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Robert Atkins is waiting for a batch of Mt. Pilot Mayberry Mystery Healing Salve to cool to the perfect temperature to add the healing herbs.

Salve will cure what ails you

From Spanish influenza to tomorrow's ache

By Bill Colvard
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Robert Atkins can lay claim to a couple of Mayberry bona fides: to being the real-life Wally as well as being the manufacturer of a healing salve that he says is good for what ails you.

In the 1950s, Atkins owned and operated Atkins Esso, a gas station on the site currently occupied by Wally's Service Station on South Main Street.

"I was Wally, and I didn't know it," he said.

At the age of 90, Atkins has left the gas station business behind, and for the past nine years, has taken up the family legacy of making and selling a "multiple purpose salve," reputed to promote healing, ease the pain of life's cuts, bruises, burns, cuts and abrasions, relieve the agony of back ache, headaches, colds, sinus, arthritis and rheumatism.

And those are just the

uses listed on the label. Atkins regularly gets calls and letters from his customers telling him of off-label uses they have discovered, including gout, athlete's foot, other foot problems, removing warts that had plagued someone for years, and a hairdresser who had to close her business because her hands had become such a mess they were almost bleeding, cured by his salve.

Atkins sells the salve that he, his wife Lettie Atkins, and granddaughter Amy Thornburg, produce and package in the basement of his Mount Airy home to independent pharmacies and general stores, both locally and across the United States.

"These little cans of salve are sitting in houses all over the world," he said, tinkering with a package of labels that was giving his wife problems as she was applying them to tins. "We have 600 reg-



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A tin of the original salve made by Robert Atkins' father between 1920 and 1950.

ular customers, and 350 of them are like family."

Atkins will be 91 years old in January, and though Mt. Pilot Mayberry Mystery Healing Salve has only been produced since 2009, it has roots that go back a hundred years, to a time before Atkins was born.

"My dad was farming here in 1918," he said, "and his brother-in-law moved to Indiana. He

was working in a meat-processing plant and encouraged Dad to come to Indiana and raise pork. It took two weeks to get out there back then. You had to go all the way to Martinsville (Virginia) just to get to a place where you could cross the mountains."

Atkins' father, John, moved his wife and first

Salve

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12 children to Richmond, Indiana, where he bought a low-lying farm. He would ultimately have a total of 19 children with his two wives. Three of his children died in infancy.

"Don't call us half-brothers and sisters," Atkins says his elder siblings told the younger ones. "Your mother is our mother."

"What dad didn't know was that the land had to have terra cotta. Without it, you couldn't farm it."

The elder Atkins went into debt for the farm and a tractor. He thought he was getting a bargain for the bottomland, which where he came from was prime farmland. He planted a big crop of corn and bought some pigs.

"But the rains came and scalded it, and it died," said Atkins. "The pigs took cholera and died."

While this situation was playing out, the elder Atkins made friends with a local doctor who had made a salve for people who were getting sick and dying from the 1918 influenza pandemic, which infected 500 million people, or one-third of the world's population at the time, according to CDC estimates.

Atkins said the doctor was sympathetic to his father's plight, with a large family and a farm that wasn't panning out, and wanted to help him out. So he gave him the formula to the salve about 1920. Atkins' father in return did some favors for the doctor and helped him out in a lot of ways.

"Mama cooked it on the wood stove," said Atkins of the salve he smelled all through his early years. "I didn't know how beneficial it was."

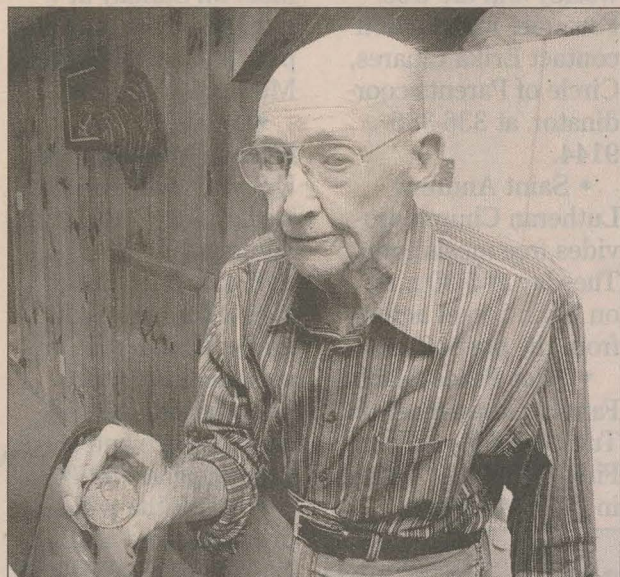
Atkins' father sold the salve his wife cooked up. Ultimately, the family made their way back to Mount Airy, and owned and operated the White Sulphur Springs Hotel where they rented rooms and apartments.

"It was on 160 acres and it had 160 rooms," said Atkins. "It was a big white elephant. There were only bathrooms on one end."

Atkins' family lived on the end which had water, and his parents continued to make and market the salve there until John Atkins died on Jan. 8, 1950, at the hotel.

"I was busy running the service station and garage, and I didn't ask any questions about the salve formula," said Atkins.

When he died, John had 12 heirs left, including Robert Atkins, who



Robert Atkins shows the tin of his salve he found in an antique store.

had been born in 1928, and was one of the younger of the surviving children.

No one had the formula for the salve. It had gone missing on the death of the senior Atkins, and that seemed to be the end of the salve for a very long time.

Much later, Robert Atkins found an old rusty tin of the salve in an antique store, which he was told had been found in a medicine cabinet while an estate was being cleared. He bought it as a souvenir of his family's past.

Time went on. His first wife died of cancer after 37 years of marriage in 1984, and he soon remarried to Lettie who had lost her husband of 35 years to cancer a few years before.

"It was nearly four years," said Atkins of the time between his first wife's death and the death of his current wife's first husband. "I can't believe somebody didn't take her away."

"I fixed it," he smiled. They will have been married 34 years in January.

Lettie and Robert Atkins' story would have just been a sweet story of second love for two people who had each lost a spouse to cancer, which is a lovely story all by itself, but in 2009, Atkins' oldest sister died, and things changed.

When his sister died, Atkins was sent a packet of what he called "kitchen recipes" that had belonged to their mother.

"They were still tied up like Mama did them," said Atkins.

The ribbon binding the recipes had not been untied after their mother died, and in the packet of his mother's long-lost recipes, Atkins found the formula for the salve. He checked the ingredients against the tin he had purchased at the antique store, and it was indeed the formula for the salve his father had made.

In 2009, Atkins had another living brother, J. Franklin Atkins, who was called Jay.

"We called him Jay, but it was just a first initial. The army didn't like that," Atkins chuckled. "He lived to be 99 years old. He was the oldest Atkins I ever saw."

Atkins said his older brother thought the younger Atkins should have the formula, because he still had the energy to do something with it.

"After praying about it, my wife Lettie and I decided to make the salve. Mount Airy and Mayberry have always been good to us, so we decided to put that in the name."

"And John Cox at Mt. Airy Drug told us, 'If you put Mayberry on it, it will sell.'"

As far as Mt. Pilot's name on the salve, Atkins said it has nothing to do with the salve episode on "The Andy Griffith Show" in which the salve Opie and his buddies could not sell came from Mt. Pilot.

"No, I just wanted to bring back my Dad's salve. And I have always loved Pilot Mountain. One reason we did that was my brother wanted to go in together with me and buy Pilot Mountain (the mountain, not the town). We could have bought the mountain for \$14,000. That was around 1950, and I've had regrets ever since about not doing that." He now has a picture of the mountain he regrets not buying on every tin of his salve.

So the name was chosen, and Atkins began the process of negotiating the legalities of getting the salve on the market. Lettie Atkins' niece is an extension agent and helped them with the Department of Agriculture, and they had to get a sample of the salve analyzed and approved by the FDA.

Before that was accomplished, the formula had to be adapted. The devilweed had to go, as that was now illegal to use.

Oil of camphor, which Atkins says is one of the best bacteria killers there is, had to be restricted to



Amy Thornburg, granddaughter of Robert and Lettie Atkins, and heir apparent of the salve formula, pours a batch of salve.

3 percent of the formulation. And the red pepper in the original formula was replaced with pure mustard oil which warms the skin, opens blood vessels and causes healing, according to Atkins.

Oil of cloves to ease pain is still there, as is magnesium, for arthritis and rheumatism, and strontium, which Atkins says is better for bones than calcium (but only if ingested, and Atkins' salve is for topical use only). Strontium is a mineral mined from a cave in Scotland.

"That's it," said Atkins. "Every can tells what's in it. It ain't no secret."

Atkins says the newly formulated salve is not as strong as it was in the old days, but it still has enough kick to make it effective. The avalanche of testimonials he receives from his customers would indicate they agree.

"I'm having trouble finding the quality of herbs that I need," said Atkins. "It's very expensive."

Atkins has selected his granddaughter Amy Thornburg to carry on the family salve tradition, and she works by his side, making the salve and helping him with the details of selling it to 37 stores across the country.

Atkins made 2,680 cans of salve last year, one crockpot full at a time. Each batch yields 72 tins of salve, and in an 18-hour day, Atkins and Thornburg can produce two batches.

For a man of 91, Atkins is still a savvy businessman. He laments the chain pharmacies and mega-chains like Walmart that are not interested in dealing with a small entrepreneur like himself, setting barriers to doing business with them that make it impossible. He spouts off the exorbitant amounts of product liability insurance they would expect him to carry, and the production levels they would want. Worse than that, their businesses are



Lettie Atkins put labels on tins of salve.

killing off the independent pharmacies that are the lifeblood of his enterprise.

He even has a few choice words for drive-through windows at pharmacies which are detrimental to floor sales of products like his, and quotes percentages and statistics to back up what he is saying.

Out of the six dozen tins of salve in each production batch, Atkins said he usually gives away one dozen, but this past year, he has been giving away more like 50 percent of their production.

"I've given away a million dollars worth of labor in the last nine years," he said.

"That has got to cease, they tell me," he laughed, indicating his wife and granddaughter.

"This has kept him alive, kept him happy and his mind working," said Thornburg.

Her point is made when no sooner than she has finished speaking that Atkins, for the second time in an hour, darts up the stairs from the basement production area to the house and back, a feat that would



The back side of the original salve tin is shown here.

stress the capacities of a lot of men 20 years his junior.

Mt. Pilot Mayberry Mystery Salve is available in Mount Airy (Mayberry) at Mill Creek General Store, Andy Griffith Museum, Mount Airy Museum of Regional History, Mayberry Market, Robby's Army Store, Gates Pharmacy, Mount Airy Drug Company, Wally's Pharmacy, Granite City Produce, Mayberry Inn, Copper Pot Restaurant, Brintle's Truck Stop Restaurant and The Fruit Basket (Wally's).

In Pilot Mountain (Mt. Pilot), it is available at Blue Mountain Herbs. Call Robert Atkins at 336-786-4802 for a retail outlet near you or if there is not one, he will mail some to you.

Reach Bill Colvard at 336-415-4699.

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