

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, February 2011

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Nokoms had their own stash of medicines

When I think of health I think of childhood, my mom and the mothers of our community who worked so hard keeping their families healthy. Although we didn't live far from a town, we were isolated by many factors, two of them being race and poverty.

True, white people were also poor, but not in the way that made them invisible or suspect of all things no good. But that's not what I want to remember today. I want to remember and honor those moms and grandmothers and the things they did to keep us and our communities healthy.

Our homes were small log houses, often crowded with extended families with no place to live. There was no homelessness in those days, if someone had no home they were taken in until the men could build a log house and the women put in a garden. Everyone shared their meager food supplies with the person or family until the garden was ready.

Those gardens were often an acre in size and it was not uncommon for a family to have two of them. Working from sun-up to sundown every spring, the women prepared these plots for planting. Cultivating and raking the soil, they made sure the ground was smooth and clean of old weeds.

Then, after soaking the seeds in water, most of which were from last year's crop, the garden was planted with the help of every child that could walk and the summer spent putting in the early morning hours as well as serving your "time out" weeding the garden. Some people love gardening as a result of those years. Not me. I do it only because I believe that I should at least teach my grandchildren the importance of growing your own food. But I still hate weeding.

As the plants matured, they were canned and pickled. Healthy too, were the buckets of berries we children picked with our nokoms who dried some of them and canned others as well as making jars of jams and jellies. Hours and hours spent in the garden, in the bush and over a hot stove in July and August, until literally hundreds of jars of food filled the shelves of our cellars.

The also picked wild herbs and medicines, dried them, crushed others into powder and stored them all in cotton bags hanging them on the rafters of the cellar.

Although our nokoms did most of the doctoring, every mother had her own stash of medicines used for croups, coughs, fevers and any number of childhood illnesses. There were no drug stores and the general store had very little in the way of medicine. Even if they did, no one had the money to purchase them.

Our drug store was half a mile up the road in a meadow called Omisimaw Puskiwa (oldest sister prairie) where yarrow, plantain, wild roses, fireweed, asters, nettles and pigweed could be found in great abundance. Some of it was just medicine and some of it like fireweed, nettles and pigweed was medicine and food.

"Never mind, just drink it you need the medicine," was Mom's mantra as she made us eat or drink the wild things she and the nokoms harvested.

I have since come to understand that most everything we ate in those days was medicinal, including the moose and other wild animals. Moose, for example, eat willow and poplar branches all full of medicine. They eat water plantain and dig down deep in the water to eat the water lily and roots, both of which are very important ingredients in some cancer medicines. Bears eat berry, the roots of many plants making their fat, especially, highly prized by medicine people.

We drank wild rose hip tea every morning, all winter long because we needed the vitamin C and as I learned from my aunty, wild rose hips do not lose their vitamin content with boiling or cooking. This tea washed down the big spoonful of cod liver oil we also had to take every morning. This was the only store-bought medicine we ever had and believe me was probably the grossest stuff I've ever swallowed in my life and to think I did it to my children too.

"Why do I have to take it?" my youngest daughter asked one day after gagging through two spoonfuls and finally keeping one down.

"So you'll be healthy." I answered self-righteously. "And so you'll have good stories to tell your kids."

My husband laughed wiping her face. None of my grandchildren ever had to drink cod liver oil. They ate Flintstone vitamins instead but they have all been told the story of nokom's medicine.

I also remember having to eat a piece of smoked dried moose, bear or beaver fat every morning. With a bit of salt it was not as bad as cod liver oil. Nokom said it was to prevent us from turning into a Witigo, which was the human turned cannibal story of olden times. Our diets were very lean unlike today and we needed the fat to keep us healthy both physically and mentally.

Recently, while rummaging in an old lady's attic, I found an old scribbler full of recipes and remedies.

"Make with love for good health of family," reads the note under the title Recipes and Remedies. Here are some of the treasures I found in that scribbler.

"Saskatoon's for winter. Pick and dry berries on canvas spread out in the sun. Store in flour sack and hang in dry place away from mice and rats.

"Duck Eggs, but you must not steal from nest more then twice as the duck will give up and that's not good. Test eggs in water of slough or muskeg. If it floats put it back in nest. If sinks good. Heat small stones in campfire, make nest with hot stones, cover with grass, spruce branches or little sticks. Lay eggs on top. Cover with more grass then splash water on grass and steam for 10 minutes. Very good taste and very good for body.

"Dry wild strawberry runners and boil up when you need for diarrhea. Also add crushed dried roots for same belly trouble. Dried raspberry leaves may also be added but no have to. Dried and powdered strawberry plants are very good for a baby's bum rash.

"For those of you who may be dealing with head lice this works good. Apply coal oil to hair then put on a tight fitting hat over night, wash hair in morning. Next night apply vinegar to hairline and don another tight hat. In the morning, remove nits with fine-tooth comb, nits should just come off."

Last note in scribbler says, "Thank the good god each morning and night for all you have. Laugh a lot and kiss your children every day."

Happy New Year and good health.