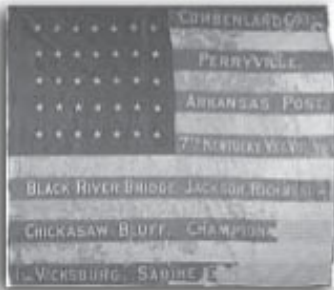


Medicinal Plants of the Confederacy

While not complete, the Northern stranglehold on Southern ports and the ships serving them proved so successful that by the end of the war there were few people in the beleaguered South who had not felt its' effects.

One area that was particularly and severely affected by the blockade was the importation of the botanical and chemical medicines so desperately needed by our troops.

Yellow Fever, Malaria and a host of other insidious bacterial and viral diseases lurked in the wings waiting for the chance to attack. Scurvy and Ricketts ran amuck through troops subsisting on a diet of hard tack, moldy fat back and parched corn. Open latrines and polluted drinking water, along with a general ignorance of proper hygiene on the part of the average soldier, served to compound an already serious problem.



Life was not easy for the Confederate soldier. He was as likely to die from disease as from a Yankee miniball. If the mini-ball didn't kill him, there was a good chance of gangrene or sepsis developing and finishing the job. At the very least, stomach disorders, the flux (bloody diarrhea), trenchfoot, measles, chicken pox, small pox, typhoid fever and a myriad of other lesser, though no less serious ailments, made constant forays through camps already debilitated by the hardships of war.

In an attempt to blunt the effects of the Northern blockade, the Surgeon General of the Confederate States enlisted the services of Dr. Francis Porcher in the war effort. Dr. Porcher was commissioned to develop a list of all potential resources to be found indigenous to the Southern States. This list was to cover everything from the manufacture of gun powder from bat guano and saltpeter found in the thousands of caves dotting the South to the production of paper from native reeds and yes - MEDICINE.

You see, Dr. Porcher was a doctor of medicine as well as a large land owner and planter in the Charleston, S.C. area. He was well respected among medical circles of his time and presented many scholarly papers to the AMA both before and after the war.

Dr. Porcher, being the true patriotic son of the South that he was, set forth with a zeal to produce this list in time for it to be of use in the war effort. In the course of researching and preparing this list to be presented to the Confederate High Command, he wrote an immense tome titled, "Resources of Southern Fields and Forests." The 700 page manuscript was the most comprehensive of its time to be found in the South or North. To this day, its scope and magnitude have not been excelled.

Being a physician, Dr. Porcher was particularly interested in native substitutes for the medicines failing to make it through the Yankee blockade. What few medicines, such as Cinchona bark used to treat malaria, made it through the gauntlet of Yankee warships, usually ended up on the black market at prices out of the reach of the average person.

Dr. Porcher's work proved to be a life saver to Confederate soldiers, many who had resorted to using old home remedies in a desperate attempt to both prevent and treat the multitude of attacking diseases.

One interesting approach to the prevention and treatment of disease of this time was the use of "BITTERS". The general belief was that the more bitter a tonic was, the better it was for you. Herbs such as Gentian, Goldenseal, Chicory, Boneset, Yellowroot and Dogwood gained much popularity among the troops due to their extreme bitterness. Many a soldier imbibing these bitter witches brews soon developed a liking for the taste and drank them liberally as a substitute for coffee which more often than not had been unavailable for months and years.

The following information draws mainly from the work of Dr. Porcher but is not limited to it alone. Many other manuscripts were written during the war years of 1861 - 1865. Some of the information proved to be valid while others were only quackery very scholarly written.

SASSAFRAS

Measles, mumps, pneumonia, rheumatism, bronchitis, fevers and colds. The roots and leaves were gathered dried and used as a substitute for flax seed, marshmallow root and gum arabic. Desperate, lice ridden soldiers used an infusion of the leaves as a hair wash. A cheap beer was also made by combining: water, sassafras, molasses yeast, ginger and creme of tartar. A hot infusion of the bark and roots was used to promote perspiration in the treatment of fevers.

SPICEBUSH

A wonderful stimulant and tonic, used in the treatment of fevers and as a substitute for "green" tea as a beverage. It found some use in the treatment of bruises and for rheumatic limbs. A hot infusion of the twigs and leaves caused profuse perspiration and was used for pneumonia, coughs and colds. It was also used as a substitute for allspice.

VIRGINIA SNAKEROOT

A general tonic, much used as a diaphoretic in the treatment of fevers. Slaves used this plant in the treatment of pneumonia and typhoid fever. V. Snakeroot was commonly infused in alcohol along with gentian, boneset etc., to make "bitters". It found some use as an antiseptic. The effects of this plant were increased when combined with either camphor or opium.

JERUSALEM OAK

Few other medicinal plants have carried on a long a tradition of healing as has Jerusalem Oak. Many people in the South can remember being dosed in the fall with a tea or candy of this plant for the treatment of internal parasites. As can be guessed, worms made terrible inroads among the troops of both sides in this war. In many cases, worms, in conjunction with the diseases that attacked a weakened soldier, proved to be a fatal combination.

WILD GINGER

Considered an aromatic, stimulant tonic and diaphoretic, Wild Ginger was used extensively in the treatment of fevers, coughs, gas and colic. The leaves dried and powdered were considered to be excellent for sinus trouble. The root was employed as a substitute for culinary ginger. Some writers of the day promoted its use in the treatment of heart ailments due to the shape of the leaves. This belief in what was known as the "Doctrine of Signatures" was to strongly affect the selection of many wild plants for their medicinal uses.

POKE ROOT

Poke Root, Poke Salad or Skoke was an interesting herb in that not only was it eaten, it was greatly appreciated for its use as a medicinal herb, particularly in the treatment of external cancers. It was said that it ate the cancers out by the roots. The juice of the berries was used along with extracts of the roots for this purpose. Poke Root, while considered very poisonous, was popular in the treatment of rheumatism. Extracts of the roots and berries were considered emetic and purgative. The "Itch", a type of scabies, was commonly treated with a bath made from combining Poke Root, kerosene and sulphur. This was a good example of the cure being almost as bad as the illness. This concoction, while working, also set the patient on fire due to the caustic nature of the plant. After treating the person, the next job was to catch him as he ran down the road screaming bloody murder. Poke berries were also used as indelible ink.

To Be Continued.....

