-all. (One analysis of the Microbe Killer by

Avenue with a great view of Central Park. The one-time gardener now operated seventeen factories across America that produced bottles and jugs of the Microbe Killer in three different strengths, many of them now boldly bearing the phrase "CURES ALL DISEASES" underneath the trademark.

Radam's shop on Broadway offered a free

the Department of Agriculture placed the water content of Microbe Killer at 99.381%.) Furthermore, Eccles started laying the groundwork for his own suit against Radam because the latter had called Eccles a charlatan. Eccles' suit was the first to make it to trial, and he sought \$20,000 in damages from Radam in a Brooklyn court.

Radam's newly-acquired wealth allowed him to retain the agnostic philosopher Robert Ingersoll as his attorney for the Brooklyn trial and the man who would eventually manage the American interests of I.G. Farben as his chemical expert. Despite these safeguards, the trial went badly for Radam. Once on the witness stand, the gardener couldn't place calla lilies, poppies, or even potatoes in their proper botanical orders. (Radam insisted this was because he forgot these superfluous facts ever since discovery of the Microbe Killer.) Even the surprise admission of Radam's expert witness that Radam did indeed use hydrochloric and sulfuric acids to create his concoction – for which mankind should be grateful to Radam for discovering the process – could not prevent the Brooklyn jury from awarding Eccles \$6,000.

Radam appealed the verdict, fired Ingersoll, and pursued his own case against Eccles in a Manhattan courtroom. The gar-

dener was kept off the witness stand by his new attorneys, who argued the case on a legal technicality by stating that Eccles failed to detail each point of his arguments against the Microbe Killer. The judge charged the jury to rule in favor of Radam, who walked out of the courtroom with a \$500 award. Despite the fact that Radam was \$5,500 short overall at that point (the Brooklyn award was eventually reversed), he called the Manhattan verdict "a complete vindication

of the unjust charges and libelous attack" on his Microbe Killer and proclaimed the victory in newspapers and pamphlets. He



William Radam, gardener turned quack medicine peddler extraordinaire.

— *Microbes and the Microbe Killer*

also warned Eccles during the trial that if Eccles made any further attacks on the Microbe Killer, he would be “challenged to mortal combat” by Radam.

Once again, Eccles continued his attacks undaunted, but the promised duel never materialized. Radam realized that Eccles’ reports were printed in drug trade journals, which were read by almost nobody outside the profession – but Radam’s advertisements ran in newspapers across America, which everybody read. His fortunes were therefore secure. In fact, it seemed that the only thing Radam could not do with his money was take it with him when he finally passed away in 1902. His body was returned to Texas and buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Austin.

The Microbe Killer, on the other hand, continued to be produced and sold not only throughout America, but also around the world. A factory in London churned out Microbe Killer jugs for British customers, while Melbourne Glassworks manufactured Microbe Killer bottles from 1900 until around 1912 for sale to Australians. Even after American journalist Samuel Hopkins Adams exposed the Microbe Killer in his landmark exposé, *The Great American Fraud* and the Pure Food and Drugs Act (America’s first major anti-quackery legislation) was signed into law in 1906, the Microbe Killer apparently still realized a handsome profit for Radam’s successors.

Ten years after Radam’s death, however, a Kentucky congressman named Swagar Sherley introduced a bill on Capitol Hill designed to compensate for some of the deficiencies in the Pure Food and Drugs Act. Known as the Sherley Amendment, it declared that a drug was misbranded, and therefore illegal:

...if its package or label shall bear or contain any statement, design, or device regarding the curative or therapeutic effect of such article or any of the ingredients or substances contained therein, which is false and fraudulent.

The Sherley Amendment was passed by Congress with far less controversy and fanfare than the Pure Food and Drugs Act; President William Howard Taft signed it into law in 1912. The Bureau of Chemistry, the precursor of the FDA, began analyzing numerous patent medicines to see if their manufacturers could be hauled into court for violating the Sherley Amendment. Out of hundreds of nostrums investigated by the government, the Microbe Killer, which still touted its efficacy in treating disease, was the first to be targeted.

In the latter half of 1913, Federal agents raided a freight car and seized a large amount of Microbe Killer cartons en route from New York to Minneapolis. The bottles and jugs seized had a retail value of \$5,166; government investigators estimated that the cost of producing the shipment at only \$25.82. Carl L. Alsberg, chief of the Bureau of Chemistry, prosecuted the case against the Microbe Killer in court, indicating that the only effect of the minute amount of sulfuric acid present in the

concoction would be to irritate the stomach and upper intestine of many people. The Microbe Killer attorney then asked Alsberg if his only complaint was against the inflammation caused by the medicine as it passed through the alimentary tract.

Alsberg: What we are complaining of is more than that. It is the fact that a man may be very sick and use this medicine until it is too late to use something else.

Q: Then it is the time he loses?

Alsberg: The time he loses may be sometimes the difference between life and death.

Despite numerous testimonials provided by the defense, the Minneapolis jury found that the Microbe Killer had violated the Sherley Amendment and recommended the destruction of the entire confiscated shipment; the district attorney stated, “I favor using an ax.” Thus, in December 1913, under the watchful eye of a US marshal and a food and drug inspector, all 539 boxes and 322 cartons of Microbe Killer seized by the government were hauled into a pit in St. Paul. The boxes and cartons were broken open and then set on fire, and the bottles and jugs of Microbe Killer were smashed. This event apparently marked the beginning of the end for Radam’s company and his cure-all.

Today, the Koppel Building, built with Radam’s money, still stands down the street from the capitol building in Austin, Texas. It has reportedly served over the past century as a hotel, a feed store, and even a brothel. Despite renovations in 1984, the Koppel Building remains faithful to its original architecture and now serves as the home of TateAustin, a public relations firm. As for the Microbe Killer itself, some jugs and bottles of the elixir still survive to this day and have become prized collectors’ items – especially if they feature Radam’s distinctive trademark stamped on the front. Aside from these, however, there is little else to remind the average Texan that a Prussian-born gardener once made a fortune in Austin over a century ago by peddling a potion that allegedly cured all diseases by ridding the body of microbes.

On the other hand, the discoveries made by Pasteur, Koch, and others regarding microbes served as the foundation for modern clinical understanding of microbes and disease, leading to an improved overall quality of life that Radam’s Microbe Killer could never deliver. □

For Further Reading:

- Radam, William. *Microbes and the Microbe Killer*. 1890; The Knickerbocker Press; New York, NY.
- Young, James Harvey. *The Medical Messiahs*. 1967; Princeton University Press; Princeton, NJ.
- Young, James Harvey. *The Toadstool Millionaires*. 1961; Princeton University Press; Princeton, NJ.

Alien Encounter: Roswell revisited

By Prasad Golla

NTS Member Prasad Golla recently visited Roswell, NM. This is his interesting story.

Roswell could have been any other town in west Texas. In fact El Paso is farther west than Roswell. What endears many nuts – and possibly not so many other non-nuts – to this town is its alleged involvement with Aliens.

That's right folks – Aliens with a capital A. Aliens from outer space. Not an alien like me in New Mexico – or for that matter here in Texas.

While people who are more sane, and ironically the US government, claim that it was a weather balloon that crashed in a farm here about 56 years ago, people who are more 'pedestrian' claim that it was a malfunctioning space vehicle from outer space. The surviving Aliens on the then battered spaceship immediately managed a pact with the US government – for reasons left to your own imagination – to keep their identities a secret.

We all probably know this story. Roswell is famous – or is it notorious? – for this tryst in its destiny with the extraterrestrial – with the little green men from outer space.

A 'yes/no' question in the guest book at the 'International UFO Museum and Research Center' was quite revealing. It asked if I had stopped over at Roswell to visit this 'Research Center.' My tick probably did not reveal my shouting in my head, "YES!" (Duh, I wouldn't stop in a million other towns in Texas or New Mexico... even if it were the happy hour.)

Each town needs a tourist attraction. Roswell preys on the conspiracy minded human nature. In the process it raises more questions than it sets out to answer. It's a freak show for many a traveler who patronizes the local businesses. I cannot be more patriotic when I suggest that there is nothing more American than that.

The visitors to the 'research center' were heard saying, "fascinating," "fantastic," "intriguing"... and a lot went unsaid. People displayed reverence as though it were a religion site. I wouldn't be exaggerating a bit if I said that the place where I stood was the Mecca of the UFO cult. Would any one bow or kneel down? A lot, too, went unseen.

Considering the long human search for extraterrestrial intelligence, could I expect to find some of it here where I stood? All the testimonials, the dates from the past half a century, all those replicas (and admittedly fantastic artistry) – all was there to see. What the museum lacked was a shred of real evidence despite the bold assertion on the brochure cover: **The Truth is here.**¹ No shred of clearly authenticated material or photo of an alien or a space ship. No tissues. No bones. Just suggestions – heavy suggestions. (A mock-up Roswell Radio Station in 1947?! A whole section on Crop-circles!)

Although it was supposed to cater largely to the conspiracy minded and believe-everything-under-the-sun type people, the museum has enough material to suggest that most of the 'evidence' (their figure: 90%) is 'made-up.' I would even go as far as saying that none of the material would stand the scrutiny of 'rudimentary' scientific analysis.²

Gov. Jimmy Carter said that he does not make fun of people who claim to have seen UFOs because he was a witness of a UFO himself. The candidate for President Carter promised that he would get to the bottom of this – and make the documents public – if he was elected President. Then, he was elected the President. Did he reveal these documents?

Rather than presume that the government has no hidden documents on UFOs or Aliens, the conspiracy theorists claim that the CIA chief George Bush hoodwinked President Carter.^{3,4}

The International UFO Museum and Research Center, a non-profit organization, was set up in 1991 by the Public Information Officer at Rosewell Army Field in



This is the museum as witnessed on Dec 29, 2003. If the museum looks like a movie theater it's because it's housed at present in a remodeled movie theater. It houses good artwork.

Photo by Prasad Golla

1947 (the alleged year of the crash), Lt. Walter G. Haut. Lt. Haut wrote the first ever document of the incident in 1947 which appeared in the Roswell Daily Record. The co-founder was W. Glenn Dennis, who was working at a funeral home in Roswell in 1947. He was approached by the military for youth sized caskets. The museum operates with the money it gets from donations, memberships and gift shops.⁵

New Mexico in many ways brought us into the age we are in. The first nuclear weapon was detonated here. It was the test and development site for what our age would be know for — missiles, aeronautics, and space. It was more than fitting for the Aliens traveling possibly hundreds of light-years to crash their space craft here. And it was more than ‘suggestive’ for us to think so.

Was it one of our missiles that hit the craft? There, I just provided another ‘theory.’ They came to study our best technology even though it would have been much inferior to theirs. There, I provided the second theory. You get the idea. The theories are limitless. How credulous are you? Where do you want to go today?

People’s interest leads to more people’s interest. A cult becomes a religion. (Comfort and logic in numbers hasn’t exactly died out yet.) Our interest in something that we like to stamp out has the opposite effect.

Say what you may, folks. New Mexico belongs to Texas — in more ways than one. For one, I would like to think that the Aliens genuinely thought that they were crashing their craft in Texas. (You don’t see the state lines from up there, you know.) We Texans have ‘property’ more west than much of New Mexico.

I would like to think an alien revisited Roswell. I am sure there was at least one other ‘foreigner’ who came searching for Aliens before. And didn’t find them.



References

- 1 From the brochure of the International UFO Museum and Research Center — located at 114 N.Main, Roswell, NM 88203. [Http://www.iufomrc.org](http://www.iufomrc.org)
- 2 Roswell: Inconvenient Facts and the Will to Believe, by Karl T. Pflock, ISBN 1-57392-894-1, Prometheus Books.
- 3 <http://www.ufoevidence.org/documents/doc858.htm>
- 4 <http://www.presidentialufo.com/carter.htm>
- 5 Brochure, International UFO Museum

What’s new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What’s New column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

Climate change: AGU statement reflects the growing consensus

It is now “scientifically inconceivable that human activity has not altered climate systems,” explained John Christy, Director of the Earth Systems Science Center at the University of Alabama, Huntsville. He spoke this week at an American Geophysical Union press briefing in Washington to announce a new position statement on Human Impact on Climate. An AGU statement three years ago was far more tentative (WN 29 Jan 99). Even the Bush administration now accepts the reality of anthropogenic warming (WN 7 Jun 02).

University of World Peace: training professional meditators

The Washington Post yesterday carried a photograph of a peaceful-looking audience, seated with their eyes closed. It looked like an 8:00 a.m. section of Physics 101. The caption said they were meditating to raise \$1 billion to build a University of World Peace, with scholarships to train 8,000 meditation experts. You can imagine that with 8,000 UWP graduates, they will be able to meditate even larger sums. Followers of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, they sought \$1B after 9/11 to train 40,000 meditators who would generate a “unified field” that would create world peace (WN 28 Sep 01). They must not have raised the full amount.

Nobel madness: campaign by scorned inventor only intensifies

There have been a lot of disappointed almost-Nobels, but nothing before like the costly public rampage of Raymond Damadian, who was left off the 2003 Medicine Nobel, given for MRI (WN 10 Oct 03). He began with full-page ads in major newspapers, which is not inexpensive. No good could come of this, and most scientists seemed at most sort of embarrassed for Damadian, but the full-page ads just kept coming. On Tuesday, the day before the award ceremony, he took one last shot: a double-page NYT ad in color.

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

Skeptic Ink

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Wrong, again

by John Blanton

OK, my predictions for 2003 were not so hot. In fact, I only fared a little better than the professional psychics.¹

For example, I predicted Osama bin Laden would be discovered alive and well, working as a baggage screener at an airport. That's only partly right. He has not yet been discovered.

Same with Saddam Hussein. I said he would quit his day job and go on *Hollywood Squares*. The retirement part panned out, but the *Hollywood Squares* will have to await the outcome of some prior commitments.

I also predicted James Randi would be caught performing a real feat of paranormal powers in 2003. It looks as though he won't be caught this year. Stand by for 2004.

Rats! I missed on my "intelligent design" prediction, too. I was sure ID would become accepted into mainstream science and would begin to address some of the great unsolved questions of the new century. Instead, the Texas State Board of Education not only rejected attempts to include ID in new textbooks, but they would not even agree to water down references to Dar-

winism. Furthermore, I had to report that the Discovery Institute got the boot, if only figuratively, when they came here to present their case for ID. H.L. Mencken supposedly said "There's no underestimating the intelligence of the American public." Well, if he can be wrong, so can I.

Wrong, again. I thought John Edward would find a charitable application for his ability to turn our stomachs. I checked the TV listings, and it appears he has decided to keep this wonderful gift for himself.

Great news! Remember that 73-year-old widow from Bakersfield, California, I predicted would receive \$2.35 million for assisting in the transfer of a large fortune from a war-torn African nation? Well, she's 74 now.

Not so good for me. Tom Cruise and a bunch of other Hollywood swells did not-repeat, did *not*-renounce the Church of Scientology as a money-grubbing cult. And, contrary to my predictions, at least two Scorpios had life-changing experiences in 2003, and George Bush did not win a Nobel Prize for literature or any other field in 2003. Also, my prediction of a major breakthrough for the pseudo medical field of homeopathy failed to materialize. Maybe they should increase the dilution.

Finally, despite anything skeptical mathematician John Paulos might have said about the chances of winning money in the lottery, these exercises in wishful

thinking kept chugging right along throughout the year. Say! Maybe Mencken was right after all.

References

- 1 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2003/2003january/january2003.htm#predictions>

Skeptic singer/comedy writer Laura Ainsworth's

musical satire of the anti-aging industry, *My Ship Has Sailed: How to be a Late Bloomer in a World Obsessed with Extreme Youth*, is returning to the boards soon, but at a new venue. It will be opening soon at the snazzy new supper club Django in Addison, just off the Tollway at Beltline. For show dates and to subscribe to the free e-mail newsletter Laura is now doing that includes her humorous recaps and commentary about the latest odd news on plastic surgery, cosmetics quakery, etc., visit her website at www.laurainsworth.com

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