

Chemistry Movies Blog

by Mark Griep,

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Naming the Fictional Vitajex Pill in *A Face in the Crowd* (1957)

Larry “Lonesome” Rhodes (Andy Griffith) is an easy-going ne’er-do-well with a guitar. Even though he lives by his wits, he occasionally gets so drunk the police have to throw him in jail. One day, Marsha (Patricia Neal) visits the jail to interview some prisoners for a radio program. She realizes Lonesome has a personality suitable for radio. After helping him rise to fame in that medium, he is offered his own television show. He is an incredible success. In the end, she stops him because he is manipulated by powerbrokers to espouse right-wing political sentiments.

Shortly after Lonesome’s TV show becomes successful, the Hainesworth Company contacts him to sponsor his show. In the 6.5-minute scene beginning at 44:30, the Hainesworth company leaders meet to discuss Vitajex, the product they want to advertise. First, the head of advertising says they’ve dropped from having 10% of the market share to 7%, despite spending money. Next, the research chemist shows his pie chart of the contents of the pill (see Figure 1). He’s upset the ingredients are so common because “I was hired as a research chemist.” He says, “It is like a lot of old patent medicines” with its 5 grains inert matter, 3 1/2 grains aspirin, 2 1/2 grains caffeine, and 6 grains dextrose that “might give you some energy”. When Rhodes meets with the Hainesworth executives, he tells them their white pills look pale and that, “You should color them yellow.”

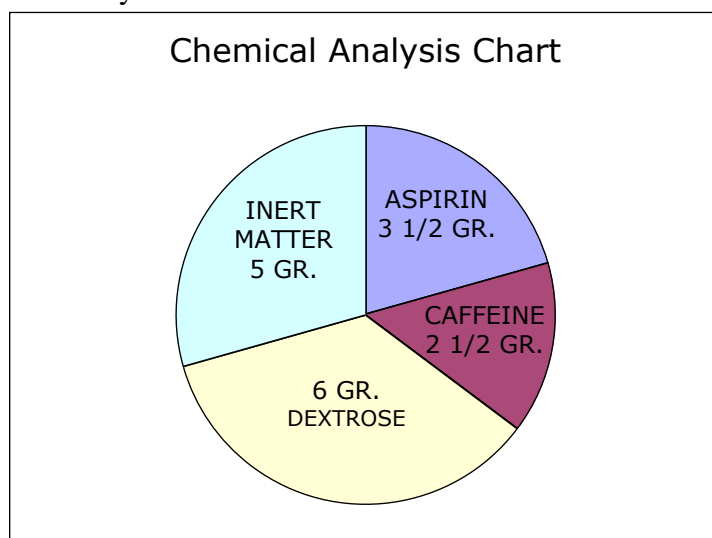
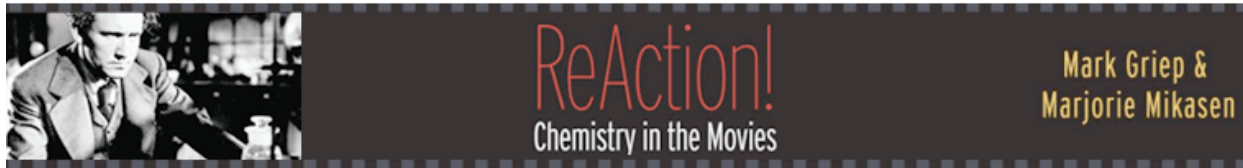


Figure 1: Vitajex composition as described by the Hainesworth Research Chemist in *A Face in the Crowd* (1957)



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Using the conversion of 1 grain equals 64.8 milligrams, we can calculate that one pill of Vitajex contained 227 mg aspirin, 162 mg caffeine, 389 mg dextrose, and 324 mg inert matter. Anacin is one of the oldest brands of pain relievers in the United States and has been sold since the 1920s. They have advertised on TV since its earliest days. In 2008, Anacin Regular Strength contains 400 mg aspirin and 32 mg caffeine, indicating that the fictional Vitajex had far more of the stimulant caffeine.

Since the screenwriter Budd Schulberg based the movie upon his own short story “An Arkansas Traveler”, the first thing I did to learn more about Vitajex was to read that story. It is part of his collection of short stories titled *Some Faces in the Crowd*, published in 1953 by Random House. Its focus is how Rhodes’ uninformed views gain influence with his audience. It does not mention Vitajex or any other advertised product. Schulberg seems to have used the Vitajex scenes as comic relief and as a counterpoint to his darker message about the media’s power to influence the American public politically.

To read the script and other material related to the movie’s production, Mikasen and I visited the Warner Archive at the University of Southern California. In the “Final Script”, Mikasen learned that the Research Chemist’s name is Dr. Wylie but nothing else special about Vitajex. In other boxes of material, she learned that someone in the Warner Brothers legal team had searched the trade names section of the Thomas Register of American Manufacturers in early 1956. They found that Viajex, Vitajex, and Vitagene were not listed but that Vitalene was a bird food composed of cod liver oil manufactured by Kaemper’s of New York City. The legal office continued to examine other aspects of the script over the next year. Among many things, they noted that the caricature of the advertising agencies was lost on the preview audience and made the advertising people appear ineffectual and unethical. They didn’t, however, propose any changes to the script or movie, and these scenes remained.