

MEDICAL PRACTICES OF THE CATAWBA INDIANS

by Louise Pettus

When white settlers first came to this area they brought with them a number of diseases that the Indians had never experienced--particularly smallpox and measles for which the Indians had acquired no immunity.

The encounter of two vastly differently cultures worked two ways. The Indians passed along diseases of their own. Over many, 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 Univ. of Pennsylvania, came to do field work among the Catawbas in 1913 that anyone wrote extensively on Catawba medical practices. Dr. Speck was not a medical doctor but he was interested in the words that the Catawbas used to describe their medicines and the healing process.

There were still a handful of Catawbas who spoke the native language. Dr. Speck was able to list about 14 ailments and about 30 herbal remedies (Catawba medicine almost totally relied 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 14 ailments: rheumatism, ague, fever, fever and ague combined, heart complaint, headache, constipation, dysentery, jaundice, skin afflictions, sores and boils, catch cold, backache and lumbago, hives and nightmares (the last caused by dwarf-spirits or little people).

Sally Brown told Dr. Speck that sickness was brought by the shadow of a dead person (a ghost) and that medicine was the weapon used to cure. She said that 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 it, 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. A part of the liquid was saved back for the doctor, who used a long cane to syphon up the liquid and then blew 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 a turkey wingbone. When the blood flowed freely the doctor sucked the incision to remove the "bad blood" and then either blew medicine into the wound with the cane tube or dropped the medicine 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 blow 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. This custom is the best explanation we have as to why during the smallpox epidemic of 1759 the *South Carolina Gazette* reported: "It is pretty certain that the small-pox has lately