After the war, Americans in the North and South encountered quackery in the continued influence of patent medicines. Just as they had during the war itself, patent medicine firms marketed their wares specifically to Civil War veterans in the post-war years, and counted on testimonials from veterans to prop up their “snake oil” to the American public. The stakes were high: patent medicine sales grew to nearly $80 million by the turn of the century. Patent medicines were especially popular in the South, which did not have the same maturing base of pharmaceutical industry that the North enjoyed. However, one person, at least, believed that the long-lasting impact on the war was to show southern citizens that they could live without these quack medicines, having survived the blockade. Below, a former Confederate surgeon tries to explain this particular lesson of the war for all civilians and veterans.

What shall be said in regard to the native medicines, or medical plants of the South? There was a time when every natural substance, possessing any medicinal value, was supposed to indicate, by a well-marked external character, the disease for which it is a remedy. It was held that each plant had its “signature,” as it was termed, and that whereas turmeric is of a yellow color, it must be capable of curing jaundice; that the eyebright, having a black spot on its flower resembling the eye, must be the best application, in affections of that organ; that as the lungwort resembles, in its leaves, the texture of the lungs, it must be good in pulmonary affections, and, for the same reason, the liverwort was to be used in biliary disorders. These primitive ideas have been much modified, but even as late as the last generation there was an expressed belief, on the part of distinguished physicians, such as Rush, Drake, Hosack and others, that the plants of each section of country were all sufficient for the eradication of diseases peculiar to that country. The profession have been slow to abandon this belief, and many have entertained a lingering hope that it would yet prove true. The experience of the Confederate Medical Bureau must forever destroy such a hope, for after thoroughly examining “the resources of the Southern fields and forests,” there has been no lesson derived, worthy of mention. There is, however, one extremely interesting and astonishing fact, in connection with the subject of remedies, which should be mentioned here. It is that during the long, rigorous blockade existing throughout the war, the Southern people learned that they could actually live without quack medicines; and clergymen and judges, and lawyers and postmasters, discovered that they could exist, in comparative happiness at least, without giving their characteristic testimonials in support of this abominable trash.

Source: E. S. Gaillard, The Medical and Surgical Lessons of the Late War. The Introductory Address Delivered before the Medical Class of the Kentucky School of Medicine, Louisville, KY., Oct. 5, 1868. (Louisville: Louisville Journal Job Print, 1868), 12–13.