

## Hebern Claflin

Born 27 August 1835, Streetsborough, Portage County, Ohio.<sup>1</sup>

Died 29 April 1917, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois.<sup>2</sup>

Buried Oak Woods Cemetery, Chicago, Illinois.<sup>3</sup>

Hebern was one of Buck and Anna Claflin's two sons who struck out on their own shortly after the 1850 census. In his case, it seems to have been an effort to put as much distance between himself and his father as possible. Hebern eventually went into the family business of miracle cures, seeing the profit potential.<sup>4</sup> He was gone from the family early: he was with them in the 1850 census of Homer, but by October 1856 he was in Henry, Illinois, where he married Mary Ann Edwards.<sup>5</sup> He said in a later interview that he moved to Chicago in 1854.<sup>6</sup> It is not quite clear how he came to tout himself as a "cancer champion," but according to the citizens of Quincy, Illinois, where he had settled in late 1863, he was hawking candy to passengers on the trains, and "discovered" or "had been given" a potion that he began to sell as a cure for cancer in early 1863.<sup>7</sup> There is possibly a grain of truth to their story that Hebern, who with little formal schooling had few options to earn money in 1854, worked on the railroads. His brother Malden was a railroad conductor. He certainly would need employment after his marriage and the birth of his first son (Albert, in 1857). Hebern, like his father, was never a man who would be content with a menial position in life nor was he interested in hard labor.

It seems more likely that it was Hebern's brother-in-law Canning Woodhull who introduced him to his miracle salve. Woodhull, who touted himself as the "Great Cancer and Chronic Disease Doctor," had been peddling his patented "Turkish Cancer Salve," in February of 1863.<sup>8</sup> Woodhull was also most likely gave the idea to his father-in-law.

Both Hebern and his father burst on the scenes advertising themselves as kings of cancer at almost exactly the same time. Hebern's first advertisements were placed in Indiana newspapers in May 1863,<sup>9</sup> Buck's in the Ottawa, Illinois, *Free Trader* in June.<sup>10</sup> In Buck's case, he began promoting himself from his brother-in-law's home;<sup>11</sup> Hebern was at the Bramble House in Lafayette, Indiana.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wight, *The Genealogy of the Claflin Family*, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> "Hebern Claflin Dies," *Chicago Examiner*, 28 April 1917; "Death of Dr. Claflin," *Topeka Daily State Journal*, 28 April 1917.

<sup>3</sup> Certificate of Death, Cook County Clerk's Office, Chicago, Illinois, 26 April 1917.

<sup>4</sup> *The Indianapolis Star*, 19 May 1863 through 24 June 1863, advertisements for "Dr. Hebern, the American Cancer Champion."

<sup>5</sup> Wight, *The Genealogy of the Claflin Family*, p. 256. Henry County Clerk's Office, Volume A, p. 23, license number 01856118. He was indexed as "Hebron Claflin."

<sup>6</sup> *Marshalltown Evening Times Republican*, 16 April 1900.

<sup>7</sup> "The Cure of Cancers," *The Quincy Whig*, 5 March 1864, p. 3. Because his elder brother Malden was also working for the trains, Hebern may have used the connection to obtain a job.

<sup>8</sup> Testimonial, *The Quincy Daily Whig*, 31 October 1863

<sup>9</sup> *Indianapolis Star*, 19 May 1863, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ottawa Free Trader*, 27 June 1863,

<sup>11</sup> Buck's sister, Corintha Claflin Caulkins had settled in Ottawa with her husband and family in the 1850s.

<sup>12</sup> *Indianapolis Star*, op. cit.

The tenor of the two men's advertising suggests they knew of each other's schemes and were trying to out-do one another. Buck's *Ottawa Free Trader* ad (27 June 1863):

AMERICAN KING OF CANCERS.—Dr. R. B. Claflin is stopping at Mr. M.D. Calkins',<sup>13</sup> in south Ottawa, Ill. He claims to be the King of Cancers and all kinds of Chronic Diseases. Fever Sores, Bone Diseases, Scrofula,<sup>14</sup> Piles, Sore Eyes in the worst stages; Heart and Liver complaints, Female Weakness, Consumption, Salt Rheum,<sup>15</sup> Tetters,<sup>16</sup> Inflammatory Rheumatisms, Asthma, Neuralgia, Sick Headache, Dropsy in the Chest,<sup>17</sup> and Fits in various forms.

The Doctor also guarantees a cure, in all cases, where patients live up to the directions. The poor dealt with liberally.

Cancers killed and extracted root and branch, in from 10 to 45 hours, without instruments, pain, or the use of chloroform, simply by applying a mild Salve of the Doctor's own make.

Hebern's *Indianapolis Star* ad (19 May 1863):

Dr. Hebern, the American Cancer Champion, is located at the Bramble House, Lafayette. The Doctor is the only physician now living who can kill and cure a cancer in from five to twenty-four hours, without instruments or pain. No cure no pay.

Hebern's 15 September 1863 ad in the *Milwaukee News*:

Dr. Hebern has located in the City of Milwaukee, and may be found at No. 227 East Water street, over Von Baumbach & Co.'s Bank. He claims to be the King of Cancers and all kinds of Fever sores, such as White Swelling<sup>18</sup> and Bone Diseases, Scrofula, Piles and Sore Eyes in their worst stages, Liver Complaints, Consumption, Female Weakness and Salt Rheum, Tetters, Rheumatism, &c.

The Doctor became a master of the above diseases while traveling through Europe and America, and he now stands at the head of his profession both in Europe and in America. . . The poor dealt with liberally.<sup>19</sup>

That there was competition between the two men is obvious. Once Buck had Tennessee back into his business in July 1863<sup>20</sup>, he ceased being the King of Cancers and instead began advertising "The Great Magnetic Doctoress."<sup>21</sup>

Hebern, meanwhile, never looked back. He was a master of self-promotion and advertising and was apparently a very likeable fellow—the perfect traits for a con man. In

---

<sup>13</sup> Buck's brother-in-law.

<sup>14</sup> Glandular swellings, probably related to tuberculosis.

<sup>15</sup> Eruptions on the skin, usually eczema.

<sup>16</sup> Refers to ringworm or eczema.

<sup>17</sup> Edema. Often associated with tuberculosis.

<sup>18</sup> Tubercular arthritis usually seen in the knees.

<sup>19</sup> "American Cancer Champion," *Milwaukee News*, 15 September 1863.

<sup>20</sup> After she rebelliously ran away in 1861 when she entered into a short-lived marriage and was, by 1863, "back in the fold."

<sup>21</sup> *Ottawa Free Trader*, 18 July 1863.

August 1863, he was in St. Louis, together with Canning Woodhull<sup>22</sup> and for the next few months the two cancer doctors worked in collaboration. Hebern returned to Chicago in November, only to be joined there by Canning in December. Canning's wife remained in St. Louis.

Hebern moved to Quincy in early 1864; from there his business grew until he was able to build an elegant home and clinic that is extant today. He called his establishment "The Northwestern Institute and Infirmary," and it did a booming business.<sup>23</sup> The Quincy residents, while reserving judgment on the efficacy of his cancer remedy, admired him for his enterprising qualities and seemed to have been genuinely fond of him. They were certainly impressed by the wealth he apparently amassed.<sup>24</sup>

Hebern had little to do with his parents; in fact, when he first started into his patent medicine business, he dropped his surname and called himself "Dr. Hebern." His Quincy home became a safe haven for his sisters in their own times of trial. Tennessee and Utica joined him shortly after Tennessee was indicted in Ottawa, Illinois, in June 1864.<sup>25</sup> The siblings told the citizens of Quincy that their parents were dead.<sup>26</sup> The townsfolk were impressed by Hebern's sisters: they were enamoured with Tennessee's vivacious nature (and never forgot her) and impressed with Utica's beauty and lady-like demeanor, though, a typical refrain for Utica, everyone forgot her name but remembered the name of the man she married. No one complained when Hebern's sister Victoria, and her new husband Col. Blood, arrived – in fact, they noted that Col. Blood worked as a railroad conductor and generally was quiet and withdrawn, while Victoria was an intellectual, quiet beauty.<sup>27</sup>

In 1867, Hebern sold his home in Quincy and moved to Chicago. His sisters followed him to that city, and for a time they opened branches of a "Magnetic Healing Institute" throughout the mid-west. In 1868, when the sisters left for New York, Hebern continued his lucrative business of peddling his cancer salve from Chicago, advertising and travelling all over the country.

Hebern created an image of himself as coming from wealth and having made a great deal of his own. When his sisters Victoria and Tennessee married into British society (and Tennessee gaining a title through her marriage) no one was happier than

---

<sup>22</sup> *The Missouri Republican -- Saint Louis*, 6 August 1863, p. 3; 9 August 1863, p. 3; 12 August 1863, p. 3; 19 August 1863, p. 3, *The Quincy Daily Whig*, 4 August 1863; 15 August 1863; 22 August 1863.

<sup>23</sup> *The Quincy Herald*, 1 August 1866, p. 3, col. 3. It is today known as the "Hebern Claflin House."

<sup>24</sup> In 1862, to pay for the War, the Federal Government assessed the first income tax on Americans. In 1864, soon after his move to Quincy, Hebern was assessed \$10 and he was assessed the same amount in 1866, with no personal property assessments. This indicates his braggadocio about his income was exaggerated. NARA, Record Group 58 of the Internal Revenue Service, Assessment Lists.

<sup>25</sup> "To Whom it May Concern," *Ottawa Free Trader*, 4 June 1864, p. 2, a notice printed from Rebecca Howe saying that she was not only not cured of cancer but was much worse. Howe died three days later. See also the *Ottawa Free Trader*, 10 May 1890, p. 1, where it was reported that threats had been made to revive the indictments unless the blackmailer received \$100,000. "One indictment was brought for the alleged killing of the late Mrs. Howe, through the application of poisonous drugs."

<sup>26</sup> "A Former Quincy Lady," *Quincy Daily Journal*, 27 October 1909, p. 9, col. 3.

<sup>27</sup> "Lived in Quincy," *The Quincy Daily Journal*, 2 May 1892, p. 6, col. 1; "Once Lived in Quincy," *The Quincy Daily Journal*, 25 March 1897, p. 4, col. 3; "The Remarkable Careers of Former Quincy Women," *The Quincy Daily Whig*, 29 March 1901, p. 6, col. 2; "Quincy and Beecher," *The Quincy Daily Herald*, 28 May 1907, p. 4, col. 1;

their brother. He was in London for Tennessee's wedding,<sup>28</sup> and on returning to the States, made a cottage industry promoting himself and his connections to the money of British aristocracy.<sup>29</sup> He visited Los Angeles in 1887, where he claimed to have purchased property worth \$100,000, and represented to the citizens of that city that he was connected to "unlimited English capital." The *Los Angeles Times* commented that he would be a "valuable acquisition to the dynamic force" of the city.<sup>30</sup> His firm was the "London Loaning House, Marshalltown, Iowa," but the venture never seemed to have gone anywhere.

In 1900 Hebern managed to have the *Chicago Chronicle* write a lengthy and illustrated account of his sister Tennessee in which he included plenty of his own life details.<sup>31</sup>

Dr. Herbert Claflin, brother of Lady Cook, came to Chicago in 1854 and after completing his medical studies began here the practice of medicine. He says he always had plenty of patients, and those of the paying kind. . . For years his investments were in real estate, but later in railroad stocks. He became a speculator in these stocks to such an extent some twelve years ago that he gave up the practice of his profession. He continues to speculate here and in New York and in London. . . Dr. Claflin married his wife in this city, but she is an Englishwoman by birth. She is of an old titled family and when in England—she laughingly says—she is saluted by the title of lady; but in this country she prefers to be considered as a plain American wife and mother. But this does not prevent her from remembering that she was educated for rank and position. The doctor and she have recently returned to their pretty home on Euclid avenue from a visit of three months to Lady Cook. Last year Mrs. Claflin spent the season with her sister-in-law at Montserrat palace. There she met her soon-to-be daughter-in-law, the countess of Cintra, who is to marry one of her sons who is settled in London. Her other son residing there is married to an Australian lady of rank and wealth.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, Hebern never attended medical school, nor was his wife of an 'old titled family.' Hebern's attempts both to ingratiate himself with and swindle money out of his sisters' wealthy husbands came to an abrupt and embarrassing end in 1892. Victoria and John Biddulph Martin visited Chicago in October 1892 for the dedication ceremonies of the World's Fair. Martin was the United Kingdom's commissioner for the Fair. Earlier in the year, Hebern, apparently without thinking of the consequences, had told the Chicago *Inter Ocean* exactly what he thought of his sister's presidential aspirations. Pompous as ever he said:

Goodness only knows. Make a bigger fool of herself than ever, I suppose. My wife and I have no sympathy for the ridiculous folly of Mrs. Martin or her absurd pretensions, but on the contrary, have tried during the past six years to

<sup>28</sup> *The New York Times*, 7 March 1886. "Dr. Claflin of Iowa, who is here, swells with pride over his sister, Lady Cook."

<sup>29</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, 5 October 1887, p. 4. He also tried to set his sons up in Los Angeles to form a bank, but it never seems to have happened.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Marshalltown Evening Times Republican*, 16 April 1900.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

dissuade her, by numerous letters, from her present course. The only result has been to arouse her ire against myself and my family, whom she accuses of being traitors to her and enemies to her work.

I see that she is reported to be a member of the Royal World's Fair Commission. That is a mistake. Mr. Martin alone is a member of that body. He is famous as a financier and business man in England, and I can not understand his toleration and apparent encouragement of his wife's vagaries. . . I regard Martin as a bigger fool than his wife in backing up her absurd pretensions.<sup>33</sup>

During the World's Fair dedication ceremonies, Martin confided "in the presence of several persons" that Dr. Claflin did not amount to anything and "other uncomplimentary remarks," including the accusation that Claflin had been receiving "hush" money from Sir Francis Cook.<sup>34</sup> Hebern responded by filing a suit for alleged slander asking for \$25,000 in damages. He withdrew the suit the next day. "Mrs. Martin declared yesterday that she had nothing to say about the trouble except that it was a family affair and a very painful one. The suit was begun in a moment of anger and withdrawn the next day, she added. Dr. Claflin had said he was "very sorry" for his action. Mr. Martin gravely assented to his wife's statements.<sup>35</sup> Hebern's behavior not only led to a permanent cooling of relations with his sister and her husband, the revelation of the hush money being paid to him by Cook caused a rift between Victoria and Tennessee that never fully closed.

In July 1899, when the Chicago *Inter Ocean* published the story of Tennessee Cook's first marriage to a ne'er do well bartender and sporting man, Hebern indignantly spoke to the reporter, denying that Tennessee was never married prior to Cook. Tennessee sent him a telegraph stating she had indeed been married to the man. He went on to brag:

I am a Wall street speculator I quit practicing medicine years ago and went into operations on the street, because I was acquainted with Commodore Vanderbilt. Yes, I knew him through my sisters' speculations. But I never met James Fisk, and so far as I know my sisters did not.<sup>36</sup>

There is no evidence whatsoever that Hebern was ever in New York during the years of his sisters' association with Vanderbilt. Remembering that he loathed his father, who was living with his sisters while the Commodore was alive, the likelihood of Hebern ever being introduced to Vanderbilt is quite slim.

After his wife's death in 1909, Hebern put himself on a quest to find her successor. One woman after another was interviewed, apparently attracted by his claims of wealth, then invited to the altar, but not one took the final steps. Even the spirit of his deceased wife had a say in the prospects and she rejected most of them.<sup>37</sup> The search

<sup>33</sup> *The Inter Ocean from Chicago*, 27 April 1892, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> *The Inter Ocean from Chicago*, 25 October 1892, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> "Dr. Claflin Was Sorry," *New York World*, 26 October 1892, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *The Inter Ocean from Chicago*, 29 July 1899, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> "Dr. Claflin to Wed Former Resident," *Evening Times Republican*, 22 June 1910; "For Early Marriages and Late Ones," *The Quincy Journal*, 22 June 1910, p. 1, col. 6; "Again?? Bark is Willin'," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 1910, p. 9; "May Stay out of Paradise," *Chicago Examiner*, 11 October 1911; "Dr. Claflin, 77, to Wed," *Chicago Examiner*, 20 March 1915, p. 1, col. 2; "'Wed' Said His Spirit Wife to Dr. Claflin,"

went on for over five years and until finally, one lady, a “Mrs. Dr. Jackman” agreed. The problem was that she had to secure a divorce from her first husband (she did, but the judge stipulated a waiting period of a year). Her intended was now in his late seventies and no one was sure he would live to make it down the aisle.

He didn’t, dying at Mrs. Dr. Jackman’s home in 1917, two weeks before the scheduled wedding date. The funeral was well attended by all of his old friends.

His estate entered probate. Everyone was surprised to discover that the man, whom they had all assumed to be wealthy, left a meagre \$500.<sup>38</sup>

Hebern’s sons, Albert, Austin, and Corliss inherited their father’s share of Tennessee’s estate in 1923. While Albert worked as a clerk in Chicago most of his life, Austin and Corliss had both moved to England where they maintained close friendships with their titled aunt. The legacy proved a boon to Albert, who was a widower when he inherited, and who also moved to England. Only Austin had children, and they have living descendants.

---

*Chicago Examiner*, 21 March 1915, p. 4,, col. 2; “No Wife for Dr. Claflin,” *Chicago Examiner*, 22 March 1915, p. 4, col. 7; “Can’t Tell Which Girl He Will Wed,” *Quincy Daily Whig*, 26 March 1915; “Women Sharpers Fishing for an Old Man’s Money,” *Quincy Daily Journal*, p. 5, col. 5; “Spirit at Odds Over Claflin’s Coming Marriage,” *Davenport Quad-City Times*, 28 March 1915, p 13; “‘Spirit Bride’ Denies Claflin,” *Chicago Examiner*, 25 May 1915, p. 4, col. 7; and “Dr Claflin will Try To Wed Again,” *The Quincy Journal*, 14 January 1916, p. 9, col. 1,

<sup>38</sup> “Claflin’s Riches Vanish,” *Chicago Examiner*, 3 May 1917, p. 1, col. 3.