
TAR HEEL

CURE

DISCOVERED BY ACCIDENT
MORE THAN A CENTURY
AGO, A LOCAL LINIMENT
STILL OFFERS RELIEF FOR
A HOST OF MALADIES.

BY MEGAN VERLEE



Whether you suffer from aches, pains, burns, black lung, snakebite, or fire ants, Linda and Nellie Sistrunk believe they have the cure for what ails you: Astyptodyne.

The Wilmington-based sisters-in-law are the latest producers of this strangely named liniment. Distilled from the sap of the longleaf pine tree, Astyptodyne has long been a staple in the medicine cabinets of generations of North Carolina families.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HARRY TAYLOR

Packaging has differed over Astyptodyne's 102-year history, but the original formula remains unchanged.



Astyptodyne derives its name from the three clinical words that describe its main healing properties: antiseptic, styptic, and anodyne. Translate that into English, and this liniment is FDA-approved to prevent infection, slow bleeding, and dull pain.

But waded into the dozens of testimonials grateful users have sent the company over the years, and it's clear those uses are just the start of its purported abilities.

Explosive beginnings

Anyone who's ever heard North Carolina's official toast, which starts with the cry, "Here's to the land of the longleaf pine," knows how important this tree is to the Old North State. For hundreds of years, coastal cities like Wilmington built their fortunes and entire shipping fleets from the pine. The wood went into hulls and masts, and the tree's sticky sap produced tar and pitch for waterproofing (in such great quantities that those products presumably earned the state its Tar Heel nickname).

The wooden ships that relied so heavily on the pine's products were long gone by the time the 20th century dawned, but companies in Wilmington still used the sap to manufacture industrial products like turpentine. And it was in one of those factories that Astyptodyne's unique powers were first discovered through a tragic accident.

Sitting in her cozy dining room, Linda tells the story as fresh as if it had just come over the back fence from a neighbor, instead of being passed down through the decades. In 1906, a major steam pipe burst at a Wilmington turpentine plant, filling the factory with scalding vapor. The three workers nearest the explosion ran for their lives, Linda says, "and, stumbling out of the building, one of them fell [and] knocked over a vat of what we call Astyptodyne today ..."

Linda (left) and Nellie Sistrunk happily accepted the challenge of taking over the family business.

"At that time, it was just a worthless by-product," Nellie interjects.

"A by-product of the pine tree," Linda continues. The two sound more like sisters than sisters-in-law. "So it kind of poured all over him. The other two men, they picked them up and put them in a wagon ... and then they went and picked up the other man, who wasn't screaming and hollering like the other men. He was pretty calm; he wasn't in any pain. ... When they got [to the hospital], they treated the other two men, who ended up having a lot of scars and a lot of pain. And the other man — no pain. He was in no pain and [had] very little scarring."

The doctor who cared for the three men was intrigued by this miraculous recovery. He dispatched a pharmacist

friend to the scene of the explosion to collect a sample before the company got around to cleaning up. The medical minds of Wilmington gathered to test the substance, and only a few months later the patent medicine called Astyptodyne was for sale behind the counter of one of the town's premier drugstores.

"From there, it spread to all these independent drugstores," Linda says, a position it still holds throughout the Southeast today.

Family business

Astyptodyne Chemical Company was already nearly 50 years old when the Sistrunk family took over. James Sistrunk, Linda and Nellie's father-in-



PHOTOGRAPHY BY HARRY TAYLOR

... WHEN THE DEADLY

SPANISH FLU EPIDEMIC

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law, had worked his way up through the company, and, when the founder passed away, he purchased the patent to the liniment's secret formula.

By then, the simple medicine had quite a history. The *Wilmington Star* described Astyptodyne Chemical as a "mammoth" business in 1911. And, when the deadly Spanish Flu epidemic swept through Wilmington in 1918, many survivors credited Astyptodyne with keeping them safe.

"They put it in a pot of boiling water; [the vapors] open up the lungs and the

bronchial tubes and all," Linda says. "And even if they had the flu, they were still put on it because it would break up the mucus that was collecting in the lungs."

Today at Cape Fear Hospital, a wall-length timeline of the region's pioneering medical advancements includes an Astyptodyne advertisement in its section on the flu.

When their father-in-law died a few years ago, Linda and Nellie discovered neither of their husbands had any interest in the business. So the women, both retired and ready for a new

challenge, decided it was time to try their hands.

"Nellie and I decided that we were going to have a female-owned company, and we were going to run this company, and we were going to see what we can do," Linda says. "I think our whole goal is to help the people. We're not in it to make money. We're here to help others."

"Of course, if the money comes along, that's not bad," Nellie says. So far, the women say every penny they've made has gone back into their little amber bottles.

Astyptodyne
Chemical Company
once marketed
nearly a dozen
products.

“ASTYPTODYNE”

(Trade Mark Registered)



SKEE-TER-GO

If Applied to Insect
Bites will Relieve
Irritation

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HARRY TAYLOR



Linda and Nellie Sistrunk still have the original tank druggists used to dispense their cure-all liniment.

Cures everything but heartache

The liniment itself is brewed by a chemical company in Durham, and larger orders are bottled in a Charlotte factory. But the sisters handle smaller requests themselves, filling each bottle and wrapping it in the company's distinctive blue-and-red label in a shed behind Linda's house.

Approaching their workspace through her oak-shaded backyard near the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, you notice the ocean tang in the air quickly gives way to a sharper scent, clean and clarifying. "You can smell it right here," Nellie says, pausing, "if you get a breath." It's the odor of green needles and rough bark — the trees this area was built on.

Inside the shed, one counter displays the original tin tank that first sat behind the counter in Bellamy's Drug Store on Front Street. During Astyptodyne's early days, druggists would pump the miracle cure directly into customers' bottles.

One 1924 newspaper advertisement for Astyptodyne credits it with the power to cure "all wounds except of the heart." Another lists eight different Astyptodyne products — everything from croup and pneumonia salve to hair oil to Skee-Ter-Go insect repellent owed their powers to the mysterious pine derivative.

Today the company has only one product, its two-ounce bottles of liniment. Everything else has fallen by the wayside, Linda says, simply because this one formula can do it all.

Letters collected by the Sistrunks tell the story. There's the photo lab worker who uses the liniment to heal chemical burns on her hands; the former farm boy who remembers his father applying it to harness sores on the mules; the Georgia mountain man who ordered six bottles to help recover from a rattlesnake bite; and the mother who taught her grateful daughter how to use it to clear up acne.

Fresh in the women's minds on this morning is the story of an Alabama coal miner who called recently and

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HARRY TAYLOR

told Linda, “Ma’am, my whole life’s Astyptodyne.” For three generations, the men in his family had used the product’s vapors to clear the coal dust from their lungs at night. Now he was buying a case to pass out to his buddies.

“It really is amazing the people that call,” Nellie says. “It’ll be older people that talk about how their mother put it on them growing up. Like this guy from the University of South Carolina said his mother always used it on him, and they

were trying to get something to go in these first aid kits [for the students] that would just be a cure-all, if you will, and he said that was the first thing that crossed his mind — Astyptodyne.”

These stories are the pair’s best payment. “It’s very satisfying,” Nellie says. “It makes you feel good that you’re putting something out there that people really appreciate. They all say, ‘Thank you for doing this. Please don’t ever stop!’”

Protected recipe

For all of its history, Astyptodyne seems tailor-made for today’s increasing emphasis on natural products. The label says it all — the only ingredient is pine oil. But how that oil goes from tree trunk to topical salve is a closely guarded secret. When pressed, the Sistrunks eye each other and smile but give away nothing.


“It’s definitely nature’s creation,” is all Linda will say. “It really is. As we always said for years: ‘Prepared by nature.’”

“Years ago,” Nellie says, “people got away from the natural stuff and went to the more sophisticated stuff. But now they’re realizing that natural is better — for the environment and for the body. People are going back to green, as they say, and you can’t get more natural than this.”

“Right out of the longleaf pine tree,” Linda says.

Astyptodyne, one of Wilmington’s last products to be made from the area’s first source of wealth, is so woven into the city’s fabric that the town’s historic walking tour uses a bottle as a visual aid. The horse-drawn carriage driver used to tell his passengers about it. And when the last drugstore downtown closed, the city’s Chamber of Commerce helped find another shop to carry the liniment.

These days, Astyptodyne’s Wilmington home is a little gift shop called Ladybugs. A rack of the bottles sits among old-fashioned candy, toys, and coastal knickknacks. Store clerk Vicki Williams says she’s surprised how many people stop by to pick it up, but notes, “a lot of people are into the home remedy kind of thing.”

That comment wouldn’t surprise the Sistrunks; after all, it’s their home the miracle cure comes from. 

Megan Verlee lives in Wilmington.

to know more

Astyptodyne can be ordered directly from the Sistrunks at (910) 392-8110 or astyptodyne@aol.com.