

'A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS', Number Twenty-Two 'Chemistry or Chicanery?'

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The day after the Abacus Auctions office re-opened in January 2025, a prospective vendor came for an assessment of the rather untidy collection he and his brother had inherited from their mother.

Much of the accumulation was unpromising but there were enough tidbits to suggest close inspection would be rewarded. I began flicking through a batch of covers and "Voila!", I came across a delightful advertising postcard from Victoria, then a related cover, then a group of promotional labels, then ephemera for the same user. All up, this amounted to an exciting "find" of material previously unknown to me. Considering my exposure to just about everything Australian during the past 45 years, that's really saying something.

So, here is the tantalising tale of a pioneer "medicine man" whose gift for self-promotion was as compelling as the claims he made for the pills he peddled were spurious.

The name Francis Longmore, Chemist, was not familiar to me. The material before me announced that he was what we would today call a "compounding pharmacist", a clever chap who concocted his own chemical creations, that he then wholesaled and retailed to a gullible populace from premises in Melbourne's CBD (Central Business District).

Thanks to various internet searches and assistance from Vito Milana, aka "Mr Cinderellas", I have been able to establish that Longmore was born in 1848 at Shoalhaven NSW and that he was registered in Victoria as a pharmacist in April 1877. From these sources, I have been able to cobble together the essence of the enchanting story of how a veritable snake-oil salesman rose to a position of corporate distinction in our fair city of Melbourne.



Our first exhibit (and it may well have been involved in legal proceedings) is as fine a piece of self-laudatory windbaggy as one might hope to find. Clearly modelled on the 1d Postal Cards of the day, the heading features a songbird warbling praises of Francis Longmore, whose shingle has displaced the more usual Royal coat-of-arms. Samuel Reading's 1d portrait of Queen Victoria has made way for a disreputable geezer with a pipe and the cryptic legend 'I Thought I had a Match about Me'.

Excepting the pointing-hand device, the postal admonition has been supplanted by a classic advertising hook: 'This card may be the means of saving you much pain and worry; when your system requires building up read the other side, and after one trial you will be convinced that Longmore's Famous remedies, unlike the Mellon Spooks, are what they are said to be'.

To make sure the recipient got the point, the postal instruction 'The Address Only to be Written on This Side' is rendered as 'ONLY ADDRESS IS PRINTED ON THE OTHER SIDE'.



And what an "other side" it is! The images of three spectral sub-humans are sure to give the frights to any reader of delicate constitution, who is entreated to avoid becoming a 'spook' by ingesting Longmore's 'Quinine & Iron Tonic' and 'Rhubarb & Soda' and liberally applying Longmore's 'Sulphur Hair Restorer' and his 'Depilatory', presumably all at the same time!

The rather shocking nature of the advertisement effectively dates its production to the year 1895. During 1894, an English spiritualist named Mrs Annie Fairlamb Mellon gave a series of séances at which she called forth the spirits of three departed souls. They were a young black girl named 'Cissie', a tall Scotsman who answered to 'Geordie', and an ancient by the name of 'Josephine', caricatures of whom grace Longmore's card.

On 12th October 1894, during one of Mrs Mellon's performances to a largely credulous audience, the so-called 'materialisation medium' was literally unmasked by a cynic among them, and the jig was up. Only two months later, an interested party named TS Henry published a short work entitled "Spooked!", just in time for that year's Christmas buying frenzy.¹

The essence of the scandal was brilliantly conveyed by Francis Longmore's publicist, likely himself. The message was clear: don't be taken-in by potions and lotions marketed by any charlatan other than Longmore (perhaps that's not quite what he meant).

To the sophisticated modern reader, the bold claims of "*the most perfect tonic in the world*", the restoration of one's hair "*to its natural youthful colour*", and the promise of "*a positive cure*" for all manner of ailments, might sound like last week's slate of smartphone scams.

Probably since the Stone Age, mere mortals have been induced by the less mere among them to swallow any amount of bunkum. These were straightened times that, for the likes of Francis Longmore, merited more than a little in-your-face advertising, whether in the promotion of miracle cures or barely-disguised chicanery.

The Colony of Victoria entered the 1890s riding high on cheap money and boundless optimism. (Sound familiar?) The inevitable 'crash' of 1892-93 and the consequent economic depression, confirmed by no less an authority than the Reserve Bank as "*the most severe in Australia's history*"² caused Mr & Mrs Joe Average to tighten their belts or corsets and resist purchasing such trivial items as patent medicines.

Vito Milana has provided me with a book extract that includes some very interesting details about Francis Longmore, and a photograph of said gentleman. Unfortunately, the image is so degraded that it is not possible to reproduce it here.

It transpires that Longmore had been an active land speculator and incurred heavy liabilities when things went pear-shaped.

In addition, the economic downturn would have caused a sharp decline in sales, making it commercially incumbent upon Longmore Esq to benevolently remind the good people of Victoria that they would still get sick and that only he could "*relieve depression*", "*cure liver diseases*" and "*remove superfluous hair without injury*", all for a mere 1/6d to 2/6d a pop, or 9/- for the set, at a time when the average daily wage - if one was fortunate enough to have a job - was less than 20/- (or £1).³ What a guy!⁴

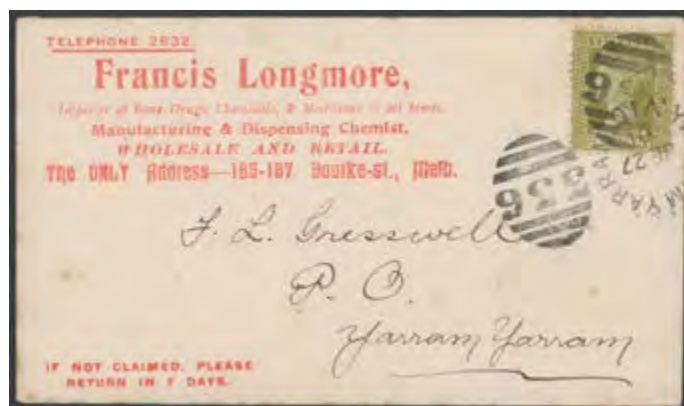
From a philatelic perspective, it is interesting to note that the Post Office recognised the printed hobo device as having no validity and cancelled only the affixed 1d stamp, the aforementioned Reading design. The 'MD/4' cancellation - that looks like it might be scarce but isn't - is confirmed by the adjacent datestamp as having been used at the inner-eastern suburb of Malvern (the date is largely illegible).

The boxed 'TOO LATE' handstamp is an unusual usage on a locally addressed item.

The 'ONLY ADDRESS' referred to is given as 183 Bourke Street, Melbourne. Business must have been buoyant because the next artefact reveals a move to presumably larger adjacent premises at 185-187 Bourke Street.



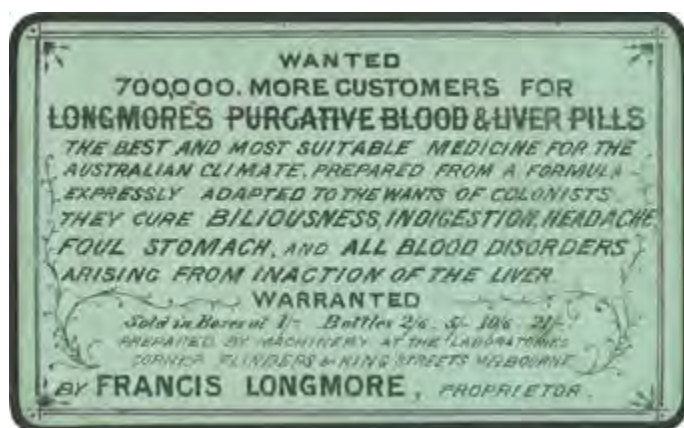
This envelope bears standard text-only advertising that, however, is no less subtle than the earlier card. Longmore now promotes himself as an "Importer of rare drugs, chemicals and medicines of all kinds". Like every micro-capitalist dreaming of world domination, he does it all, manufacturing and dispensing his marvellous creations at both the wholesale and retail levels.



Turn over the cover to learn that his famous Blood & Liver Pills for Indigestion (curing it or causing it?) are "*sold by every storekeeper*". Says refined lady to bespoke jeweller: "My good man, I'll pay for this delightful ring, this simply irresistible strand of pearls, and two bottles of Professor Longmore's most efficacious liver pills!"

Even more startling is the claim that the just as ubiquitously available Everton Cough Remedy "*instantly cures asthma, bronchitis and the common cold!*"

As a lifetime sufferer of pulmonary ailments, I could certainly have benefited from this wonder-drug. And where was it during the Covid pandemic? Being "*the most popular and effective medicine being made*", apparently anywhere in the world, one can only wonder at its later universal unavailability.



Longmore obviously had great expectations for his Blood & Liver Pills. The new find includes two small cards inviting a mere 700,000 more customers (!) to buy his medicinal marvels for up to 21/- a bottle. Pull the other one, Frank: that's like filling today's MCG seven times over! (At the time, Melbourne's population was only about 500,000.)

Big plans indeed. Longmore had invested in production machinery and laboratories for his premises at the corner of King and Flinders Streets, also within the CBD.⁵ A multitude of new customers were needed to fund his Grand Vision.



The reverse of the card further enhances the message. Different photographic panels featuring cats at play (read into that what you will) include further product promotions. The first is, of course, for the magic pills. The second reveals “modest” line-extensions, not a new flavour of Kit-Kat but such natural bedfellows as insecticide, cherry toothpaste, so-called “sarsaparilla alternative” (to what?) which is apparently root beer, and a specious draught called “lavender water.”

Also, “cantharadine cream”, made from beetles to treat warts and God knows what else, that causes the skin to blister. “Perfumed benzine”, derived from crude oil and now condemned as a Grade 1 human carcinogen. “Seidlitz powders”, used as a laxative and gut regulator, presumably containing billions of healthy bacteria.



Other items in the cache suggest that at some point during the noughties, Longmore decided or was compelled to clean up his act. In 1909, Atlas Press in Melbourne printed a basic calendar for the firm from which florid hyperbole was noticeably absent. Claims were limited to Longmores being “Melbourne’s Popular Chemists” and that “We Despatch Promptly”. These uncontroversial panels were affixed to the address-side of contemporary artist postcards - there are two different here - and presumably handed to customers and/or inserted in mail orders.

Three envelopes with the firm’s printed address and not a whiff of product advertising are also included. These are all dated late in 1910, posted at Mildura or aboard Travelling Post Office Number 4, that operated on the railway line between Melbourne and Bendigo.

They all bear interstate frankings, valid from 13th October 1910, two of which are overpaid. They are overtly philatelic usages. My suggestion is that they were sent to head office by one of Longmore’s travelling salesmen, who was also a stamp collector.

These provide a compelling link to the 1901 cover discussed above. This is franked with the Reading 1d design in olive (SG 358), that is rarely seen on commercial covers. This stamp was issued on 6th June 1901 and withdrawn on 30th June, a mere 24 days later, from which date all adhesive stamps and postal stationery inscribed ‘STAMP DUTY’ were invalid for postage.

This cover, dated 27th June, was sent locally which, of itself, is of little consequence. However, so was the illustrated postcard from 6 years earlier. Although endorsed in obviously different hands, they are both to one “FL Gresswell”. Methinks our travelling representative/philatelist has been revealed.



The find also includes several small gummed and perforated labels all inscribed ‘FRANCIS LONGMORE – CHEMIST &c – MELBOURNE – GUARANTEE STAMP’. These are believed to have been affixed to bottles and packets of the firm’s products, which was a common practice at the time.

The existence of these labels was first noted by Vito Milana in his regular column, ‘Cinderella Corner’, published in May 2022.⁶

Vito illustrated a single label that he colourfully described as “wonderfully rare”, with a manuscript endorsement “JBR/1902”, helpfully narrowing down the date of issue or use. “JBR” was probably but not necessarily in Longmore’s employ.

An email exchange with Vito revealed that neither he, nor the other collectors with whom he had discussed the labels, has knowledge of any additional examples. Michael Courtis, a pharmacist friend who collects material related to his profession, also advised that he had no prior knowledge of any of these items, save for the innocuous self-addressed envelopes, of which he has examples used in 1913 and 1914.

In his column, Vito stated the label was printed in “orange” but the accompanying illustration indicates it was printed in a redder shade. The four similar labels now consigned for auction - two singles and a pair - are all printed in a bright pink, tending to rosine. Interestingly, the centring and perforation characteristics suggest they emanate from three different sheets.



The final item is a horizontal strip of 3 from the upper-left corner of the sheet in the same design but printed in green. This is the only evidence available regarding the size or layout of the sheet. Also, as a previously unrecorded label, this is a highly significant piece.

As noted, the labels share the same vignette, a typical Aussie swagman (or “swaggie”), his modest possessions carried bandolier-style, a humble billy can for boiling tea suspended from the stick over his right shoulder.

The setting sun in the background identifies the wanderer as a “sundowner”, an itinerant noted for turning up at a farm too late in the day to do any work in exchange for a place to sleep.

Is there a Freudian element here? Was Longmore tacitly admitting that his success came with very little real effort, that he was, in fact, a charlatan? Might this also be the interpretation of the hobo image and cryptic description on the first item discussed here?

Whatever the case, Francis Longmore operated a successful pharmaceutical business in a major port of the British Empire for at least 30 years. He may not have been the medicinal magician he claimed to be but he was certainly a masterful self-promoter.

His exquisite advertising postcard, his rare “guarantee stamps”, and the rather sensational if fragmentary nature of his back-story all contribute to this cache of little treasures being among my favourite things, even though I don’t own them.

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POSTSCRIPT

Francis Longmore died in Melbourne on 10th or 11th October 1921, by which time his immodest pills and potions firm had developed into an important player in the foodstuffs market.

As intimated above, at some point Longmore had transitioned from blustering conman to respectable business personality. This metamorphosis roughly coincides with his release of an out-of-left-field product, tomato sauce. Marketed under the brand name ‘White Crow’, this tasty condiment set up the firm for major development.

Melbourne’s ‘Sun News Pictorial’ of 5th July 1933 carried a full-page advertisement for the flagship White Crow Tomato Sauce, and an extraordinary number of 69 new products all “added by public demand” (seriously!). The imbedded text provides confirmation that the famous tomato sauce had been released in 1908.

In the absence of definitive statements, and therefore necessarily “reading between the lines”, it seems the firm was corporatised about this time with the creation of two divisions: the pharmaceutical business; and consumer food products.

World War II was a godsend for the company. At the 1942 Annual General Meeting of Francis Longmore & Company, the chairman stated the firm’s output in the previous year was almost entirely foodstuffs for the Armed Forces.

However, it wasn’t all clear skies and plain sailing. At the 1947 AGM, the chairman reported on shortages of tinsplate required to make cans and of soda ash used in the manufacture of glass bottles. And the anonymous book previously referred to states that the last entry in the Melbourne trade directories for Longmore the Chemist was in 1950.

The pharmacist Francis Longmore is long forgotten but his White Crow Tomato Sauce can still be found in our supermarkets.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I would like to record with thanks the assistance received from Vito Milana and Michael Courtis, both of whom reviewed the article and provided interesting background information that enhanced the story of Francis Longmore.

Endnotes:

¹ For a detailed account of the scandal, visit the website www.sydneymagic.net

² www.rba.gov.au/publications/rdp/2001/2001-07/1890s-depression.html

³ rse.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/sp07_008_tables-wages.pdf

⁴ It is stated in the anonymous book that “*Although it took him many years, he never rested until he paid all his creditors in full.*” Highly commendable, but Longmore’s financial situation clearly nurtured his aggressive advertising of dubious products.

⁵ Said book also reveals that even in the 1880s, Longmore operated from premises at 138 Bourke Street East and at the corner of Flinders & King Streets. The source is quoted as an advertisement appearing in ‘The Melbourne Trade Directory’ published in 1887.

⁶ ‘Stamp News’ edition of May 2022