

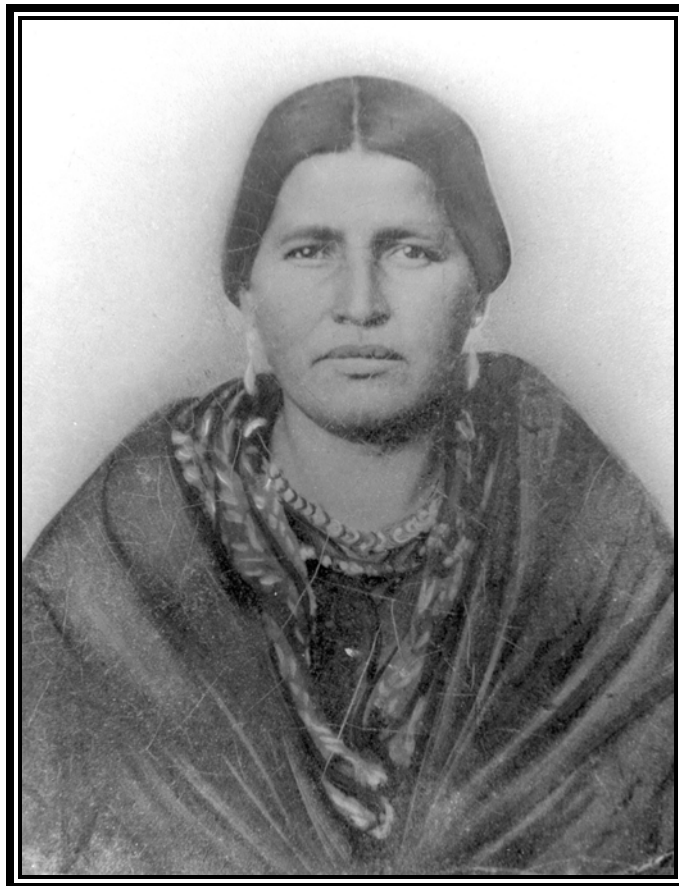
# LENAPE INDIAN MEDICINES

by

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and  
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## Introduction:

The following paper is based on notes made by Glenn McCartlin (1926–1987) of some of the Indian Medicines used by his grandmother, Minnie Fouts (1871-1949). She was a highly respected member of the Lenape or Delaware Indian tribe, and her home three miles north of Dewey, Oklahoma, was one of the centers of traditional Lenape activities. It was there that the Big House Ceremony was briefly revived during the Second World War. She had also given information about her Lenape people to M. R. Harrington.



Wèmeehèlèxkwe  
Minnie Fouts

At the time Glenn made these notes he was about ten or twelve years old, and his interest in the medicines was sparked by his grandmother having to administer her medicines to a White neighbor man who had been bitten by a spider.



Glenn McCartlin

Glenn was the proprietor of the Lenape Trading Post, a business which he built, and from which a part of the proceeds are used to benefit his tribe by maintaining the Delaware Indian cemetery northwest of Dewey, and by helping Delaware families defray the high cost of funeral expenses. [**Note:** Glenn left this life on January 22, 1987.]

The co-author of this paper, Jim Rementer, has studied the Lenape language, customs, etc. for a number of years, mainly with the late Nora Thompson Dean. In this article he researched various references for similar uses for the same remedies by other Lenape or other tribes.

For many hundreds, possibly thousands, of years, the Indian people who at one time inhabited Lenapehoking (a Lenape word which means "The Land of the Lenape", and is used for their original homeland of New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, northern Delaware, and southeastern New York) had recourse to the

native plants of the area to help them in times of distress and illness. These people who called themselves Lenape (later to be named "Delawares" by the Europeans) developed a fairly complete pharmacopoeia based not only on the plants, but also on other natural substances such as clay and mud.

It was believed that these were placed here for their use by Kishelëmukònk (the Creator of us all). It was also believed that each type of plant had its own spirit. The practice was to address not only the Creator when gathering medicinal herbs, but also the spirit of the plant to be gathered. When gathering plants for a medicinal use, the person sought out the type needed, and when a plant of that type was found, a pinch of lèni kwshatay (Indian tobacco) was offered to the spirit of the plant, but that particular plant was not gathered itself. The person would then go to other plants of the same type and these were the ones used.

The early Europeans wrote about the skill of the Indians in using these plants. Writing in 1650, Adriaen van der Donck says, ". . . the Indians know how to cure very dangerous and perilous wounds and sores by roots, leaves and other little things". He added further that ". . . as we are not skilled in those things, we cannot say much about them". (Representation of New Netherland, p. 299)

This last statement proved to be very true, as in several cases we know of these early Europeans trying to make use of these new things without bothering to ask the local Indians anything about them. In at least two cases, the results were as one writer expressed it, dangerous: "There was a certain danger in experimenting with unknown American plants. A group of Virginia soldiers who. . . gathered a mess of young Jimson weed "for a boil'd Salad" were dangerously affected. A contemporary account says that they suffered from amnesia and temporary insanity for eleven days. . . And then there was "John Josselyn, who went out for a walk in the wild country near Scarborough, Maine, about 1638. On a tree, he "chanc't to spye a fruit as I thought like a pine Apple," which was "of an Ash Colour." It was a queer-looking fruit, to be sure, and remarkably big; but Josselyn had seen so many strange things in this new country that he was not greatly surprised. He grasped it -- only to be stung by an emerging swarm of furious hornets, so severely that his companions could hardly recognize his swollen face." (The Eyes of Discovery, p. 193)

As we move forward in time, we have more complete accounts written by people who actually lived among the Indians and often had recourse to the medicines of the Lenape people. The Moravian missionary David Zeisberger, who lived among the Lenape for more than fifty years during the 1700's, says, "Concerning plants and roots of medicinal value, it would be possible, if one were to devote himself to inquiry, to secure a great deal of information from the Indians for what one does not know another does, each man and woman having some knowledge in this direction, some more, some less". (History of the North American Indians, p. 55).

His fellow missionary, John Heckewelder went into even more detail: "The Materia Medica of the Indians consists of various roots and plants known to

themselves, the properties of which they are not fond of disclosing to strangers. They make considerable use of the barks of trees, such as the white and black oak, the white walnut, of which they make pills, the cherry, dogwood, maple, birch, and several others. They prepare and compound these medicines in different ways, which they keep a profound secret." (History, Manners, and Customs, p. 224)

Heckewelder went into some detail about Indian doctors who use herbal medicines, writing of them as, "the good and honest practitioners who are in the habit of curing and healing diseases and wounds, by the simple application of natural remedies. . . Their science is entirely founded on observation, experience and the well tried efficacy of remedies. There are physicians of both sexes, who take considerable pains to acquire a correct knowledge of the properties and medical virtues of plants, roots and barks, for the benefit of their fellow-men. They are very careful to have at all times a full assortment of their medicines on hand, which they gather and collect at the proper seasons, sometimes fetching them from the distance of several days' journey from their homes, then they cure or dry them properly, tie them up in small bundles, and preserve them for use. . . I have myself been benefited and cured by taking their emetics and their medicines in fevers. . . I have also known many, both whites and Indians, who have with the same success resorted to Indian physicians while labouring under diseases. The wives of Missionaries, in every instance in which they had to apply to the female physicians, for the cure of complaints peculiar to their sex, experienced good results from their abilities. They are also well skilled in curing wounds and bruises. . . Indeed, it is in the cure of external wounds that they particularly excel. . . this branch of knowledge is carried to a great degree of perfection among them. I firmly believe that there is no wound, unless it should be absolutely mortal, or beyond the skill of our own good practitioners, which an Indian surgeon (I mean the best of them) will not succeed in healing". (History, Manners, and Customs, p. 228-229)

In the years that followed the work by the Moravian missionaries, little was done on recording Lenape medicines. It was not until this century that more was written in any detail. In 1930 one of Frank Speck's students, Gladys Tantaquidgeon (herself a Mohegan Indian from Connecticut), made a study of Lenape medicines with Speck's informant, James C. Webber, and she produced *A Study of Delaware Indian Medicine Practice and Folk Beliefs*. Unfortunately, Webber's knowledge was but a small portion of the total knowledge of the Lenape, and it is to be regretted that Miss Tantaquidgeon was unable to come to Oklahoma to do further work with tribal elders. The next major work was done in 1969 and 1970, and published in 1971 by George Hill and was entitled *Delaware Ethnobotany*. George had worked with mainly with Nora Thompson Dean, but also did some work with Freddie Washington, Reuben Wilson, and Anna Davis. George had hoped to return for further work, but he was under pressure to get his article into print, and he was unable to complete some of the aspects of the paper as fully as he wished. He has since closed some of these gaps, and we look forward to the updated version of his *Ethnobotany*.

The next major work was done in 1973 by C. A. Weslager and is entitled *Magic Medicines of the Indians*. This is perhaps the most complete book on Lenape

medicines as it talks about not only the medicines used by this group of Lenape, but the ones in Canada as well. There is also a chapter of Nanticoke remedies. The latest work is entitled Turtle Tales, and is of interest because of several pages of the medicines of the Delawares of Western Oklahoma, a group which has been separated from the main group for 193 years.

What follows is the list of Lenape Medicines in the same order as put down by Glenn McCartlin years ago, and it is based on what his grandmother, Wèmeehèlèxkwe ["Reverberates Everywhere Woman"], known in English as Minnie Fouts, told him. It should be pointed out that this is not a complete listing of the medicines she used, but this is all Glenn wrote at that time. In some cases where the original name was not very specific, it was necessary for Glenn to point out exactly what plant it was his grandmother used. Our further comments are enclosed in brackets [ ].

## "Indian Medicines"

1. **To Stop Vomiting:** Take six 1-1/2 ft Box Elder limbs that are pointing east. Scrape limbs starting from the end. And take two limbs from Redbud tree, and put in a pan with some cold water and drink it every little while until it quits.

Box Elder - We found no other reference to this being used to stop vomiting; however, it was mentioned for other stomach trouble, as follows: "If a child was constipated, there were laxatives. . [one being the tea]. .made of the fresh inner bark of the Box Elder tree, *Acer negundo*". (Plant Medicine and Folklore, p. 175)

Redbud - "Bark steeped in cold water for a drink to reduce fever and stop vomiting." (James C. Webber in Delaware Indian Medicine, p. 25)

"*Cercis canadensis* . . .Redbud.--The bark of this beautiful leguminous tree, indigenous and well know throughout the eastern and central United States. . .has been recommended as an astringent in the treatment of chronic diarrhea and dysentery." (Dispensatory, p. 1311)

2. **If you want to vomit**, start from the end that's toward the main tree or the bigger end. Do the same way as 1. [This refers to Box Elder and Redbud as mentioned in #1]

note: we found no mention elsewhere of these plants being used as an emetic

3. **Blackberry Roots** are used for running off of bowels. Take the roots and boil them. When it has cooled off, drink it, until you feel better.

"Tea made from the root is used to cure dysentery" (Nora Thompson Dean in Magic Medicines, p. 69)

"According to the Merck Index the active constituents of the dried bark of the rhizome and root of *Rubus*, blackberry, are in the 'Therapeutic Category', antidiarrheal." (Pharmacological Properties, p. 39)

"The vine is combined with wild cherry bark to cure dysentery." (James C. Webber in Delaware Indian Medicine, p. 28)

"500 Indians of the Oneida tribe were attacked by dysentery in one season, and all recovered by the use of blackberry root, while their white neighbors 'fell before the disease'". (American Indian Medicine, p. 268)

4. **Cherry Bark** is used for bad colds of the chest. Take the cherry bark and boil it and drink when it cools off or when it's warm if you prefer. [This refers to the native Black Cherry, *Prunus serotina*].

"Strips of bark taken from different places on the tree and boiled in water to make a tea, which is drunk hot to treat a heavy cold, cough, or even pneumonia" (Nora Thompson Dean in Magic Medicines, p. 76)

"The presence of the cyanogenic glycoside prunasin in the wild cherry bark is the cause of a mild sedative affect ... as an ingredient in cough mixtures." (Pharmacological Properties, p. 41)

5. **Locust Tree chips and bark**, boil them and drink when cool or warm. [Note: Glenn remembers these trees as having long and sharp thorns, so it must be the Honey Locust, *Gleditsia triacanthos*. Like #4, it is used for bad colds].

Thorned Locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*)- "The bark is used to make a tea which will induce sweating and reduce bronchial congestion." (Nora Thompson Dean in Magic Medicines, p. 75)

"A bark tea good for a bad cold was that made from honey locust, *Gleditsia triacanthos*, using the twig bark only. You can call the honey locust by these names in some localities - sweet locust, tree-thorned acacia, thorn locust, honey, honey chucks, or sweet bean." (Plant Medicine and Folklore, p. 194)

6. **Blackjack Bark**: Take the yellow-like bark and boil it, and take for husky or hoarse voice.

[Note: The following references to Red Oaks should also apply to the Blackjack Oak as they are both in the Red Oak tree family].

Red Oak - "NTD stated that the Delaware use red oak for hoarseness and to keep the throat clear. To open the throat the inner bark was boiled in water to make a "tea". To clear throats, chips of red oak wood were placed in a bucket of water and the infusion drunk." (Nora Thompson Dean in Delaware Ethnobotany, p. 73)

Red Oak - "Lewis found that oaks in general contain tannins. . . tannins have astringent properties." (Pharmacological Properties, p. 31)

7. **Muletail Weed Leaves**: Squeeze together until the juice comes, then put on face for pimply face.

note: we found no other references for uses of this plant

8. **Spider Bite:** Take leaves that have fallen last year and wash them, and a old piece of wood that is rotten and ready to fall apart. Boil these, and drink about half a cup two times a day. Also, sponge sore bitten spots.

"If a black widow spider bites you, make a mixture made with a spider web and dried leaves to put on it." (Willie Snake, Bessie Snake, and Martha Ellis in Turtle Tales, p. 20)

9. **Also for a sore throat.** [This refers to the old leaf and rotten wood tea given above in #8.]

10. **Snake Bite:** Get mud from the bottom of a creek or river and put on bitten place. Tie it on with a rag, when it begins to get dry, get some more mud.

note: we found no other reference listing this remedy for snake bite.

11. **Centipede Bite:** Kill a chicken and cut the breast out and put on where bitten.

"If a centipede bites you, rub a hot chicken brain on the bite. Shawnees put a chicken gizzard, while it is still hot, on the bite." (Willie Snake, Bessie Snake, and Martha Ellis in Turtle Tales, p. 20)

It seems apparent that the above remedy for bites is of some antiquity as Thomas Budd writing in 1685 says, "I never heard of but one Person bitten in Pennsylvania or New-Jersey with the Rattle-Snake, and he was helpt of it by live Chickens slit assunder and apply'd to the place, which drew out the Poyson". (Good Order Established, p. 35)

12. **Cactus:** [For a Sore Throat] Burn the stickers and cut them out. Slice the Cactus and tie both pieces on both sides of the throat with a rag, handkerchief, etc. When you want to warm them, put them in some water in a skillet and place over a fire and heat.

"The prickly pear, *Opuntia humifusa*, is in itself a healer. We may bind the peeled stems of the prickly pear over the cut as we would a bandage." (Plant Medicine and Folklore, p. 16)

"PRICKLY PEAR: The leaf is shredded and placed on a piece of cloth and applied to boils and carbuncles." (Nora Thompson Dean in Magic Medicines, p. 72)

13. **Cedar Tree:** For anyone having nightmares or bad dreams all the time, burn the cedar limbs and leaves in hot coals, and let the smoke go in all the rooms.

"If people are having bad dreams, they are also smoked with cedar." (Bessie Snake in Turtle Tales, p. 19)

14. **Bean Tree:** Take a very small piece of bark and put on aching tooth. Fix a rag or handkerchief so that it does not touch other teeth as if it touches your other teeth they will become easy to crack or chip off.

note: we found no other reference to this use for this tree.

15. **Maple Tree Leaves:** Place them in cool water bring to a boil. Put the juice in your eyes if they hurt or are sore.

"Red maple, *Acer rubrum*, provided another bark infusion for eyewash." (Plant Medicine and Folklore, p. 66)

16. **Peach Tree Bark:** Boil in water and take in cups to relieve colds.

note: we found no other reference to this use of Peach Tree Bark.

17. **Stomach Trouble:** Take Birch tree bark and Plum tree bark and an old rotten piece of wood that is ready to fall apart and boil and drink when cool.

"The root bark of the paper birch, *Betula papyrifera*, was. . .said to alleviate stomach cramps." (Plant Medicine and Folklore, p. 128)

note: we found no other reference for Plum tree bark having this usage.

18. **Mud Dauber's Nest or Wasp's Nest:** Take all the bugs and insects out, and boil in water. Take a drink of it and sponge spider bitten spots. [Glenn points out that his grandmother removed the wasp grubs because she believed the thought of them would make the White neighbor sicker than he already was, but she told Glenn that normally the nest is boiled grubs and all].

"A mud dauber's nest is boiled in water, and the strained liquid makes an excellent gargle for a sore throat." (Nora Thompson Dean in Magic Medicines, p. 88)

This concludes the list of medicines as written down at that time. It is our hope that this list will be of benefit in filling the gaps in the pharmacopoeia of the Lenape.

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This paper is updated with photographs and newer information.**

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