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## Article Title: The Medicinal Herbs of our Forefathers

Full Citation: Lila Gravatt Scrimsher, "The Medicinal Herbs of our Forefathers," *Nebraska History* 50 (1969): 309-322

URL of article: [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1969Med\\_Herbs.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1969Med_Herbs.pdf)

Date: 5/4/2011

Article Summary: This article presents a sampling of the thousands of home remedies documented in early American historical writings, providing insight into traditional natural treatments, some of which have stood the test of time and others not.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Mari Sandoz, Meriwether Lewis, William Ellsworth Webber, Hans Kiersteade, Alice Morse Earle, Anneke Webber Janse Bogardus, Nichols Van Wassenaer, Rev Jonas Michaelius, Adriaen van der Donck, Jacques Cartier, John Josselyn, H L Girth Van Wijk, Asa Gray

Keywords: Thalomid, Krebiozen, "simples," mustard plaster, goose grease, skunk oil, "receipt book," *A Receipt Book, Farmersville, Catt Co NY 1850*, Knickerbocker Pickel, saltpetre, lime, ginger, tobacco, Laudanum, hemlock, milkweed, chamomile, mosses, liverworts, Wahoo, olive oil, yeast

# THE MEDICINAL HERBS OF OUR FOREFATHERS

By LILA GRAVATT SCRIMSHER

With the present multiplicity of modern drugs and their occasional tragic failure, as occurred with Thalomid and Krebiozen, one is inclined to reflect with relief on the tried and true "simples" of our grandparents' day. Some of them have stood the test of years, others the test of centuries. Who does not respect the use of salt as a healer of membranes, catarrhal conditions, or sore throats; soda, mud kept moist, bread and milk poultices that drew poison from the stings; or a piece of fat salt pork that was bound over rusty nail punctures? Mustard plasters have always been good, using a kindly portion of flour to subdue their fierceness, but even then the mustard plaster was not to be applied for more than fifteen minutes. Goose grease and skunk oil had their own peculiar drawing properties; sugar moistened with turpentine and held on the tongue allayed fits of coughing.

The young teacher in Mari Sandoz' *Winter Thunder*,<sup>1</sup> when caught on the prairie in a blizzard with feverish children, brewed willow bark tea until it was strong and dark and made them drink it; shortly thereafter the children broke out in perspiration and were relieved. In 1805 when Captain Meriwether Lewis was returning from Oregon he was seized with severe abdominal pains; he boiled two-

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inch lengths of chokecherry twigs and drank the decoction—the first dose at sunset, and by ten o'clock he was without pain.<sup>2</sup>

But not all the home remedies seemed sound. It is easy to accept the conclusion that pungent asafetida bags suspended from a child's neck and intended to ward off germs did so only by warding off other children.<sup>3</sup> Some people may have recollections of old grannies insisting the salt pork be nailed over the barn door, or that asthma sufferers should wear muskrat skins over their lungs with the fur side next to the body. It seems worthwhile to subject some of the more reasonable-sounding ones to the scrutiny of herbalists and present-day drug standards.

At least one "receipt book" dated more than a century ago, offers household hints and kitchen recipes as well as health remedies. A book of this sort, frequently made by pioneers—loose sheets of paper between pasteboard covers tied with bits of ribbon or yarn—came to Nebraska in 1891 among the treasures of a bride,<sup>4</sup> who had travelled in covered wagons from Cattaraugus County, New York, to Iowa, to Kansas, thence to Nemaha County. Inscribed with the name of a young man of Dutch descent, William Ellsworth Webber, there is also this ornamental title, "*A Receipt Book, Farmersville, Catt Co. N.Y. 1850.*" In faded brown handwriting that is still quite elegant there is divers information, some merely amusing, some of real interest; it gives methods of preserving eggs, destroying bedbugs, rendering leather waterproof, coloring red hair black. Tainted pork "even when much injured can be restored in warm weather by boiling up the brine, skimming it well and repouring it over the meat while still boiling hot." House plans showed the old-time Dutch "Stoope", "square room", and always four or five eight by ten bedroom cubicles.

One quaint "receipt" is for The Knickerbocker Pickel. "For pork take six gallons of water, nine pounds of salt, three pounds of brown sugar, one quart of molasses, three ounces of saltpetre and one ounce of pearlash; mix, and

boil the whole well, then skim. When the meat is cut it should be slightly rubbed in fine salt and lay a day or two that the salt may extract the blood, then it may be packed tight in a cask, the pickel poured over it when coald. A follower may be put in the cask and a weight so as to keep the meat under the pickel; add a little salt and molasses in the spring and boil again, then pour it over the meat when coald. For domestic use beef and pork hams should not be salted on the day the animals are killed. Meat for smoking requires less salt than that which remains in the pickel, and should not be dried with heat but smoake.”\*

Startling is the cure for a stifled horse. “Take 1 gallon urine, put therein a small hand full of junk tobacco, boil down to 1 quart; then add 2 ounces of the oil of spike, 1 ounce of the oil of amber, 2 spoonfuls of spirits of turpentine and 2 of honey. Put into a jug and cork tight for use. Process for using: Rub the stifle bone hard with the mixture fifteen or twenty minutes; then dry it thoroughly with a red-hot fire shovel, next ride the horse forth and back one hundred rods. Repeat the above two or three times and a cure is most sure.”

The “receipts” continue: “To have candles give good light. Soak the wicks in lime water and saltpetre, and dry them before dipping.”

“Receipt for setting rison. Take one quart warm water, 1 teaspunful of salt, 1 of saleratus and 1 of ginger. Mix the bread with warm water.”

“Receipt for preserving Corn from worms. Take 1 pound of tobacco to 4 galens of water, soak the Corn therein.”

“To kill a pipe. Take Arsnick role up in toe and put in the pipe.”

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\* Original spelling of Webber's *Receipt Book* is maintained in this article.

“Receipt for removing moss off of housen rooves. Sprinkle a little dry white lead near the top just before a rain.”

Yet it is remedies for the aches and pains of humans which we wish to examine, and any New York “receipt book” of that period was bound to be replete with such. This one is especially so since William Ellsworth Webber was of the lineage of Dr. Hans Kiersteade, called by Alice Morse Earle,<sup>5</sup> “the best colonial physician of his day.” He was the son-in-law of Anneke Webber Janse Bogardus, famous for the two-centuries-old lawsuit between her heirs and Old Trinity Church over New York City property.

Dr. Kierstead had a profusion of herbs with which to work, and though many years had elapsed before the time of William Ellsworth Webber, the medical advances which have obliterated plant species by this time were not yet in process in New York. Reported Nicholas Van Wassenauer<sup>6</sup> who spent 1624-28 in New Netherland: “In some places they (the Indians) have abundant means with herbs and leaves and roots to cure their ailments. There is not an ailment they have not a remedy for.” The Rev. Jonas Michaelius, first minister in New Amsterdam,<sup>7</sup> wrote in 1628: “And what the land possesses in all kinds of fruits, roots, herbs and plants both for eating and medicinal purposes, and with which wonderful cures can be effected, it would take too long to tell, nor could I yet tell accurately.”

Adriaen van der Donck and his associates, preparing a careful listing of New Netherland herbs, 1649, wrote, “. . . after a little search, are principally as they have come to our knowledge *Capelli veneris* (Maidenhair), *Scholapendria* (Hound’s Tongue), *Angelica* (Belly-ache root), *Polypodium* (Fern), *Verbascum album* (white Mullein), *Colceue sacerdotis vel maris* (Moccasin plant), *Atriplex hortensis vel marina* (garden or marine Orach), *Chortium turrites* (tower mustard), *Calamus aromanticus* (Sweet flag), *Sassafrax* (Sassafras), *Rolis virginarium* (perhaps vigini-



*Familiar symbol of early pharmacy, the mortar and pestle.*

cum) (Sumach), *Ranunculus* (crowfoot), *Plantago* (plantain), *Bursa pastoris* (Shepherd's purse), *Malva* (Mallow), *Origanum* (Marjoram), *Geranium* (Cranesbill), *Althea* (Marsh Mallow), *Cinero-ton pseudodaphne* (Spice bush), *Viola* (violet), *Irias* (Blue flag), *Indigo silvestris* (wild indigo), *Sigillum salomonis* (Solomon's seal), *Sanguis draconium* (Dragon's blood), *Consolida* (Comfrey), *Millefolium* (Milfoil), several species Ferns, various wild lilies, Agrimony (wild leek), *Corduus benedictus* (Blessed Thistle), *Serpentaria* (Snakeroot), Indian figs which grow on the leaves,<sup>9</sup> *Tarragon* (Wormwood) and numerous other plants and flowers; but as we are not skilled in those things we cannot say much about them. Nevertheless we doubt not but amateurs would be able to find there divers simples of great and varied virtues in which we have confidence, principally because the Indians can cure very severe and dangerous wounds and sores by roots, leaves and other trifles."

Indians have been credited with curative draughts. A notable example regarded Jacques Cartier and his explorers. The winter was of unusual severity, supplies ran low and scurvy struck the camp. Almost everyone was stricken, and a quarter of them had died before they learned

from the Indians<sup>10</sup> that the bark of white spruce boiled in water was the cure they needed. The Frenchmen dosed themselves using a whole tree within a week, and with such results that Cartier recorded the discovery as a genuine miracle.

John Josselyn,<sup>11</sup> "who came here from England, 1638," recommended the grease of the black bear as very good for aches and cold swellings, citing the redmen who anointed themselves with it from head to toe when winter set in. He is authority for, "The leaf fat from the bellies of rattlesnakes" being excellent for anointing frozen limbs; and "their hearts swallowed fresh is a good antidote against their venom." For a knee bruise or cut, Indians chewed Alder bark and placed the bark on the wound. A tea made from White Birch bark took fire out of a burn. To reduce swellings and sores, they used the inner bark of young Hemlock, boiled it, then "knocked it betwixt two stones to a Playster".

Numbers of plants and trees from van der Donck's list are ingredients of the Webber "receipts". Following are some of the remedies:

For bleeding at the Lungs

Cranesbill-powdered  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoonful

or

Buckhorn break 10-12 roots in one qt. brandy, add 1 pt. water.

Cranesbill or Wild geranium has been employed for all the purposes to which astringents are applicable, diminishing secretions, coagulating the blood, as would be desirable in diarrhea, indolent ulcers, sore throat and similar ailments.<sup>12</sup>

Buckhorn is called a cress in an old herbal by Richard Bankes, "dwelling in London, a little from the Stocks in Poultry, the twenty-fifth day of March. The Year of our Lord, 1525." The Buckhorn of New York, and the one Wil-

liam Ellsworth Webber would have utilized, was probably a plantain, and a remedy for ague.<sup>13</sup> It has cathartic properties; if used in its green state it produces violent reactions.<sup>14</sup>

For inflammatory rheumatism  
 2 ounces Wormwood oil  
 3 ounces hemlock oil

Wormwood oil is the juice of Tarragon, one of the *Artemesia*; with the exception of Rue, Wormwood is the bitterest herb known.<sup>15</sup> It has been used as a tonic to stimulate digestion.<sup>16</sup>

Hemlock oil is a powerful sedative. A stronger brew made a poisonous drink which has been made famous by noble Socrates. Hemlock oil has been used in tetanus with good results.<sup>17</sup>

Surup for Cleansing the blood. Take Tablespunful 3 times daily.

1 lb. Sarsaphrilla  
 3 lbs. Tamarack bark  
 ½ lb. Green Osier bark  
 1½ lb. Wandering Milkweed  
 1½ lb. Swampsnake root  
 ½ lb Burdock  
 1 lb. Spikenard

Sarsaparilla was one of the earliest American drugs to be used by European physicians. It was believed for a long time to have value as an alternative, or gradual restorative of healthy bodily functions.<sup>18</sup> It was also a tonic and useful in skin disorders.

Tamarack bark was American Larch, of value in obstructions of the liver, rheumatism, jaundice, besides being a sedative and tonic.

Green Osier bark was from willows and dogwoods.<sup>19</sup>

Wandering Milkweed is *Apocynum Androsaemfolium*, a dogbane with milky juice, and so named was found only

in three botanical references: *Dictionary of Plant Names*, by H. L. Girth Van Wijk, published by the Dutch Society of Sciences at Haarlem, the Hague, 1911, in *Distribution, Abundance and Uses of Wild Drug Plants in Oregon and Southern California*, plus one reference to Wandering Milkweed being found in the San Bernardino Mountains of California at altitudes of 6500-9500 feet. It is prescribed mainly for rheumatism.

Swampsnake root tones up digestive organs and in small doses promotes the appetite.<sup>20</sup>

Burdock was considered an alternative earlier, and supposedly a cure for gout. It purifies the blood.<sup>22</sup>

Spikenard was a smilax, formerly used as an alternative similar to sarsaphrilla in rheumatic affections; its therapeutic value now is extremely questionable.

#### Receipt for stopping Diarea

Take 1 Tabelspoonful of Burdock steep in one pint of water. Dose the whole.

#### For canker take

Moss of the well  
 Brook liverwort  
 Chamomile  
 Flower of the s-ring (sic)  
 Egromany  
 Frogs and fresh buter

Mosses and liverworts, certain cryptogamous plants or bryophytes with leafy, often tufted stems, plus lichens which are not differentiated into stem and leaf, have been employed in skin troubles.<sup>23</sup> Liverworts have been thought valuable in affections of the liver, and were thus named; plants have frequently been named according to their original use in medicine, and the traditional use may have stemmed from nothing more than some peculiarity of the plant—its shape, color, scent, taste, or habitat. Hence we have liverwort, lungwort, bladderwort, snakeroot, pleurisy root, Heal-all, even Canterbury bell with its throat-like

corolla, all supposedly giving evidence in some fashion of curative areas.<sup>24</sup>

Chamomile is the same as camomile; for centuries it was employed for healing wounds.<sup>25</sup> Its strong scented foliage and flower heads yield a bitter substance which relieves spasms and reduces irritation.<sup>26</sup>

Egromany is Agrimony; Adriaen van der Donck called it Wild Leek. It was highly regarded by medieval herbalists, and has been reported useful for healing ulcers.<sup>27</sup>

For inflammation

Take Indian meal

wet with water and cook it put

Spirits of turpentine on when spread on a cloth to be put on the parts effected 2 hours at a time.

Indian meal was ground maize, North America's contribution to the world's cereals, now commonly called corn.

Spirits of Turpentine has been used medicinally from time immemorial; it is good for healing wounds and coughs, but is no longer administered internally.

For coughs take

Skunk cabbage

Wild turnip

Wahoo and lungwort

Hoarhoun      Dose 1 Tablespunful 3 times a day

Skunk cabbage was a despised plant largely ignored by herbalists. Asa Gray, Botanist, lists it as *Symplocarpus foetidus*, and describes its odor as a combination of skunk, putrid flesh and garlic. Its seeds and roots however came to have a number of uses, mainly as an expectorant and a narcotic; larger doses caused nausea, vomiting, headache and dimness of vision.<sup>28</sup>

Wild turnip also is largely ignored by botanists, who generally regard what they call Indian turnip as the same as Jack-in-the-Pulpit; however Pool & Maxwell in Wild Flowers in Nebraska, E.C.5-168. classifies Indian turnip

as *Psoralea esculenta*, and Jack-in-the-Pulpit as *Arisaema triphyllum*. Gleason, *New Britton & Brown Illustrated Flora of the Northeastern United States & Canada* calls *Psoralea esculenta* the Prairie Turnip. *New Century Dictionary* defines navew (French *neveau*, dim. L. *napus*, turnip) the wild turnip, which no doubt would have been the species available to William E. Webber's area (Western New York).

Wahoo is a small tree or shrub whose small rosy coral colored seeds were purgative.<sup>29</sup> Lungwort (its spotted leaves resembling diseased lungs!) is however recognized to have healing effects on pulmonary complaints.<sup>30</sup>

Hoarhound, formerly popular as an expectorant, in large doses is laxative.<sup>31</sup>

#### Rec't. for Liniment

Take 1 oz. organum oil

1 oz. Spirits Hartshorn

1/2 oz. sweet oil

Put the two first in a bottle, then pour in sweet oil until it is as thick as Buttermilk. Shake before using.

Organum oil was extracted from Horsemint (*Monarda ounctata* L.). The whole herb was used, abounding in volatile oil and having an aromatic odor. It is not used in modern practice.<sup>32</sup>

Spirits of Hartshorn was an ammonia preparation made from the antlers of the hart or male deer and most commonly the red deer.

Sweet oil is olive oil.

#### A Cure for bilious Consumption

Take one large handfull of Tamarack bark put in four quarts of water, boild down to one, and strain when coald, add one pint of brandy, one pound of loaf shugar and one biscuit raised with emptyings,—after taking off the outside crust put in a

jar or something that is handy so as to take a little of the biscuit and a teaspoonfull three times a day before eating.

Yeast prepared from the dregs of hops, potatoes and the like was called emptyings.

For the Cholery in the first when the diarea is first commenced use Laudanum six drops in mild cases; if there is pain and a tendency to cramp and coldness in the extremities a mixture of laudanum,<sup>33</sup> tincture of rhubarb and tincture of camphor, equal proportions of this may be given an adult, to be increased according to circumstances. Does to be repeated every four hours.

“Receipts” for three salves follow. One wonders if any of them contain the ingredients of “the closely guarded family secret” to which Alice Morse Earle refers in her *Colonial Days!*

A Salve for the Aracipeles

take one handful of pumpkin seed meats,<sup>34</sup> one of the inside bark of white pithed elder, one of frog-spit fried down in fresh buter or cream is best. Rub on.

Frog-spit is a fresh-water algae, one genus forming a floating mass.

A Salve for burns and sores

1 oz. Organum oil  
12 oz. fresh buter oil  
1 tablespunfull of Spirits of Turpentine to be rubed in.

For sores To be rubed on

Take 1 oz. Chamberly 35  
1 oz. Rosin  
2 oz. Beeswax or melted Tallow. Boil down the Chamberly thick, and stir in the several ingredients when hot.

Chamberly (*F. Chambréule commune L.Galeopsis*), found only in *Dictionary of Plant Names*, is a nettle. Strangely, the juice of nettle is antidote for its own sting; another antidote is Dock leaves which are often found in close proximity.

Provided here has been only a sampling of the thousands of home remedies resorted to by mankind. Yet it is evident from these few that the best of them had some merit, whether the healing function was sedative, purgative, or tonic. It is evident also that an amateur's interest in medicinal herbs had best be from a historical or botanical standpoint, for tinctures and extracts are sometimes too potent to be prescribed by unskilled persons. With what quavering hands those old-time mothers should have counted out their drops of laudanum!

In the past two decades scientific interest in drugs has turned to synthetic or molecular reproduction in laboratories, but as research has continued synthesis proves to be more costly than extraction from natural forms.<sup>36</sup> So the great botanical hunt goes on in Asia, Africa, Europe, both Americas—grubbing for roots, stripping bark, picking flowers, leaves, and fruits. In 1958 the volume of American drug plants for human use amounted to more than \$20.2 million. Our forefathers who stopped to gather a ripe head of burdock on their way in from the field would be dumbfounded!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mari Sandoz, *Winter Thunder*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Lewis and Clark, Journals of*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1953), 135.

<sup>3</sup> *Dispensary of United States*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1955), 11. "Its (asafetida) therapeutic action probably arose from the psychic effect of its disagreeable odor and taste." Henceforth cited as U.S.D.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Webber Gravatt, formerly of Talmage, Nebraska.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Days in Old New York*, (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1904), 90. "One tribute to old-time medicine we owe still. The well-known Kiersteade Ointment, manufactured and sold in New York today, is made from a receipt of Dr. Kiersteade . . . The manufacture of this ointment is a closely guarded family secret . . . and in the centuries that have passed the descendants have had more profit from the ointment than the real estate."

<sup>6</sup> *Narratives of New Netherland* (Original) ed. by J. Franklin Jameson, (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1909).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> Probably prickly pear.

<sup>10</sup> William J. Bennett Munro, *Crusaders of New France*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Old Farmer's Almanack, (Dublin, N.H.: Yankee Inc., 1965), 96. Also Melvin R. Gilmore's thesis *Use of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region*, 1914, University of Nebraska.

<sup>12</sup> *U.S.D.*, 1705. Also *Economic Botany* Vol. 1, (Philadelphia: 1847), 62.

<sup>13</sup> Grieve (Maude) & Leyel (Mrs. C.F.), *A Modern Herbal*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1931), 642.

<sup>14</sup> *U.S.D.*, 1644.

<sup>15</sup> *Grieve & Leyel*, 858.

<sup>16</sup> *U.S.D.*, 1523.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1645

<sup>18</sup> *Grieve & Leyel* in 1931 accepts alternatives.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 846-47.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 745.

<sup>21</sup> *U.S.D.* in 1955 discounts alternatives.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 1733

<sup>23</sup> *Economic Botany*, Vol. 15, p. 2

<sup>24</sup> *Grieve & Leyel*, 1

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 14; *U.S.D.*, 1550

<sup>26</sup> *Webster's International Dictionary*, (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam & Co., 1964), 372

<sup>27</sup> *Economic Botany*, Vol. 10, p. 42

<sup>28</sup> *Grieve & Leyel*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 763

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 502

<sup>31</sup> *U.S.D.*,

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1758.

<sup>33</sup> *Webster's International Dictionary*, 1277. Laudanum was formerly any preparation in which opium was the chief ingredient.

<sup>34</sup> *Journal of American Chemical Science*, 32 (1910), 346. "Power and Solway were unable to detect any active substance in pumpkin seeds." *Journal of Pharmacology*, 12 (1918), 129. "The experiments of Sollman on earthworms, however, afford some scientific basis for accepting the traditional belief in the value of pumpkin seeds, if fresh, in the management of tapeworm infestation."

<sup>35</sup> *Grieve & Leyel*, 575-77. "Burns may be cured rapidly by applying to them linen clothes well wetted with diluted (Chamberly) juice. . . An infusion of the green leaves is also soothing as a lotion. Nettles have long been used as a blood purifier. . . are still in demand by wholesale herbalists."

<sup>36</sup> John A. Mirt, "The Renaissance in Botanical Drugs," *Today's Health*, (May, 1963), 43.