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F. W. Fitch

NOTE: Back in the late twenties when Jule Gordon became F.W. Fitch's first promotion assistant, he wrote the following tribute for a history of the Fitch Family from 1400. The two-volume history, compiled by Roscoe Conkling Fitch, was published in 1930. In spite of its tendency to overstatement, this document is the best source for information on the early life of F.W. Fitch. Fitch provided most of the facts and information for Gordon. It is printed here in its original version as Gordon wrote it; the version in the family history has been edited down somewhat from this.

This story of the life of Fred W. Fitch is by no means a final estimate of his remarkable career, because at the time this is written (August, 1929) he is still under 60. If his achievements to date are any criterion, he will add even greater glory to the name of Fitch in the many years of life that seem to be ahead of him.

Fred W. Fitch's rise from a bound-out farm hand at the age of eight to the presidency of the largest organization in the world devoted to the manufacture of hair preparations, is one of the outstanding epics of modern business. The world is familiar with the type of financial success that has characterized the growth of American industry, but in the case of Fred W. Fitch, financial success has gone hand in hand with leadership in the elevation of a once great profession, and the creation of new and revolutionary manufacturing ideals.

To the casual observer, the F.W. Fitch Company, of Des Moines, Iowa, is an impressive monument to the genius and industry of its founder. But to Fred W. Fitch, the institution he founded perpetuates not his own name but the name of his father, Dr. Henry Lucius Carey Fitch, one of the first practicing physicians of the state of Iowa and one of the real pioneers of the middle west. Dr. Fitch, a native of Connecticut, was one of the more restless and adventurous members of the New England Fitches, who were among the earliest settlers in the original Thirteen Colonies. After finishing his medical education in the east, Dr. Fitch followed "the course of empire westward". Doctors were scarce west of the Mississippi River and land was plentiful. Opportunity beckoned irresistibly and the year 1847 found Dr. Fitch an itinerant practicing physician in central Iowa. He made his home in Ridgeport, Boone County, and for many years was a familiar and beloved figure among the countryfolk and townspeople within a radius of 100 miles.

ber of shattered lamps bore witness to his markmanship and his empty pockets testified to the gayety of his long awaited celebration. Youth had had its fling and the next morning cold reality compelled an important decision. Fred Fitch sold his pony for \$20.00 and boarded a train back to Boonesboro and home.

He finished his teens with four years of varied, but unproductive labors. His activities ranged from hauling coal from McBurney's mine, to "breaking" a quarter section of land four miles north of Laurens, Iowa. The spring of 1890 found him again in Boone about to give up farming forever and to enter the barber profession, destined to be his pathway to fame and fortune. At the age of 20 he made the step which proved the turning point of his life. He became an apprentice in the barber shop of Tom Satterly. From that day until this the name Fred Fitch has been inseparably connected with the barber profession, for he became not only one of its most progressive practitioners, but its chief prophet, the Moses who led a despised and declining profession out of the wilderness of slow degeneration into the sunlight of dignity, prosperity and public respect.

Ever since early boyhood, Fred Fitch had been suffering from a scalp disease which had been diagnosed as "scaldhead". As a result of his affliction, he had lost practically all of his hair. In vain had he gone from one doctor to another for treatment. The care of the hair and scalp seemed to be a mystery to the medical profession as well as to the public, and the desire to solve this mystery was as vital a factor as any in attracting young Fitch to the practice of barbering.

After three months apprenticeship, he was considered a fullfledged barber. With characteristic self-confidence, he bought out Tom Satterly's shop and was thus in business for himself at the age of 20. Within six months he had built up a prosperous trade far greater than Tom Satterly had ever enjoyed. But he had found no relief for his "scaldhead" and in desperation he sold out his shop in Boone - at a handsome profit - and went to Des Moines where he thought he could obtain more skillful medical attention and practice his profession at the same time. He secured employment as a journeyman barber in Jakie Schmidt's shop on Sixth Avenue, but was less successful in securing effective medical treatment. The local specialists were baffled and their advice and ministrations proved of no avail.

In the meantime young Fitch had done some thinking and observing on his own account. He studied the methods of treating hair and scalp troubles and carefully watched the action of the hair preparations dispensed in barber shops. He came to the conclusion that his own scalp condition and practically all of the scalp infections prevalent at the time were caused by the poisonous wood alcohol used in the hair preparations on the market. Some of these preparations contained as high as 96% wood alcohol. He made inquiries of his barber shop patrons and he found that not only scalp infections, but falling hair, baldness and

even blindness could be laid at the door of the poisonous wood alcohol preparations sold without restriction in barber shops, drug stores and department stores.

Fifteen years later he had the satisfaction of having his opinions emphatically confirmed by the testimony of experts before the Congress of the United States, and embodied in the famous Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which condemned wood alcohol as a dangerous poison unfit for use in preparations intended for man or beast.

Despairing more than ever of relief through orthodox methods and more deeply absorbed than ever in his own studies, Fred Fitch purchased a barber shop in the little town of Madrid, about 30 miles from Des Moines. Here he applied himself every spare hour of the day and night to the study of the hair and scalp and here he perfected the remedy which launched him on his manufacturing career. How this came about is an interesting story that reveals more clearly than any other incident in Fred Fitch's life, his mental makeup.

A certain Dr. R.W. Breckbill had built up a prosperous practice in the vicinity of Madrid. He was a patron of the Fitch barber shop and young Fitch had often discussed with him the treatment of hair and scalp troubles. Dr. Breckbill prevailed upon his friend to follow his directions for the relief of his "scaldhead" and a course of treatment ensued which gave Fred Fitch no relief, but did give him his "big idea". Dr. Breckbill's "treatment" consisted of the use of blood medicines which were supposed to cure the scalp disease by strengthening and purifying the blood. After consuming numerous bottles of these blood medicines, Fitch became convinced of the folly of internal applications to remedy an external condition and he called on Dr. Breckbill to tell him so.

"Doctor, I am suffering from a bad corn and would like to have you prescribe some blood medicine to cure it", said Fred Fitch nonchalantly.

"Blood medicine to cure a corn!", exclaimed the startled doctor. "Why you must be crazy".

"If I am, there are two of us rocking in the same boat", answered his patient.

"What do you mean?", asked Dr. Breckbill.

"Well, you have been trying to cure my "scaldhead" with blood medicine and curing a corn with blood medicines is no crazier than that. I am through with internal medicines. My condition is external because internally I am in perfect health. Scalp troubles must be treated externally and anything that will not give relief the first time it is used, will never help no matter how often it is used. I think I know now what kind of a preparation is needed and I'm going to keep working on it until I get it perfected".

Dr. Breckbill listened to this pronouncement with mingled amazement and admiration. "Fitch, I think you're right", he replied with slow deliberation. "My medical library is at your disposal and any assistance I can give you is yours for the asking".

This astounding conversation, taken verbatim from Fred Fitch's vivid recollection of the incident, brought bountiful results. The young barber was quick to take advantage of the doctor's generous offer and before many months he had diligently waded through all of the voluminous medical textbooks in the doctor's library. He learned of the structure of the hair and scalp, of the stages in the growth of hair, of the function of the sebaceous glands within each hair follicle. He confirmed the theory he had evolved in his practical barber shop studies that the dread dandruff, represented even in the advertising of that day as a dangerous disease caused by a mysterious germ, was nothing more than a natural accumulation of sebum thrown off by the sebaceous glands, of dead, dried skin sloughed off by the scalp and dust and dirt caught in the hair.

This simple but sound explanation of dandruff he made the foundation of his philosophy of hair culture, unchanged to this day and corroborated by medical science and by the experience of millions of people. The accumulations of dandruff are natural enough, reasoned Fred Fitch, but if they are allowed to remain on the scalp they will form a hard coating over the scalp, clogging up the pores and hair follicles and stifling the growth of hair. These accumulations must be constantly removed so that the pores and hair follicles can breathe as nature intends.

The problem then was to remove these accumulations of dandruff and leave the scalp antiseptically clean and every pore and hair follicle open. To the solution of this problem, Fred Fitch devoted himself with tireless energy. After innumerable experiments, he discovered the principle, and having found the principle, he eventually perfected the preparation that put it into action. The principle was "dandruff can be removed only by first being dissolved and then being washed out" He tried every available kind of soap to dissolve the dandruff but these tests served only to prove incontestably that soap not only does not have sufficient dissolving power to remove dandruff, but aggravates the condition by leaving its own insoluble ingredients in the hair. An entirely new kind of solvent was needed and Fred Fitch found it and called it Fitch's Ideal Dandruff Remover.

His discovery of Fitch's Ideal Dandruff Remover solved the problem of dandruff, but the immensely more difficult problem of persuading the world to accept his solution, now faced Fred Fitch as he entered manhood.

His studies and experiments in his shop in Madrid had extended over a period of five years and it was not until 1897, when he was 27 years of age, that he had perfected Fitch's Ideal Dandruff Remover sufficiently to use it professionally in his barber shop.