

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 13, 2006

Leather Belts, Brake Lining, and Castor Oil: For those who don't know it, castor oil was a nasty product applied to youngsters of my generation who needed a strong cathartic. It was the texture of olive oil and was sold in tiny bottles of about 2 ounces for 15 cents. The normal dose was one teaspoon or more, which was often camouflaged with orange juice. The trouble was, it didn't mix, and the orange juice was always on top. The victim would be happily drinking the juice, when he (or she) would suddenly hit the castor oil. The Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children no longer allows this practice.

Although less known for these uses, castor oil was also a good dressing for leather belts (it kept them soft and non-slip) and for old brake linings that had become glazed. Learning this from my father, I still keep it in the shop and use it in these ways. On a steam car tour in Vermont in 1976 with our Model 71, I had bested another Stanley in an informal race up a long hill and had heated up the brake linings on the way down. The brakes seemed noisy and unreliable. I asked Jerry Brady, my passenger on that trip, to go into a small drug store in the next town and buy a bottle of castor oil. As he started for the store, I called to him: "get two bottles, so I'll have a spare to take home." Jerry asked the clerk for castor oil, the good man obliged by finding a bottle in the back of the store, and then Jerry said he wanted two bottles. The clerk was taken aback, and exclaimed: "Oh, no, *one* will do the job!"