

Catawbas' Healing Arts Explored

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Medicines Made From Herbs, Roots

When white settlers first came to this area they brought with them a number of diseases the



Nearby
History

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Indians had never experienced and therefore had acquired no immunity to, particularly smallpox and measles.

The encounter of two vastly different cultures worked two ways. The Indians passed along diseases of their own. Over many years each group had learned, mostly through trial and error, what cures were most effective.

Unfortunately, it was not until Dr. Frank Speck, an ethnologist from the University of Pennsylvania, came to do field work among the Catawbas in 1913 that anyone wrote extensively on Catawba medical practices. Speck was not a medical doctor but he was inter-

ested in the words the Catawbas used to describe their medicines and the healing process.

There were still a handful of Catawbas who spoke the native language. Speck was able to list about 15 ailments and about 30 herbal remedies (Catawba medicine relied almost totally on roots, bark and leaves of local plants.) He found that the Catawba word for the concept of disease translated as "seizure" or "grip."

The Catawbas treated 15 ailments: rheumatism, ague, fever, fever and ague combined, heart complaint, headache, constipation, dysentery, jaundice, skin afflictions, sores and boils, colds, backache and lumbago, hives and nightmares (the last caused by dwarf spirits or little people).

Sally Brown, a Catawba, told Speck that sickness was brought by the shadow of a dead person or ghost and medicine was the weapon used to cure. She said it was important to gather the herbal medicine in a certain way.

She always peeled the bark from the north side of a tree. Roots were cut at an angle. She always placed her knife blade on the west side of the root and cut in a downward slice toward the east, or, as she said, "cut from sunset to sunrise."

Enough of the plant was left to renew itself. The medicine would be ineffective if taken from a destroyed plant. Some herbs were gathered at the waning of the moon, some at the waxing.

An herb "doctor" prepared the medicine by boiling the roots, bark or leaves in an earthenware pot. The patient drank the concoction. Part of the liquid was saved for the doctor, who used a long cane to siphon it and blow it over the patient's body. In this way the doctor left some of his personal power over the body of the patient.

For wounds from arrows or snakebite, the area was first probed with a pin or turkey wing bone. When the blood flowed freely, the doctor sucked the incision to remove the "bad blood." Then he either blew medicine into the wound with the cane tube or dropped it through a bone tube. After that, the patient drank the remainder of the prepared liquid.

Another way to insert the medicine was to use an eagle quill to puncture the skin and let the medicine flow into the cut "like ink from a fountain pen." Bloodroot, which had a highly prized red dye, was smeared over the cut and left there to wear off.

Frequently, the doctor and the patient bathed in the Catawba River before beginning the treatment. During a smallpox epidemic in 1759 the South Carolina Gazette of Charleston reported:

"It is pretty certain that the smallpox has lately raged with great violence among the Catawba Indians, and that it has carried off near one half of that Nation, by throwing themselves into the river as soon as they found themselves ill."

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