

ANS401 Knowledge of Native Elders  
Jonathan and Rosie David  
Summary by Tom Andrew, March 24, 1988

HOW PLANTS WERE USED FOR MEDICINE

Today Jonathan and Rosie talked about how plants are used for medicine. Spruce pitch is used to hold cuts together. Clear pitch is put into and around the wound and a cloth is wound firmly over the wound. When there were no commercial tapes ch'elatona' (thin moose/caribou skin) string was used to tie the cloth over the wound. The bandage was not changed while the wound is healing. Covering the wound with pitch prevented infection from setting in.

Spruce pitch was also used for back ache. It was heated until it becomes like water. The warmed pitch was then applied hot onto the back. The torso is then covered over with canvas. The canvas remains over the torso for about a week. The skin becomes itchy under and around the pitch in about a week. Pitch is applied anywhere there is pain for relief.

Spruce pitch which is found in clumps in dry wood, while splitting, can be eaten to sooth sore stomach (probably ulcers). This is even good when you are well. Hard spruce pitch found on the bark can be chewed and the juice swallowed. Spruce gum is also chewed for pleasure. Spruce needles may be chewed and the juice swallowed for sore throat, spit out the needles.

Spruce pitch and inner bark of spruce that has been boiled is consumed for coughs and colds. Inner spruce bark are boiled together with spruce needles. The liquid is strained of bark and needles and other "impurities" through a screen or cheesecloth. The liquid can be kept in the refrigerator for about a week. The liquid may also be reheated before drinking. This natural medicine can be given to infants for coughs.

Spruce needles from young spruce trees, about five inches in diameter, burned on the stove top makes the air good to breath when one have a cold. This method of "medication" can be used all night.

Juniper plants are used in much the same way. Juniper berries and needles are boiled in water and used for rash. Rosie claims the rash she had behind her ears and hands were healed this way. She applied the liquid onto a towel and pressed it against the rash and said to it, "This is the time for me to use you now, so you got to help me, I want you to help me, I want you to heal me." When she picked the plants, she told it, "I'm not breaking you off for nothing. You're going to help me." Jonathan was skeptical about the whole thing at the time. He told Rosie, "That's not going to heal you, what the hell you bother it for?" Later when he saw that it worked for Rosie he also used it for some rash that he had for years. The rash disappeared. This

liquid can also be used to relieve arthritis. The afflicted part of the body can be soaked or one can bathe in it.

Sandbar willow leaves are chewed then applied to bee stings to help reduce the swelling and relieve the pain.

"Stinkweed" [a species of artemisia, specifically called artemisia tilesii] is burned in a container and the ashes are mixed with Vaseline and is applied on sores. Jonathan says he would never use it because it is too strong. "You got to know how much to use." While green, this plant is used to help relieve pain.

Khunentsena', an unidentified plant that grows on hillsides can be used for tea. This plant is found in sandy patches. It can be dried and used for sores and aches. Spring is the best time to pick these plants. While green it can help heal diaper rash.

"Beena" [wasp comb] are used for arthiritus. It is put into boiling water, removed and put onto a towel and applied on joints [knee, ankles, elbows, etc.] to reduce swelling. The combs are acquired when all the wasps have left their nest(s).

When frostbite occurs on the face, nasal fluid is applied to the affected area.

#### FOOD

Birch sap was used to survive at times when there was nothing to eat. They peel off the birchbark and scrape the sap and cambium upwards and it drips into a pan. The sap is sweet and can be drunk straight. It can be boiled and saved up to two to three weeks. It is harvested during spring for children and is used much like fruit.

Water berries, black in color, were picked for food, not along river banks, but on the lakes. Jonathan says that they are red and are hard to crush. He claims that he sees them in stores--this food source is unidentified.

Wild carrots or celery are another plant food picked in late fall. The University hill was once a place where the Athabascan people would harvest this food source. [Name of University hill is Troth Yeddha' which means 'wild carrot hill']

Rosehips, even when dry, are picked during fall and winter. The dry fruit is soaked in oil (Wesson) and becomes swollen. During the spring months this fruit is not picked because they are black. The fruit is boiled in water and given to children by the spoonfuls, a good source of vitamin C.

The inner sides of willow bark are chewed for pleasure or for medicinal purposes. [Yupik Eskimos use this source to help relieve sore mouth or throat]. Labrador tea is used as tea or can be boiled with meat and the broth is imbibed (consumed).

#### CHILDBIRTH

The process of giving birth is natural and is not induced by any natural drugs or medicine. A lot of exercise is practiced; activities such as taking walks, sawing and splitting fire wood is most common.

Greasy foods are not allowed because the birth process of the baby will be slow. Drinking too much tea is not advised for pregnant women--remember what the mother eats or drinks, the unborn child eats or drinks the same.

Blueberries and other berries are not eaten because bears eat this fruit during the summer months hibernates in the winter. Bear and beaver meat are not eaten by women who are pregnant. This arises from the fact that these animals are not seen in winter and both live in dens. Both animals do not come out until spring.

Midwives (men or women) are trained to deliver babies. Men so trained helped their wives deliver when there are not other midwives available. Children are not allowed to watch the birth process. Women giving birth did not lay on their backs, they were positioned in a more of a sitting pose and pulling a horizontal pole as if attempting sit-ups. This method of birthing was discouraged by doctors, but now is making a come back.

When babies are born, they are slapped to get them to breathe. A frying pan is hit near the infants ear to get his attention. (What a start). Soon, if everything is okay, the baby will start to breathe and cry.

Black charcoal is used to dry the navel. Many babies bleed to death from improperly tied umbilical cords.

Babies born with crooked arms or legs are splinted with wood or wrapped tightly to help straighten the limbs. Every morning the infants arms or legs are moved back and forth for exercise. When the infants wake from naps, they are rubbed on the back, legs, arms, etc.

Babies born with cleft lips or palates could not be helped. These babies usually died.