

**VOLUME X, NO. 4 and VOLUME XI, NO. 1**  
**January 1997**

**Folk Medicine**  
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As you walk down the aisles of your local drugstore seeing the array of brightly colored bottles and boxes whose contents are designed to treat an almost endless variety of ailments, could you ever imagine them as flowers once growing on a forest floor or as a bark cut from one of its trees? From the chemicals developed by nature have actually come 25 percent of all our medications.

The history of the relationship between products from living plants and healing medications goes back to the very beginnings of medicine itself, from 3700 B.C. Egypt, followed by the Chinese and later the Greeks and Romans. In the early frontier days of West Virginia, the vast majority of settlers in our region were cut off from any kind of "formal" medical care and moreover, competent physicians long remained beyond the reach, both physically and financially, of a vast segment of the population. For residents deprived of these benefits, folk medicine derived from time-honored and age-old traditions was used.

Even after new and better treatments became available, residents clung tenaciously to folk remedies handed down from generations long past. Many such remedies survived well into the twentieth century and even yet constitute a part of the home treatments practiced in remote areas of the mountains. In 1610 King James, King of England, enforced what was known as the "Great Settlement" or the "Kings Plantation." It was an attempt by King James to gain control of the Irish by putting a Protestant population into Ireland.

To do this he confiscated the lands of the Earl of Ulster and bestowed them upon Scottish and English lords on the condition that they settle the territory with tenants from Scotland and England. While in Ulster, the Scots multiplied and after about roughly 100 years became dissatisfied with the English and began emigrating in large numbers to the English colonies in America, hence the term "Scotch-Irish." As a whole, these were superstitious people who held great value in weather signs and nature lore, remedies, omens and family customs. Most folk lore (including folk medicine) having been passed down from generation to generation were held accepted as fact. Even today, many health care professionals have difficulty treating rural West Virginians due to the old beliefs that occasionally conflict with modern medicine.

Many plants provided the basic ingredients that were used in the preparation of medicines and remedies by the backwoodsman. There seemed to be a belief among the early settlers that the more distasteful or obnoxious a concoction was, the more effective it would be. Some of their remedies are still used today in patent medicines. Wild cherry bark for cough medicine is an example. The principle ailments of the early settler included a variety of stomach troubles. Inasmuch as the diet of the mountain people left much to be desired, a diet which included fatback and sowbelly along with many other greasy items, there is little wonder that they had any stomach at all!

Sassafras, catnip, horehound and pennyroyal were all brewed into teas and used to treat coughs and colds. The leaves and twigs of red cedar were boiled and inhaled for bronchitis. White and black willow leaves

and bark were made into a tea to break up a fever which makes perfect sense today since we know that willow is very abundant in salicylic acid -- aspirin. Bloodroot, golden seal, wild ginger and the corm of the jack-in-the-pulpit were used in a variety of concoctions. The pitch from the white pine healed wounds and sores. Powdered bark of the hemlock was used to staunch the flow of blood from a cut. Tannin in the bark of the hemlock was good for burns. Cooked pine needles were used for toothache. Rhododendron oil was used for rheumatism. Whether these remedies were effective or not, is not recorded. Who dared to get sick, with all that faced them on the frontier.

Blood letting was popular during these frontier days. Dr. Joseph Doddridge, author of *Notes of the Settlement and Indian Wars* was a great proponent. Dr. Doddridge observed that the danger was not in using the lances too freely but in using it too sparingly in which the patient might be left with a spitting of blood (such as in might be brought about by some pulmonary disturbances) or even consumption. Many cough syrups were built around Virginia snakeroot. Pioneers also put great faith in dried Indian turnip mixed with honey, but they knew that unless the Indian turnip had been scraped from the top downward the mixture would have no effect.

Poultices were also very highly regarded and depending on what ailed you -- there were different poultices to cure you. Mustard plasters or poultices were used to "break congestion." Apparently there was a fine line of time to leaving it on. You left it on until the skin turned pink but did not blister. Yarrow and jimson weed, two very common, summertime weeds in West Virginia, have been greatly touted as ingredients in poultices that are to be placed on wounds to draw out infection.

The American experience is deeply rooted in the lore of Native Indians. Though there was not a large Indian population in West Virginia per se, there were those that were "transplanted" here for one reason or another. My mother, who was born and raised a Clay Countian, remembers an old woman who lived way up one of the hollows from her family's farm. Prudy White was a full-blooded Blackfoot Indian who "doctored" the people who lived nearby. My mother remembers a time when she was seven years old and was coming down with chickenpox. She had a terrible fever and was chilling though covered with many quilts and sitting in front of the stove. My grandmother's concern was that the chickenpox "had not come out." The fear was that if the pox didn't come out on the skin, they would go inside and could cause a child to die. My grandmother sent my grandfather after Old Prudy. My mother was scared to death of Old Prudy particularly since local legend had it she was a witch and could put a spell on you and make you die. My mother said that Prudy came in and took one look at her and walked back outside and into the woods. When she came back she had her apron full of roots and bark and berries that she told my grandmother to brew into a tea. My mom says it was the nastiest tasting stuff she'd ever tasted but, within 15 minutes the chickenpox began coming out" and within 1 hour she was covered head to toe with the little red spots. She ran the regular course for chickenpox and was soon on her feet again. She also recalls the time her father came down with double pneumonia. Prudy was once again summoned by the family but she came into the house, looked at my grandfather and told my grandmother to make him comfortable, there was nothing she could do. He died the next morning. When my mother was older, in high school, she said she had a small wart under her left thumbnail. She sent her sister to Prudy's house to ask her what to do since my mother was still rather afraid of her. Prudy told her to take a kernel of corn and rub on the wart. She then said to take the kernel of corn and wrap it up pretty like a gift and place it in the fork of a two roads at night during a full moon. My mother did everything Prudy had said and within 2 weeks, the wart was gone. The bad part was that Prudy had also said that whoever found the kernel of corn would get the wart. My mother went to school the day after her wart disappeared and to her dismay saw, sitting next to her, the meanest girl in the whole county with a small wart under her left thumbnail.

I am a Home Health RN that makes visits to patients in their homes. The majority of my patients are elderly and have offered me a wide variety of cures:

- The blood of a black chicken rubbed on the affected area will cure the shingles.
- Black chickens are also good to bring out chickenpox particularly if you go out to the chicken coop after the sun goes down and let one fly over you.
- Tea made from hot water and corn silk will cure bed wetting in children.
- The root of rhubarb worn on a string around your neck will prevent stomach aches.
- Tie a big red onion to the bedpost and it keeps the ones in the bed from having colds.
- Boils are caused by impure blood, you should eat sorghum molasses, raisins and onions.
- A dirty sock worn around your neck when you go to bed will cure a sore throat. (My grandmother had a dog that had tonsillitis, and she did the above and the dog got well.)
- Don't let the moonlight shine on your face while your sleeping, it will cause you to go crazy.
- A buckeye carried in the pocket will cure rheumatism.
- Don't cut your hair in the dark of the moon or it may cause you to go bald.
- Tea made from sumac leaves is good for and can cure asthma and hay fever.
- An iron key pressed to the back of the neck will cure a nosebleed.
- To stop a toothache in your left jaw, tie a string around the little toe of your right foot.
- For the right jaw, reverse the directions.

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