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Review of *From Snake Oil to Medicine: Pioneering Public Health*. By R. Alton Lee. Westport

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From Snake Oil to Medicine: Pioneering Public Health. By R. Alton Lee. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007. xi + 233 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth.

When Samuel J. Crumbine closed his eyes for the final time on July 12, 1954, in his home in New York City, he left a nation seismically removed from the one he had entered 91 years earlier. Born during the Civil War and living into the Cold War, he bore witness to social transformations so profound that efforts to encapsulate his passage can leave us unsettled, like viewing a daguerreotype of Sitting Bull in western clothing.

In this meticulously documented chronicle of Samuel Crumbine's life, Professor R. Alton Lee provokes similarly

unsettling images of a physically diminutive giant in the field of public health feted at the Waldorf-Astoria late in life against those of the young medical student from rural Ohio selling Piso's Consumptive Cure on the dusty streets of Dodge City, Kansas, to friends like lawman Bat Masterson. Among pioneers of public health such as Lemuel Shattuck or Jonas Salk, Crumbine is the pioneer in deed as in name, whose life's purpose took hold under the prairie skies of western Kansas.

His story is one of unyielding principles and advocacy, evolving out of a medical training that sought bodily cures into an evangelical belief in the need to alter how we live to prevent illness. In a unique era of scientific discovery and populism, but apart from the overtly political messages of contemporary muckrakers like Lincoln Steffens or Upton Sinclair, Crumbine designed social crusades around commonsense causes: "Swat the fly!" "Bat the rat!" "Don't spit on the sidewalk." The enemy wasn't capitalism to this lifelong Republican and trusted adviser to Herbert Hoover; it was ignorance in the face of expanding medical knowledge, an adversary that crossed party lines. His impressive accomplishments might never have been possible without his adroit ability to challenge the establishment while still being part of it. Under Crumbine's leadership, Kansas led the nation in control of tuberculosis and venereal disease, clean food and drug standards, sanitation and hygiene practices, and improvements in child health and safety. Perhaps his most enduring legacy, however, was the tenacity with which he practiced public health.

The irony behind Samuel Crumbine's departure in 1923 for New York to assume leadership of the American Child Hygiene Association is not lost on students of Kansas politics. Swept into power by populism, a governor sought to imprint his own brand of Midwest reformism by removing from office perhaps the leading public health reformer of the early part of the 20th century. Thomas Frank has observed this phenomenon of embracing policies and politics that do little to serve the best interests of the majority more recently in *What's the Matter with Kansas?*

Though there is some truth to Professor Lee's observation of the lack of recognition given Crumbine over the years, to most public health practitioners personalities mean very little. It is what gets accomplished that matters; and for that, much of Samuel Crumbine has become embedded in every person who has ever questioned threats to the public's health. **Michael H. Fox**, *Department of Health Policy and Management, University of Kansas Medical Center*.