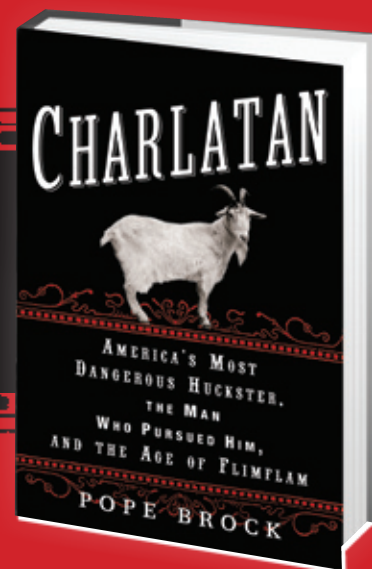


CHARLATAN Q&A

with Pope Brock

A
Midwest
CONNECTIONS
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1. Why did you decide to tell this story?

I had never heard of John Brinkley before, but within two minutes after stumbling on his name—on museumofhoaxes.com—I was hooked. Any guy who would build the biggest radio station in the world to convince other men to get goat-testicle transplants is a pretty unusual character. He made millions of dollars at this during the Depression—even had women coming in for goat ovaries, which he plugged as a wrinkle-reducer and bust developer. When I learned he was also a pioneer in radio, in advertising, in politics, I knew what I'd be doing for the next two or three years.

2. What surprised you most about Brinkley's story?

I suppose his enormous impact on pop culture, which he's never gotten credit for. He's like Shoeless Joe Jackson: he's been kept out of the Hall of Fame because he's regarded as a crook. But John Brinkley seized on radio in its infancy with a sort of evil glee, before corporate America had any idea what to do with it, and showed the world the huge potential of broadcast advertising. He also accidentally changed the American pop music scene by giving country music, and later the blues, its first national audience. When he ran for governor of Kansas in 1930—an election that was stolen from him, fittingly enough—he introduced the airplane into political campaigning; he invented the sound truck. As a quack he killed or maimed a lot of people, but meanwhile he was doing some amazing things.

3. How did Brinkley manage to fool so many successful industry titans and otherwise shrewd people?

Shrewd and successful people—like Harry Chandler of the *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, for example—were drawn to him because they thought Brinkley was one of

them, a kindred spirit. But he was usually way ahead of them. Crime-wise he played three-dimensional chess.

4. How did the American medical community change to avoid such con artists?

When Brinkley was finally exposed, it was a watershed moment for American medicine. The whole profession had been so poorly regulated, it was overwhelmed with nuts and quacks, but the comet trail of fraud he left behind was so egregious, things finally changed. The American Medical Association gained the power it had sought for decades to enforce national licensing standards for doctors. Medical schools toughened their curricula. Diplomas became much harder to get. Quacks weren't stamped out completely, of course, far from it; but overall Brinkley's downfall marked the birth of modern medicine.

5. How are Brinkley's influences still felt in society?

In politics, advertising, music... The "border blaster" he built just across the Mexican border to promote his medical practice—combining raucous hard sell with pop tunes—established the template for AM radio.

6. Do you think Brinkley was a product of his time or could such a prominent scam still be perpetrated today?

Nobody could get away with the sort of gargantuan con game Brinkley ran at his peak, not with all the investigative media that's out there now. But health scams make up in numbers today what they lack in size. Some of those TV-infomercial gurus are plugging very dubious stuff; one of them did time for fraud, and he's back on the air today. Mostly though, like a lot of other things, health scams are a niche business now, with thousands of little cubbyholes on the Internet.