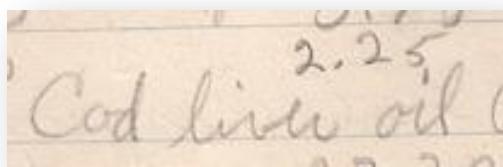


• Cod Liver Oil •

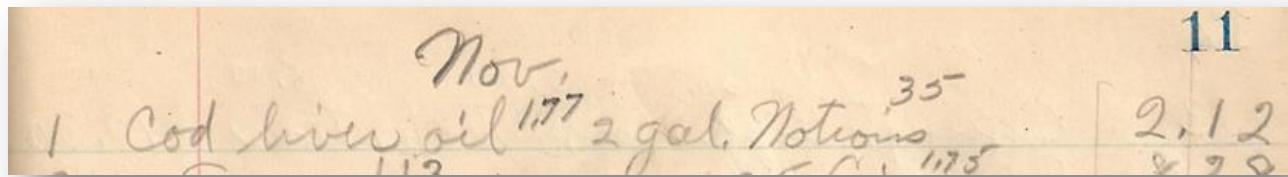
Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, it was routine for kids of my generation (or at least in my family) to be treated with a variety of what today, we might call dietary “supplements.” There were just some health benefits that weren’t supplied in our regular diets. It might have been in the form of a pill, a “health egg” (you can read about them in our first book) or liquids of varying smells or color or viscosity. We never asked why. We just “opened up and swallowed.”

One example of such a supplement was the “goiter pill.” They were dispensed weekly to students in my Catholic grade school, usually on Friday afternoons, right before the day’s dismissal. Wisconsin was part of the “goiter belt,” areas that were considered to suffer from an iodine deficiency. Some of us liked the taste of those light brown, malt or chocolatey-tasting tablets while others couldn’t tolerate them. Those of us who actually swallowed those pills took it on faith that we would never get goiters. It must have worked. No one in my class ever had a goiter, whatever that was.

When I noticed regular and frequent purchases of cod liver oil in Tonie’s ledgers, it took me back to my childhood. It was a regular part of my growing up years. Tonie regularly recorded buying varying quantities of cod liver oil.



November 22, 1928 – “Cod liver oil...\$2.25”



November 1, 1931 – “Cod liver oil \$1.77...2 gallons”

She didn't buy small amounts of the substance. She bought it by the gallon, or even two gallons. So where did all of that cod liver oil go? What did she do with it? And what was cod liver oil, anyway?

I wondered how this substance originated. Tonie never mentioned any other fish liver oil (no mackerel liver oil, no salmon liver oil). Why cod?

I've learned that fish oil in general was used for thousands of years, prized for its healing properties. It was the Vikings who fished for cod. Cod was found in abundance in the North Atlantic. Those Vikings didn't know exactly what it was about the cods' livers. They just knew that the oil harvested from cod had special qualities.

This supplement survived through the generations. And if it was good for Tonie's family, it was certainly good enough for my mother's family. She would periodically dispense that greasy, yellow-brown liquid with an eye dropper. Just five drops. Open up and swallow.



Cod liver oil was promoted for its health benefits if taken in regular doses. While it was primarily given to infants, it was also given to growing children and even adults, particularly pregnant women. (Apparently, adult men were not regular consumers.) I remember that those five drops

had a slightly salty taste. It coated my mouth and teeth with its oily, fatty consistency. It wasn't terribly offensive. I was never sure why I had to swallow it. I was just told that it was good for me.

Today, cod is a popular staple on restaurant menus and in seafood shops. It was from those fish that the livers were harvested and processed for its oil.

The "Man with a Fish on His Back" is an exhibit at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. The man is made of papier-mâché and stands over five feet tall. The fish he carries on his back is a Norwegian cod. It is almost as big as he is. The figure served as an oversized advertisement for a medicinal cod liver oil product called "Scott's Emulsion." Long ago, it probably stood prominently in a store window, when Tonie was buying the product by the gallon.



The popularity of cod liver oil has ebbed and flowed over the years with changing medical knowledge. But it has survived, even today. The suggested dosage was limited: just five drops. Certainly, less than a spoon full.

Advertising for “Seven Seas” brand cod liver oil promoted its benefits: sound, healthy lungs, straight limbs, strong teeth, protection from colds and disease. It was a kind of Depression-era “super food” that survived into the 1950s and 60s. How could any mother resist that sales pitch?



Nov. 1936 53

10 Cod liver oil 4.15

November 10, 1936 – “Cod liver oil...\$4.15”

Along with its many health benefits, the drawback of cod liver oil was its oily, fishy taste and smell, something I remember well. The trick for mothers (including mine) was how to get their children to take it and keep it down. Perhaps that wasn’t a problem for Tonie. By 1930, her children were old enough to appreciate its medicinal value. They surmised that something with that consistency, taste and smell had to be good for them.

This seemingly harmless yet wholesome liquid was popularized in a 1930s tune appropriately titled “Cod Liver Oil.” It was a song from the Canadian maritime province of Newfoundland, where cod was an important part of the economy. The lyrics, sung in various genres, go something like this:

*“Oh doctor, oh doctor, oh dear Dr. John,
your cod liver oil is so pure and so strong.
I’m afraid of my life, I’ll go down in the soil,
if my wife don’t stop drinking that cod liver oil.*

*Oh, I bought her a bottle, oh, just for to try.
The way that she drank it you'd think she was dry.
I got her another, it vanished the same.
I thought she had cod liver oil on the brain.*

*She liked it so good now that there was no doubt,
I know that my wife she got terrible stout.
As she got stout, of course she got strong.
Then I got jealous of Dr. dear John.*

*My house it resembles a big doctor's shop.
It's covered with bottles from bottom to top.
Then in the morning when the kettle do boil,
you would think it was singing of cod liver oil.*

You can Google the tune. It's not very catchy but the lyrics are fun. Tonie may have been inspired by its message because she found a health secret, dispensing cod liver oil in large quantities. Or maybe she found a special recipe in which she could add cod liver oil, taking advantage of its salty taste and oily consistency. Whatever the case, she kept buying it.

March 24, 1936 – “5 gal. Cod liver oil at .83 cents...\$4.07”

Whatever the case may have been, Tonie was buying this product in five-gallon quantities and dispensing it in five droplet doses. She must have been supplying all of her Fussville neighbor's children. If not, then surely there must have been another use for it.

According to Wikipedia, farmers often added cod liver oil to chicken feed to promote egg-laying. They used it when preparing dairy cows for breeding. They used it to stimulate weight gain for growing pigs. Another source reported that it was used for tanning hides, fuel for lamps, liquid soaps, poultices, salves, and ointments. It was also used in the rearing of calves and improving conditions of horses.

So, I have no evidence to prove otherwise, and Tonie never spelled this out in her journals. But she and Harry may have been laying in a supply of cod liver oil for other uses around the farm, including as a dietary supplement for their animals. And, of course, those healthy children provided strong, reliable farm laborers!

Just maybe, cod liver oil was the secret to their farm's success.

