

Lunsford Richardson

Series: North Carolina Inventors



See early examples of Vicks VapoRub in the exhibit Health and Healing Experiences in North Carolina at the N.C. Museum of History.

You may not recognize his name, but you've probably used his cold remedy. Lunsford Richardson was a pharmacist in Greensboro at the turn of the twentieth century. Like many druggists of his day, he made medicines for treating minor ailments. His biggest-selling remedy was Vicks Croup and Pneumonia Salve. We know it today as Vicks VapoRub.

Lunsford Richardson grew up on a plantation near Selma in Johnston County in the mid-1800s. He was the youngest of five children. During the Civil War his father served in the Confederate army. The boy saw how the war ruined North Carolina's economy. He dreamed of establishing a worldwide business that would help the state prosper once more.

After he graduated from Davidson College, Richardson became principal of Little River Academy in Cumberland County. In 1880 while he was visiting his sister in Selma, he decided to switch to a career that would help him achieve his dream. He used his savings to purchase a small drugstore and soon began concocting home remedies such as liver pills, headache powders, and liniment.

Richardson's children inspired him to invent his most successful remedy. When all three caught bad colds at the same time, they were treated in the usual manner of the day. A cloth spread with warm medicine, called a poultice, was placed on each child's chest, and a vaporizer lamp circulated the medicine to clear up the congestion. The kids got well, but Richardson thought he could come up with a better treatment.

What he came up with was a medicine that combined a poultice and a vaporizer. Richardson mixed menthol, camphor, oil of eucalyptus, and other ingredients with petroleum to create a salve. When the soothing salve was rubbed on the chest, the person's body heat released the salve's vapors to make breathing easier.

Richardson used his brother-in-law Joshua Vick's last name, rather than his own for the product, because he thought it was easier to remember. Once customers tried the salve, it practically sold itself. As a result, he decided to market it to a wider audience. And in 1898 he founded the Lunsford Richardson Wholesale Drug Company.

In 1907 H. Smith Richardson, the inventor's son, became the company's sales manager. He started selling Vicks salve throughout the Southeast and soon suggested that the name be changed to Vicks VapoRub. Later, product demonstrations, free goods to druggists

who placed large orders, and newspaper coupons for free samples attracted new customers across the country. In 1922 the company mailed five million VapoRub samples to people in rural areas west of the Mississippi River.

Vicks VapoRub eventually became a household name in the United States and beyond. When Lunsford Richardson died in 1919, sales of VapoRub had topped \$3 million. When his son passed away in 1972, sales had climbed to \$450 million! Vicks VapoRub has been a popular cough and cold remedy for nearly 100 years. Lunsford Richardson's dream of a worldwide empire has definitely come true.