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# Learning Family Healing Traditions

Natalia Bragg

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Story: "Learning Family Healing Traditions"

Storyteller: Natalia Bragg

Town: Wade, ME

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Collector: Rob Rosenthal

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Long before the advent of modern medicine, technologically sublime hospitals, and multinational pharmaceutical companies, people learned to develop remedies from the plants and animals around them. These traditional healing methods, now commonly known as "folk medicine," were passed down from generation to generation the same as folk stories, songs, superstitions, and other beliefs. Some of these remedies now seem strange and have generally passed from common usage in Western society, but others can still be found among commonly used herbal remedies. For more on traditional medicine and some examples of treatments and cures that have passed out of common usage, check out Elsie Diamond Smith's story, "Pumpkin Seed Tea Cure."

The story told here by Natalia Bragg, recorded for Storybank Maine at the American Folk Festival in 2008, explains the process of teaching traditional medicine to a new generation. In her case, it was something of an accident, and she laments at another point in the interview that her children do not seem interested in learning these family traditions. Instead, part of her work on the farm is teaching herbal medicine to any interested parties. This is not a simple process, as it takes ten years to be properly trained, but she offers the service as a way of passing on a vast repository of knowledge. Moreover, the knowledge she is sharing is local in nature (pun intended). Her homemade salves, creams, oils, and other medicines are not made of purchased ingredients, but come from plants that grow on her farm either completely on their own (like cedar and birch trees) or through her cultivation (such as peppermint). It is thus no exaggeration when she says that she walks out her backdoor to collect ingredients, and ultimately, everyone else could do the same.

#### Transcript

Well the fact that, of what I do, the fact it is not just what I do, it is also what I am. And I was very sickly when I was tiny, and didn't get a clean bill of health until I was nine years old. So, even though I'm from a big family, I didn't get to run and play with the rest, I got to stay with the elders, and because I got to stay with the elders, I was privy to what was going on unbeknownst to all the rest of the family members, and because I got to know what plants, and got to go with them, because they were at a much slower pace, and I wasn't to get over-tired, and I wasn't, I was supposed to rest and the older people went at a smaller pace, a slower pace. So I learned from the time I was four what you used for this, and what plants you harvest for that, and I also learned that you didn't talk about it; because, as my grandmother would quote me, what goes on in somebody's underwear drawer is not your business, and if you know about it, it really isn't your business so you can't talk about it. So I never talked about it, we just never talked about it. You did not talk about what somebody in the family was using for diarrhea, you did not talk about the things that went on in the family that everyone wasn't privy to, and so if you knew it, you had to keep it to yourself.

And so, in 1995, when I opened my farm to tours, because I had to for economic reasons in order to hang on to the farm, as I opened the farm to tours, more people were interested in what I was doing for

this, that, and something else, than they were in the animals, and the butter, and the cheese, or the stick-making, or apple wood pencils, or anything else that I was doing; they were interested in what I did for certain things. And then the first few times I was asked, it was kind of facetious, and they said, "Well I'll bet you got something for this, too." And I said, "Yes, I do have something for this." And the next question would be, "Well does it work?" And I would very happily say, "Well if it didn't work, I wouldn't be spending six - four to six weeks of my time doing it." So then the next question is, "Well could we get a sample? Do you have a sample?" Well I only made it for my family at that point so, that was a large family, but still just for our family, and I would give them a little baby food jar with a sample in it, and I have thirty-one products now that is in my catalog, and they've been added by the request of people that use my products, and eighty percent of all that I do is repeat customers, and they have been with me, some of them, for twenty years. But, in order to see that my traditions don't die, I feel as though I have to prove that they work exactly the way they were meant to work, and I also teach the making of them, I don't tell you my formulas, but I teach you how to make a formula so, and maybe your formula will be better than mine. But, to have a complete apothecary, and that means all the things that would normally go wrong for a person, and that would be head cold, sinuses, pain, bones and ligaments, skin rashes, first aid cream, cramping agents, all of these things are things that make a complete herbal apothecary. And believe it or not, we have all of the things that we need right here in our environment.

Maine Folklife Center