

## VARIOUS USES OF PLANTS BY WEST COAST INDIANS

### *Use of Kinnikinick, An Intoxicating Herb*

Bearberry, Kinnikinick, is much used by the West Coast Indians as an intoxicant and as medicine. The leaves are dried and smoked by them the same as tobacco is smoked by the eastern Indians. It has strong narcotic properties and makes the smoker drunk. This plant is also smoked as medicine. It is also smoked in some of the religious ceremonies. It is common to see some of the bunches of this plant hanging up in an Indian house on the Northwest Coast just as one will see bunches of tobacco hanging up in a backwoods Tennessee home.

The leaves of the salal plant and the inner bark of the dogwood tree are also dried and used in lieu of kinnikinick.

Sometimes the getting drunk on kinnikinick is disastrous. Some years ago an Indian of the Quillayute tribe got intoxicated by smoking the leaves of this plant and danced in the fire barefooted till the soles of his feet were burned to a crisp and his feet deformed for life. Some years previously another old Indian got drunk on the narcotic inhaled while smoking the leaves of this plant. As a result of being drunk he fell into the fire, burning his feet almost off, his hands badly, his nose completely off, and his lips partly off. Yet in this condition he lived for years.

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### *Cascara Sagrada Bark Used As Medicine*

The West Coast Indians use the Cascara sagrada (*Rhamnus purshiana DC.*) plant as medicine. They pare off the bark of the root or trunk, make a tea of it and then give it as a remedy for most any sort of a disease. They use it as a remedy for gonorrhoea, taking it internally and also use an injection of hot sea water for same. Their use of cascara sagrada, however, is not on scientific lines, even for an Indian. If a little is good, more is better. The herb woman is just as liable to give her patient a five-pound pail full of the tea to drink as not, provided she thinks that it is the remedy needed, and deaths are often caused by overdosing the patient.

As a cited case of this overdosing, while the writer was in charge of the Quillayute Indians one of the old people got sick from eating too much spoiled fish. He needed a cathartic. The herb woman, in this instance, made a five-pound pail almost full of very

strong cascara sagrada tea and gave it to him. He drank it all, or most all of it, then died two minutes afterwards trying to throw it up. The writer appeared on the scene just as the aged man drank the last of the tea, and saw him strangle to death.

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*Salmon Berry Sprouts Were Used in the Courting Ceremonies  
in the Long Ago*

Long ago the boys and girls of the West Coast used to find out when they loved each other in a very peculiar way. They cut salmon berry sprouts, as many cuts of a certain length as one whole sprout would make of that length. If there were two cuts, that is, if the cuts were an even number, the Indians said the love was not true. But if one was left, that is, if the cuts were an odd number, they said the love was true. The old Indians also say that where there was only one cut left the lovers ate it up so as to put it near their hearts. They also say that when there is one sprout left, that is, when the cuts were an uneven number, the odd cut was sometimes used in a different way. The lovers split a stick part way so as to make a vise out of it, they aver. They then put the odd cut of the sprout in the split place and left it there. That was done to show that their love is firm and permanent.

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*Pit-Baking*

When roasting wild onions, garlic, and many other fruits and vegetables, the West Coast Indians cover the cooking product over with layers of skunk cabbage leaves. They then cover the whole over with a light layer of dirt and then over all they pile considerable wood. This they ignite and keep burning till the cooking process is completed. The natives say that the "cabbage" gives flavor to the cooked product, but it is doubtful if a white man would think so. The natives also wrap red elderberries in the leaves of this plant when preparing them by the native baking process above. They also wrap fruits, usually cooked fruits, in the leaves of this plant and bury the whole in the muck of some swampy region. In this way it is "canned" and will keep till needed for future use. It is then dug up and re-cooked. In this way many things were preserved in the old times and were palatable.

The bulb of the camas plant (la camas, or cammas) is used as food by these Indians. In preparing this food a pit is dug in which a fire is built. On the fuel cobbles are piled, which, when heated to

a red heat, are covered over with wet leaves, brush, or grass. On this the bulbs are piled and over all wet leaves or grass or skunk cabbage leaves are spread to a thickness of, say, seven inches. Then over all, clay, earth or sand is heaped. Just before completing the covering over with earth, a quantity of water is poured on the cooking product and then when the covering is completed a small hole is left through the dirt layer for the escape of steam. The cooking is then permitted to continue for about twenty-four hours, when the product is removed through a hole dug through the top of the pit. The earth mound is left and the shifting sand fills up the hole from which the baked articles were taken. The mound is then complete, a puzzle to future archaeologists.

Clams and fruits of various kinds were also prepared by the oven process.

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#### *The Preparing of Various Foods*

In the old times the West Coast Indians ate most of the clams raw, or after they had been boiled in a sort of vat into which heated stones had been thrown. Clams were also roasted in the ashes. When plentiful they were also dried for future use. To do this they were scraped from the shell with a clam shell knife. They were then suspended by cedar bark strips over a slow, smoky fire, where they dried quickly and are said to have been good eating. They also baked them in pit ovens. Fish of all kinds were also dried in the fish houses, as were whale meat and blubber and various other meats. Deer and elk meat and smelt fish were dried in the sun, if it was in the season when the sun shone. The smelt were strung on a cedar cord, looped around the neck just under the gills. They were then hung over a pole and dried. Then in storing them, the head was pulled off with the cord and was not saved.

Ocean gastropods were roasted or boiled in the shell, then pulled out of the shell with a bone awl and eaten. Hermit crabs were also boiled in the shells they had borrowed for a home. They were then pulled out of their respective shell and eaten. Fish eggs were boiled or roasted. Fish-egg cheese was also made. The eggs were stored in a hair seal stomach, then hung up in the smokehouse near the fire to "dry." When "ripe" the cheese was eaten. It had limburger cheese beaten for smell.

*Various Uses of Cedar, Other Than That of Canoe Manufacture*

In the olden times the West Coast Indians' dress was made, for the most part, of the skins of wild animals and matted cedar bark. The inner fibers of the bark were used. Also, in the olden times the houses were of the "long house" type, with roof sloping slightly one way. These were made of cedar clap-boards, split and hewn with elk-horn axes. In those times it was a great task to prepare these boards. So when they moved, they tore their houses down and took them with them to their new homes and rebuilt them there. There were at least two kinds of these dwellings, the fish-drying-"potlatch" hall, and the dwelling. The dishes in the old times were also made of wood. The basketry, too, was made of reeds (basket straw) or from split roots of young cedar trees. Ladles and spoons were made from goat (mountain sheep) horns. Wooden cups, filled with whale oil, served as lamps, the inner bark of cedar, twisted into cords, served as lampwicks. And twisted cedar or spruce roots or twigs served as ropes. The old people in the old times and even now use cedar bark headbands in the Ka-kla-kwal and Tsi-yuk dances. Also, before the white man came, and even now, men, clad only in a blanket or totally naked, go out early in the morning to some far away place along the beach and take a cold bath, rubbing themselves dry with cedar twigs after the bath. At times wild rye or anything else that will prick the skin is used instead of the cedar twigs. Juice of green cedar bark was boiled and used as medicine. The outer bark of the same tree was also used in making wigwams and summer houses and hunting lodges. The Indians also shredded the inner bark of this tree and wove it into a sort of cloth, from which they made skirts for the women. They also lined their cradles with this bark, and wrapped their babies up in it before tying them in same. A peculiar looking "overcoat" was also made from this bark to be worn by the men while fishing in stormy weather.

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*The Canoes*

The West Coast Indians make their canoes of giant cedar logs, made in each case from one piece (section) of log, the canoe in each case being one continuous piece when finished, except just the front totem (river-deer) part. These canoes range in size from a little river canoe to an ocean whaling canoe that will hold ten whale hunters, or three tons of freight. In making these crafts in the old times it was a slow process of alternate burning and scraping with clam

shells, and a possible chiseling with some wedge-shaped stone. Today they are hewed out with ax and an Indian adz.

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*Eating Rootstalks of the Horsetail Plant*

The Indians of the Northwest Coast dug the rootstalks of the horsetail plant and ate them, and some do still, considering them a great delicacy. They also gathered them to be eaten during several of their medicine ceremonies, considering them "good medicine." They were also eaten during the puberty (coming-out) ceremonies. These rootstalks have a sweetish, though not unpleasant taste.

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*Foxglove Flowers for Decorative Purposes*

Foxgloves are used for decorative purposes by the West Coast Indians.

In the "crowning" of Chief Peter at a "potlatch" at Quillayute the Indians decorated the dance hall with foxgloves. They then held foxgloves in their hands and waved them to the time of the "music" as they danced. In the center of the hall was a boat. This the Indians filled with calico. In it they put Chief Peter, the honored guest from Neah Bay. They then elevated the boat to their shoulders and danced several times backwards and forwards lengthwise of the hall. They then put the boat down and the give-away of the things began. The "potlatch" was made in honor of the visiting Neah Bay Indians.

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