Traditional Métis Medicines and Remedies – Todd Paquin

Module Objective: The Student's will learn about various aspects of the Métis' traditional healing practices and medicines.

Folk Medicine

While the Canadian West and the North were still largely unsettled, the Métis took responsibility for their own health care and healing. Doctors were few and far between, thus people had to doctor themselves and procure their own medicines. Much of the information related to the medicinal qualities of plant and animal products was gleaned from First Nations kin who had treated and healed themselves since time immemorial prior to the arrival of Europeans.

Oral accounts of folk medicine practices are many but, unfortunately, relate primarily to the past. Nearly every family had one member or a close friend who was knowledgeable about the curative powers of different plant and animal products. The storehouse of knowledge that people had of medicinal plants was large and extensive. Many older Métis remember women and girls going out to gather plants, roots, bark and leaves to make remedies for sick people in their communities. In the majority of cases, it was older women who were the herbalists and folk healers among the Métis.

Many of these traditional medicines and remedies involved adding ingredients to boiling water or boiling ingredients together in water (infusions and decoctions) for sipping. Other therapies simply required the ailing person to chew, swallow, breathe in or rub on the medicine. These remedies were used to treat a variety of ailments, from open wounds to headaches and pneumonia.

Roots, Leaves and Bark

Roots, leaves and barks were the main plant portions gathered for their medicinal qualities. While unable to effectively heal people suffering from diseases originating from contact with European people, these traditional medicines were and are remarkably effective for health problems indigenous to North America. The following are but a handful of the plants used to bring relief from various maladies.

Mint leaves, stems and roots were chewed or made into teas to relieve colds, stomach ailments, chest pains and headaches. Chokecherry bark and roots, when made into a tea[1], was effective in relieving sore throats, stomach pain and diarrhea. High bush cranberry bark tea was effective in relieving muscle cramps, particularly stomach and menstrual cramps, while inhaling the tea steam eases asthma. It also lessened pains associated with labour contractions because it is a uterine sedative. The juice from the chokecherry berries was also used as an antiseptic.

A tea was made from algae to help relieve cold symptoms, and a tea made with muskeg tealeaves helped to break fever. Horsetail root could be made into a tea, which acted as a diuretic (which cleanses the urinary track) to eliminate sickness or as a medicine to correct menstrual irregularities. Sage could be made into a tea to help remedy constipation, menstrual irregularities and difficulty in childbirth, while its use in a steam vapour helped to relieve breathing problems.

[1] To make cranberry bark tea, steep one tablespoon of fresh bark or one teaspoon of dried bark in one cup of boiled water and sip slowly until pain is relieved.

Pine and spruce needles used in a steam vapour also helped relieve chest and sinus colds. Pinesap, used in infusions, was used as a laxative.

The late Elsie Bear, from Grand Marais, Manitoba, described how to make a winter-cold remedy. The first step was to collect cedar brush, balsam bark and cherry bark. These ingredients were then boiled together to make a dark tea. Once the ingredients were removed from the liquid, the ill person would drink the tea for relief from coughs and to loosen tightness in the chest.

Certain trees have in their inner bark a form of painkiller similar to that in aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid). By chewing on the bark from willow shoots, people were able to relieve headaches, stomachaches or other pains. *Weegas* root, sometimes referred to as "rat root", also had a pain relieving effect and was effective in fighting off colds, coughs, upset stomachs and fevers. It grows mainly in northern Saskatchewan in boggy acidic soil and gets its name because muskrats like to chew on these roots.

Seneca Root

Seneca root is an effective expectorant - it helps to loosen a tight chest. First Nations and the Métis knew about this quality and used seneca root to help relieve chest colds, pneumonia, rheumatism, croup and whooping cough. Seneca root is a perennial plant 25-40 centimetres (10-15 inches) inches tall with a 5-ounce (141.75 gram) root. The best time to collect the root is when the plant is in flower, in the summer or fall, as it is easier to recognize among the hay and other weeds it grows among.

European and Euro-Canadian people learned about this plant and its qualities and began to use it to make cough syrup and cough drops. As a result, many families engaged in picking the root as a wage-earning activity for these companies. Families would camp out for weeks at a time in the summer to pick seneca root. Because of its price per pound, a family could easily supplement their income by picking seneca root in the summer. The Interlake Region in Manitoba was one of the best places to find the root because it had not been disrupted by cultivation. Prior to cultivation, the root could be found throughout southeastern Manitoba and as far north as York Factory.

Other Medicines

While some medicines came from plants and were ingested, others used animal products and were applied externally. For instance, to relieve sore throats, hot ashes were wrapped in cloth and placed around a person's neck. Goose fat and mustard plasters were applied to the chest to help a person suffering with a cold, fever or pneumonia. Skunk oil, as well, was rubbed onto the chest of a person suffering from a cold or bronchitis. Castor oil was drunk with tea to cleanse a person of illness.

Birch bark was tied around a wound to stop bleeding and to speed healing. A wound treated in this way would heal in about a week, without leaving a scar. The inner bark of jack pine and tamarack was also used as a poultice for deep cuts. The pitch from spruce was used in combination with grease to help heal skin rashes and burns. In the event of broken bones, people used sticks or split logs to set the bone and fashioned canes and crutches out of wood.

Professional Medical Treatment

While many of the ailments the Métis were afflicted with in the nineteenth century were treatable with folk cures, the introduction of non-indigenous illnesses and diseases required professional medical attention. However, the vast expanse of territory and limited speed with which people could travel meant that many of the ailing waited extended periods of time before receiving treatment. Larger trading posts, such as York Factory, had medical professionals employed by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), but most did not. The Red River Settlement did not have a doctor present until 1832, when Dr. John Bunn – who was born in Rupert's Land and trained in Edinburgh, Scotland – began his practice.

The doctors worked tirelessly visiting the sick as they were often the only medical professionals in a very large region. Doctors covered great distances to assist the sick. However, because one doctor could only see so many patients over such a large territory, nuns and family members who had some medical training or knowledge were the most common caregivers. Cuthbert Grant, for instance, rode between Métis settlements with a medicine chest to help treat people during epidemics measles and smallpox epidemics. The Grey Nuns were known for their work as caregivers and one of their missions was to care for the sick and the infirm wherever they established themselves. Finally, Métis women often gave birth with the help of midwives from their communities rather than doctors or nurses.

Doctors and surgeons were professional people but often did not get paid by their patients because of poverty or a simple lack of currency. The doctor at Red

River, Dr. John Bunn, was recompensed £100 per annum by the Hudson's Bay Company because many of the clients at the settlement could not afford to pay him. Similarly, doctors who treated Métis people throughout the countryside, particularly during the Depression years when people relied heavily on relief payments, were not paid for their services. Payment in goods, however, was sometimes arranged.

In other cases, though, doctors did charge for their services. One doctor, during the first half of the twentieth century, who was called out to treat a Métis man for pneumonia in Lestock, Saskatchewan charged $80.00 for the trip and the treatment. Doctors and medical centres also charged for the medicines they dispensed. In many cases, people would have to travel to see a doctor, who would be established in towns but not out in the countryside. Only when a person was very sick would a doctor travel to their homes.

Because of the expenses associated with going to a doctor or calling one in, people would only seek out their services if the situation was dire or they could afford to pay for the treatment. Otherwise, they would minister their ailments with traditional medicines, seeking out the expertise of people with proven success in healing using herbs and home-made remedies. In some cases, doctors simply weren't present until quite recently and people had no choice but to treat themselves with folk remedies.

Questions and Activities:

1) How effective were traditional Métis healing practices?
2) Did they offer any protection from European-sponsored pathogens (diseases)? Why or why not?
3) What would a typical Métis medicine bundle look like? What types of herbs, plants and animal products would have been in it?
4) Who delivered most of the babies in traditional Métis communities?

5) Was professional medical attention always available to the Métis? Why or why not?
6) Why do you think many contemporary pharmaceutical companies have incorporated traditional Métis healing remedies in their medicine?
7) Is there still a place for traditional medicine in today's society?
8) Do some external research on traditional healing practices in the library or on the Internet. In addition to the Métis, take two or three traditional cultures such as pre- nineteenth century European peasants, African tribesman, Aborigines or the Mayas and make a chart listing common ailments and how each culture provided cures. How was the traditional folk medicine of the Métis similar and different from each of these groups?

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