



Blackfeet Botanist

Annie Mad Plume Wall

By Rosalyn LaPier

Ethnohistorian Walter McClintock chronicled the lives of the Blackfeet in the early 20th century in his book “The Old North Trail.” In his study he described how all the Blackfeet women he met were expert “botanists” who were taught “the knowledge of herbs and wild vegetables” from early childhood. McClintock became fascinated by the knowledge these women held and set out to document what they knew. In 1909 he published “Materia Medica of the Blackfeet” with the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and History. It was the first comprehensive study of Blackfeet women’s plant knowledge.

“The Old North Trail” also began to document the transition of the Blackfeet away from the buffalo days into the 20th century. My grandmother was raised during this time and the stories told by McClintock reflect the world in which she grew up. The women who raised my grandmother were born and lived during the last of the buffalo days on the northern Great Plains. Their knowledge of the world testified to the intimate relationship they had with their landscape.

Toward the end of the 19th century, individual bands of the Blackfeet tribe settled along rivers and creeks of the reservation. Annie Mad Plume Wall, my grandmother, was born in 1914 on Little Badger Creek, just south of Glacier Park. Her family belonged to the Never Laughs band that settled along Little Badger, which now is both on the reservation and within the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Her grandfather Middle Rider named her Otahkoi-sinopaakii, or Yellow Fox Woman. Her mother died when my grandmother was a baby, leaving her to be raised by her maternal grandparents Kitiaksisskstaki, or Not Real Beaver Woman, and Staahtsi’kayii, or Under Mink, and her great-grandmother Omahkarayaakii, or Big Mountain Lion Woman.

My grandmother recalls the pleasant times of her childhood on Little Badger Creek – family picnics, society gatherings and attending the yearly Okan, the Blackfeet celebration of hope and thanksgiving known to outsiders as the Sun Dance. Her fondest memories are of riding her horse in the foothills and up into Badger Canyon. As she grew up, my grandmother learned about many of the old Blackfeet ways from her grandmothers, including the use of native plants.

The Blackfeet historically made use of more than 200 different plants for food, medicine, and as material for creating useful objects.

I once told her that my husband was making huckleberry milkshakes and she gasped disapprovingly, “They’re medicine!”

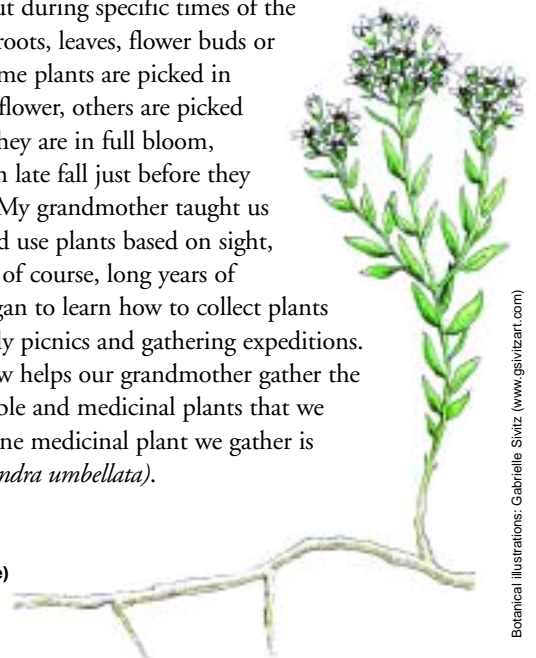
My grandmother and her family gathered a wide variety of food plants, including Pisatsiinikimm (*Allium sp.*), Ka’kitsimo (*Mentha sp.*) and Niistskápa’s (*Perideridia gairdneri*) to use in their cooking. They would also harvest large quantities of berries, such as Okonok (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), Pákkii’p (*Prunus virginiana*) and Mi’ksiníttsiim (*Shepherdia argentea*) to use fresh or to dry for winter use. After the Blackfeet settled and began to grow small home gardens of introduced root vegetables people came to rely less and less on native plant foods, but many still continued to use plants for medicinal purposes. My grandmother learned how to use many of these medicinal plants and she continues to gather them today.

The Blackfeet use different parts of plants – roots, leaves and fruit – for different purposes. The gathering and processing of plants was generally the responsibility of women. My grandmother learned which plants to pick and in what seasons by going into the hills with her grandmothers. She also learned how to process and preserve these plants for future use. My grandmother has handed down these same skills to younger generations.

We now go out during specific times of the year to collect the roots, leaves, flower buds or fruit of a plant. Some plants are picked in spring before they flower, others are picked in summer when they are in full bloom, others are picked in late fall just before they become dormant. My grandmother taught us how to identify and use plants based on sight, smell, texture and, of course, long years of experience. We began to learn how to collect plants as children at family picnics and gathering expeditions.

My family now helps our grandmother gather the many different edible and medicinal plants that we continue to use. One medicinal plant we gather is Otahkoyitsi (*Comandra umbellata*).

**Chokecherry (above)
and bastard
toadflax (right)**



Botanical illustrations: Gabrielle Sivitz (www.gsvitzart.com)

We use the clean, dried roots in a poultice to relieve inflammation. Sometimes we burn dried Ootsiisimats (*Letharia vulpina*) like incense and inhale the smoke to relieve headaches. Siiksinoko (*Juniperus horizontalis*) berries are used in a tea to treat kidney problems. We also collect Aapaawapspi (*Vaccinium membranaceum*) leaves for use in a daily tonic, and my grandmother thinks the berries should be used strictly for therapeutic purposes. I once told her that my husband was making huckleberry milkshakes and she gasped disapprovingly, "They're medicine!"

McClintock's observations and documentation of Blackfeet women's botanical knowledge almost 100 years ago provides a valuable resource for Blackfeet today, and for anyone interested in learning about ethnobotany. But there are still a few elder Blackfeet women who retain this knowledge as well. My grandmother continues to use what she learned from her grandmothers on a daily basis. She continues today, at age 91, to gather numerous roots, berries, tea leaves and other plants during the summer and fall and to share with those who seek her knowledge of native plants.

Historian Rosalyn LaPier lives in Missoula with her husband, David Beck, and two daughters, Abaki and Ikotsi. She works for the Piegan Institute in Browning and gives public presentations on Blackfeet ethnobotany. The Piegan Institute is a nonprofit organization on the Blackfeet reservation that researches, preserves and promotes Blackfeet language and history. To learn more, see www.pieganinstitute.org.

Special thanks to Shirlee Crow Shoe of the Piegan Institute for helping with the spelling of some of the Blackfeet words.



Annie Mad Plume Wall prepares fresh Ka'kitsimo, or peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), to hang and dry. The plant, which grows near water, is picked mid-summer. The leaves and stems are used for tea.



"My grandmother in the field," says LaPier. "We were out collecting Apahsipoko, or alumroot (*Heuchera parvifolia*), in the fall. We dig the whole plant and use the root. [Alumroot] grows in open fields and needs to be past its growing cycle and ready to become dormant. The root is cleaned and the outside layer peeled off. The inner root is laid in the sun to dry. It can then be broken into pieces and boiled like tea, up to three times before you need a new batch. We drink it as a tonic or use it externally as an anti-inflammatory or to dry up wounds."



Specimens of chokecherry and yampah from the University of Montana Herbarium. Photos: Todd Goodrich/University Relations