

Michigan Every Day

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Uriah Upjohn born: Son creates dissolvable pill

Before there were pills as we know them, doctors relied on liquid medicine and hard pills that may - or may not – have broken down in the body.

William Erastus Upjohn, the son of a physician, was born in 1853, worked in a pharmacy, graduated from medical school and had a medical practice in Hastings. But at home in his attic, he tackled two problems facing doctors, how to deliver medicine that would dissolve in the body and how to ensure the precise amount of an active ingredient in a medical dose. Upjohn solved both problems when he developed a method for turning doses of medicine into dissolvable pills. He received a patent for his process in 1885. Upjohn was also a natural when it came to marketing. He created demonstration kits for doctors across the country, showing how easily the new pills crushed into a pine board compared to the typical hard ones.

In the meantime, Upjohn began working on a machine to mass produce the pills. With his brother Henry, the Upjohn Pill & Granule Company, was created. Eventually, two other Upjohn brothers joined the operation. In its first year in Kalamazoo, the company had a dozen employees and manufactured nearly 200 different formulas. In 1995, the Upjohn Company merged with Pharmacia. It is now owned by Pfizer. Upjohn was the son of Uriah Upjohn, born in Great Britain on Sept. 7, 1898. At the age of 20 he moved his family to the United States.

After studying medicine and becoming a doctor, he moved to Michigan about the time the territory became a state. Uriah bought some land in Richland, between Kalamazoo and Battle Creek, and built a cabin. He began medical practice there and for two decades roamed five counties on horseback, making house calls at a time when the rudimentary science of medicine offered little more than the distribution of quinine to fight malaria and offers of condolence to the dying.

Upjohn developed a reputation as a dedicated doctor who would go to great lengths to aid the sick. He married Maria Mills and the couple had 12 children, 11 of whom survived. Two daughters were among the first women to study at the University of Michigan. Two sons attended that university's medical school, including Upjohn's best-known off-spring, William.