

PIONEER MEDICINE OF MY ANCESTORS

by Dick

I am writing this as we deal with the COVID-19 Virus in 2020. It brings up the question, “What did our ancestors have as medicines, disinfectants, and instruments to use each and every day for sickness and injuries?” Here is a partial list: whiskey, dandelion wine (or some other homemade wine), pine tar, kerosine, sulfur sticks, cupping, fire, bandages made from flour sacks & cotton bed sheets, knives, axes, red bandanas, oil of camphor. As you read this, note that rubbing alcohol and bandages did not come into existence until the 1920's.

At a Lag Stevne some years ago, I enjoyed a session on how to make a Norwegian knife. In my family, everyone had their prized knife. A pocket knife got the most use. In the house, the knife was sterilized by opening the little door where you put wood into the kitchen stove. For a moment you would place each side of the blade directly on the blazing wood. Removing it and letting it cool, you were now ready to use it to cauterize a wound on your body, to cut off a bunion or a wart, to remove an embedded tick, or to circumcise your newborn son. Sometimes a little whiskey or dandelion wine was used both as anesthetic and disinfectant.

To bandage a wound, you would cut strips from flour sacks, bed sheets or a clean hankie, perhaps soak them in whiskey and then wrap the wound. Blood soaked bandages or handkerchiefs were never just put in the regular clothes wash. You rinsed them out in a puddle, a ditch, rubbing them in the dirt, under the well pump without touching the pump spout, or most often you poured water on them from the cistern dipper. Need I expound on the highly used cistern water to wash all of the above before entering the

house? Then you put them in the clothes wash. Of course, bandages were burned if the disease or wound warranted such.

Before combing lice out of their hair, most often they dipped their compact tooth comb into kerosine. We had Norwegian friends who swallowed a teaspoon of kerosine to cure the flu or cold.

At our home probably going back to my grandmother's birthday in 1860 during the Civil War, there was always a paper carton with quinine pills. This is strong medicine for colds or congestion, usually given as a last resort to get well. Children were not allowed to take them. It was no fun to take those pills – swallow the whole pill with one gulp of water or suffer the consequential horrid taste.

Pine tar is a Norwegian specialty, the wonder treatment used for cuts, warts, scrapes, and much more. We had a wooden container of it in the barn, the machine shed, and the house. I believe Grandpa and Grandma made their own. I think Grandma's brother made it until his death in the 1960's. It was applied equally to animals and humans.

Our town in Minnesota did not have an abundance of Norway Pine trees. So even though more difficult, they used the Tamarack and Jack Pine to make their pine tar. The name tar describes its looks, very black and very sticky. It lasts in a covered bucket simply forever and was applied with either a stick or partial wood shingle – or with your trusty Norwegian knife.

The sulfur stick was about the size of your thumb. To use, dig a little of the crystallized sulfur out with your knife. Because of its low melting point, light a match under the knife blade and shortly you had liquid sulfur (making sure the sulfur did not ignite). The cow getting that applied to a sore on her leg was not a happy camper. Have you ever seen a cow kick her legs straight back? As with pine tar, the treatment most often worked.

My dad's cousin had his tonsils removed in a doctor's office in 1897 when he was about age 6. Sitting in an ordinary chair with no anesthetic, his dad and his uncle, held his arms and body while the doctor removed his tonsils. Do you suppose they used whiskey to disinfect the wound? Interesting that the tonsils removal did not affect the cousin's fantastic deep bass voice. He was an excellent singer.

Oil of camphor was used in many ways. Put a little on a saucer, placed on top of the water in a boiling tea kettle, and the fumes would loosen anyone's congested lungs. This was later refined and called Vick's VapoRub. Also, rub the oil directly on the body for many reasons. If you did not have oil of camphor in stock, it was paramount to being a negligent parent or spouse.

Lastly, sulfur was sometimes burned in a pot or a porcelain plate in a house where someone had died from a communicable disease. Get out of the house quickly as the smoke was poisonous. A couple of days later, the doors and windows were opened so that fresh air could clear out the house.

A neighbor did "cupping" for the area. To my knowledge, my grandparents did not partake of this practice. However, many Norwegians in the area did.



Family pocket knife