



**Natural  
Healing  
Secrets of  
Native  
Americans**

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**Sarah Newman**

Natural Healing Secrets of Native Americans

# Natural Healing Secrets of Native Americans

Amber Robinson

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# 1 DISCLAIMER PAGE

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This book was created to provide information about natural medicines, cures and remedies that people have used in the past. This information is made available with the knowledge that the publisher, editor and authors do not offer any legal or otherwise medical advice. In the case you are ill you should always consult with your caring physician or another medical specialist.

This book does not claim to contain and indeed does not contain all the information available on the subject of natural remedies.

While the author, editor and publisher have gone to great lengths to provide the most useful and accurate collection of healing plants and remedies in North America, there may still exist typographical and/or content errors.

Therefore, this book should not be used as a medical guide.

The authors, editor and publisher shall incur no liability or be held responsible to any person or entity regarding any loss of life or injury, alleged or otherwise, that happened directly or indirectly as a result of using the information contained in this book. It is your own responsibility and if you want to use a potion, tincture, decoction or anything else from this book you should consult with your physician first.

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## 2 HISTORY

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Long before Europeans set foot on the shores of North America, Indigenous tribes were thriving. Today, there are only 560 federally recognized Tribal groups in the United States. To get an idea of how many tribes existed around one thousand years ago, you can easily triple, or even quadruple, that number.

As history has demonstrated, one of the major contributors to the decline of the Native American populations was disease brought by settlers to the regions in which they lived. Before the arrival of settlers with their strange new diseases, Native Americans were quite efficient at healing themselves with what nature gave them.

Each tribe was unique. They had their own religion, customs, and practices. Many tribes had a close relationship with nature, believing it to be sacred. They held the upmost respect for earth and the things it provided. They believed that the bounty Mother Nature provided was to be shared. For countless centuries, they learned what plants to use to heal a variety of conditions. They contributed so much to what we know today about healing plants. In fact, many plants used for certain conditions have been proven by science to contain compounds that indeed target these conditions.

In addition to passing on the knowledge of native healing plants, they also passed on other healing traditions like a holistic approach to healing, the art of smudging, and healing through ceremony and community practices. The wealth of knowledge amassed over the centuries may have been lost in some aspects as tribes disappeared, but some knowledge was passed down (mostly through oral traditions) and is still practiced today by certain Native American Tribes.

In this book, you will learn about some of the plants Native Americans used for healing, as well as other healing traditions sacred to Indigenous people.



# 3 COMMON NORTH AMERICAN PLANTS AND THEIR SURPRISING INDIGENOUS USES

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There are many plants we encounter on a daily basis that were used by Native Americans for healing. Today, some of these plants are still used medicinally, while others are not as popular. Some plants have now been considered toxic by scientists, while others have been proven through research to contain medicinal compounds. The plants discussed below were used by Native Americans to heal a variety of issues, and you will learn about how they were used, whether they are still used today, and whether or not they are safe to use.

## PUSSYTOES

Pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*, *Antennaria parlinii*) are often found in rocky soil and woodlands throughout North America. They are aptly named for their furry, white flower heads that resembled the paws of a cat.

They emerge in spring and stick around through summer. Their leaves slightly resemble common broadleaf plantain, and in fact, these plants are often referred to as “Plantain-Leaved Pussytoes.”

The Cherokee used these plants (infused in water to drink as tea) to control severe menstrual bleeding. Along the same lines, another species of pussytoes called “Plainleaf Pussytoes” was used by the Meskwaki tribes to keep women who had just bore a child healthy. They would drink the leaves in tea as well. Other uses for this plant include use as a general tonic, fever reducer, and cough suppressant.

The leaves were applied to wounds to reduce inflammation and aid in the healing of bruises. Pussytoes are not really used today, but are thought to be safe for use in tea.



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### RAGWORT

There are several species of ragwort, but a species commonly used by Native Americans was Golden Ragwort, or “Squaw Weed.” The Latin name for this species is *Senecio aureus*.

Ragwort can be identified by its distinctive heart-shaped leaves and yellow flowers that grow in flat-topped clusters. This was named due to its use in the treatment of childbirth and reproductive issues, delayed menstrual periods, and leukorrhea.



The dried aerial parts of this plant were used, likely in a tea. However, today this plant is not used anymore, as there are several similar-looking ragwort plants that are highly toxic. Ingestion of this plant could result in serious injury.

### BEE BALM (WILD BERGAMOT)

This highly aromatic plant contains thymol, lending to its spicy, herbaceous aroma. Latin name, *Monarda fistulosa*, this unique plant can be identified by its strange, purple blossoms. The flowers don't have the usual petals, but rather narrow tubes in a cluster atop the flower head.



A member of the mint family, this plant has a sturdy, square stem. It can grow rather tall, more than three feet in height. Different tribes used this plant for different reasons.

The Cherokee used the leaves in a tea for viruses, stomach complaints, and headaches. Several tribes valued this plant for its fragrance and used it like perfume. It was so popular as a perfume, that it was called “Indian Perfume.”

Research has shown that Bee Balm contains strong antibacterial compounds, so it is no surprise that tribes like the Winnebago used the leaves of this plant for boils and pimples. This plant is still popular with herbalists today, valued for its antimicrobial properties and used for sore throats, coughs, and to kill pathogens.

### SLENDER MOUNTAIN MINT

This unassuming plant doesn't look like a typical member of the mint family, but one taste of its leaves will prove otherwise. It is common in the summer and has thin, spade-like leaves going up a woody stalk. The furry, button-like flowers are white and grow in clusters at the top of the stalk. It commonly grows in fields and thickets till late fall.

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Latin name *Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*, an interesting way this was used by Native Americans was for exhaustion. For example, if a man was out all day hunting and needed something to rouse the spirits, he might drink a tea made from the leaves of this plant to revive his senses and help him find renewed energy.

This aromatic plant isn't used much today, although consumption of the leaves in tea is thought to be perfectly safe.



### FIGWORT

Figwort (*Scrophularia marilandica*, *Scrophularia nodosa*) grows quite tall, and if you aren't looking closely, you may miss its tiny, red-maroon flowers growing from long stems near the top. The small flowers have one protruding petal on top. Its leaves are large, and get larger nearer the bottom of the plant.



They can be oval, heart-shaped, or rounded in appearance. The Iroquois used the roots of this plant in a tea for irregular menstrual periods, as a general tonic, and for fever and hemorrhoids. This plant is not widely used today. The North American species is not nearly as studied as its Chinese relative. Safety is unknown.

### JOE PYE WEED

Legend says that an Indian healer by the name of Joe Pye made this plant famous, thus the reason it is named after him. Joe Pye used this plant to cure fevers and typhus, and other Native Americans used it in the treatment of kidney issues like kidney stones and urinary tract infections. It also goes by the name "gravel root."

Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium dubium*, *E. fistulosum*, *E. maculatum*, *E. purpureum*, *E. steelei*) gets very tall, sometimes up to six feet in height. It has small pink flowers in clusters atop a tall, stout stalk. The leaves are lance-shaped and arranged in whorls up the stalk. This plant, specifically the root and leaves, are still used today for kidney and urinary issues.



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## SPIDERWORT

Spiderwort (*Tradescantia virginiana*) is said to have gotten its name because it was used to treat spider bites. The juice inside the stalk has been used medicinally to heal wounds and insect bites. The Cherokee used this plant for stomach issues and as a gentle laxative.

They also enjoyed eating the young shoots that emerge in spring. The plant has bright purple flowers with three petals. Sometimes only one flower is atop the stalk, and sometimes there are several. They range in size, but are usually around three feet tall when full grown. Spiderwort is still used by herbalists today, especially for external wound healing.



## BELLFLOWER

A North American species of bellflower called Tall Bellflower (*Campanula americana*) was used by several tribes of Native Americans for its healing properties.



This tall plant can reach heights of six feet and boasts lovely purple flowers with a long stamen coming out like a tongue. The Iroquois used the roots to treat tuberculosis, and the Meskwaki used it for the same purpose.

The roots were infused in water and drank as tea. This plant is not as commonly used today, as there are concerns with toxicity.

## BLUE VERVAIN

Blue Vervain (*Verbena hastata*) is used by herbalists today for its calming and sedative properties, but this plant was utilized by Native Americans for many different issues. Some tribes used it as a tonic for post-childbirth pain, while other tribes used it to help with coughs and colds. It was used to break fevers (by inducing sweating) and settle the stomach. The root was used more than other parts of the plant. Blue Vervain is still used by herbalists today, but aerial parts are mostly utilized. This plant can be identified by its purple flowers circling spikes in clusters atop the plant. It can get up to four feet tall.



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## BLOODROOT

There is a lot of lore surrounding this plant, especially concerning its use with Native Americans. In some tribes, if a man wanted a woman to love him, he would rub the bright red juice from the roots onto the palm of his hand and try to get the woman to shake his hand. If she did, it was thought that she would marry him within a week's time. Of course, this plant was also used medicinally among many tribes.

The Cherokee used the roots in tea for lung issues, fevers, rheumatism, and laryngitis. Various tribes would use the brightly colored dye in the roots to color materials like baskets and clothing.



Some tribes colored their skin with the roots (giving it the nickname "Indian War Paint") and it was sometimes used to decorate horses. This plant was used in commercial products like toothpaste for years, until it was removed due to the presence of toxic alkaloids. Ingestion of this root may cause serious issues. For this reason, few use it today.

The striking plant (*Sanguinaria Canadensis*) emerges in early spring, before the leaves show on the trees. It can be identified by its vivid white flowers with a yellow center and lobed, elephant-ear leaves that are a light green in color. The root is its most distinguishing factor. If you dig it up, the root will appear a bright red. If you cut it open, it looks like a severed finger.

## GREAT BLUE LOBELIA

Great Blue Lobelia has the Latin name *Lobelia siphilitica* because it was once used as a treatment for



syphilis. This tall plant has brightly colored purple flowers adorning the stalk. Although it was noticed that the Cherokee used the roots to treat syphilis, the roots were also used to treat viruses, fevers, and digestive issues. It was thought to help get rid of parasites, and was gargled to heal coughs. The leaves were used as a poultice for wounds and were thought to have pain-relieving and fever-reducing properties when applied to the forehead. This plant is not used as much today, as it may cause gastrointestinal issues.

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## INDIAN TOBACCO

Indian Tobacco is another type of Lobelia, Latin name *Lobelia inflata*. It was given its common name because it was smoked by Native Americans to relieve asthma symptoms, coughing, bronchitis, and a sore throat. It was also drunk in a tea or extract to induce vomiting, if needed. Too much of this plant will indeed cause vomiting and may also act as a strong sedative. Today, this plant is still valued by many herbalists. It is not smoked as much anymore, but it is made into tinctures and other types of extracts. It should only be used by skilled herbalists due to potential toxicity. It is currently used for its lung-nourishing properties. This plant is much smaller than Great Blue Lobelia and its white flowers come from pod-like protrusions up the stalk.



## PURPLE PRAIRIE CLOVER

This plant is a member of the pea family and isn't hard to notice with its bright pink blooms that are as unique as its uses. Purple Prairie Clover, or *Dalea purpurea*, was employed by the Chippewa to treat heart issues, while the Meskwaki used the root for pneumonia and measles. The Pawnee used the plant as a tonic for overall health. It contains strong antibacterial compounds and its pleasant-tasting roots were also chewed like gum by some tribes and early settlers. It can be identified by its thimble-like tops which are bare, with bright pink flowers surrounding the bottom of the bloom. It has a very pleasant aroma. Not much is known about this plant today, and it is scarcely used by herbalists.



## HOG PEANUT

Hog Peanut (*Amphicarpaea bracteata*), a highly invasive North American vining plant, can take over an area quickly. However, Native Americans used this plant for several issues. First, the nuts that it provided were a source of food for some prairie tribes. The Chippewa used the plant as a laxative, while the Cherokee used the roots for the treatment of diarrhea and to treat snake bites. It was mostly prepared in a tea for medicinal use. Today, not much is known about this little-studied plant. However, its Chinese cousin is used for digestive issues.



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### IRONWEED

Ironweed (*Vernonia glauca*) is a very common plant in North America, especially in the Midwest. It arrives in late summer and sticks around through October. It can be identified by its furry, purple flowers in clusters atop a stalk reaching up to five feet in height.

The Cherokee used the root of this plant as a blood purifier. It was also a women's plant, being utilized for irregular menses and pain from childbirth. In addition, it was used to treat bleeding and stomach issues. The plant is not used as widely today, and safety is unknown.



### NEW ENGLAND ASTER



New England Aster (*Aster novae-angliae*), a common fall flower throughout North America, was used by the Potawatomi and the Meskwaki tribes to bring an unconscious person back to consciousness. They would do this by smudging the plant so the affected person could inhale the smoke. The Cherokee used the root of the plant by poulticing it and applying the poultice to areas that hurt.

The root of the plant was infused in water to make a tea and drank by the Iroquois for the treatment of fevers. It was also drank in a tea for diarrhea. This plant is still utilized by herbalists today, but for an entirely different reason. Some herbalists claim the flowers have sedative and calming properties.

### ECHINACEA

Echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea, angustifolia, pallida*) is a great example of a plant that was first used by Native Americans for the very diseases it is used for today. Native Americans were the first to understand that this plant was useful for infections, colds, and other viruses. There are several species, and each was used regionally for similar issues. Today, Echinacea is still a very popular cold and influenza remedy due to the presence of immune-stimulating compounds in the plant. It stands up to three feet tall and has sturdy, hairy stems. The flowers range in color depending



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on the species, but can be pale pink to bright pink in color. The center of the flower contains sharp bristles. The roots have been shown to have medicinal properties, but also the flowers and leaves.

### WILD YAM

Wild Yam, Latin name *Dioscorea villosa*, may be more known for its use in the creation of contraceptives, asthma medication, arthritis medication, eczema medication, and metabolism control drugs. Just because the plant is used to create such things in a lab (basic progesterone starting material) does not mean the plant in its raw form can treat these issues. However, the plant also has a history of use with certain Native American tribes for issues like labor pains and childbirth assistance. Today, it is still used in some herbal preparations as a “women’s herb.” It is a vining plant with heart-shaped leaves. In some places it is endangered or threatened.



### WOOD AND STINGING NETTLES

Canadian Wood Nettle, Latin name *Urtica Canadensis*, and Stinging Nettle, Latin name *Urtica dioica*, are similar nettles used in various ways by Native Americans. Each plant grows in slightly different regions.



Canadian Wood Nettle was used in several ways. The root was used by the Iroquois to treat tuberculosis and the Meskwaki and Ojibwa used it for urinary incontinence.

Both plants have similar compounds and have been used to treat prostate issues. Both plants also offered a source of nutrition and sustenance for Native Americans. Stinging Nettle was used as a blood purifier and as an overall tonic.

Both plants have stinging hairs, but Stinging Nettle has more. Most of the Stinging Hairs on Canadian Wood Nettle are on the stalk. Both of these plants are used today as a nourishing pot herb. Stinging Nettle is still a very popular medicinal herb, with uses ranging from treating allergies to urinary issues.

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## JUNIPER

One of the most popular plants used by Native Americans, Juniper (*Juniperus communis*) was used differently by different tribes. The Cheyenne used the leaves for smudging (to be discussed in detail later in the book) and in tea for colds, fevers, and sore throats.

The Chippewa used the leaves for asthma and similar issues. The First Nation peoples of Canada and Alaska used Juniper as well, both ceremonially and medicinally.

Today, this shrub or small tree is still very popular. It collected and tied together in small bundles to create smudge sticks, or the boughs are used in steam rooms and religious ceremonies. Today, herbalists use juniper berries for their diuretic and anti-inflammatory compounds. They are also a popular treatment for digestive complaints. The berries are used to flavor gin. There are several species of juniper, and a species referred to as Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) is used similarly.



## YUCCA

There are two types of Yucca that were used by Native Americans medicinally. One type is referred to as *Yucca glauca* and the other type is called *Yucca filamentosa*. Yuccas have long, slender leaves at the bottom of the plant. The leaves are spiked. They have a long stalk and white, bell-shaped flowers on top.



The roots of some Yucca plants contain saponins. Saponins are soap-like compounds that cause frothing and foaming.

In fact, the roots of the plant have been used to make soaps and shampoos. Saponins can be toxic, so it makes sense that some Native Americans would take the roots and put it in water to shock fish. It would apparently make them float to the surface and be easier to catch.

Despite this potentially toxic compound, the Catawba used the roots to make salves or poultices for skin issues and sprains. The root was thought to have relieved inflammation and pain. Today, yucca is not widely used medicinally. However, some people eat parts of the plant (like the flowers).

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### BLACKBERRY

It can be assumed that many Native Americans enjoyed the plentiful harvest of blackberries (*Rubus sp.*) in the summer. However, they also used the vines to make twine. They used the leaves and root medicinally. Some tribes would chew the leaves to soothe sore or bleeding gums.

The roots were thought to treat an upset stomach, diarrhea, or related issues. The plant was infused in water to make a tea for coughs and sore throats as well. Blackberries are still enjoyed today around the world for their wonderful flavor. The plant is still used medicinally by some herbalists.



### ELDERBERRY

The popularity of elderberry has exploded in recent years due to the discovery of its immune-strengthening properties. Native Americans used this plant (*Sambucus canadensis*) in unique ways for relief from a variety of issues. The Iroquois used the bark for measles, headaches, as a laxative, diuretic, and to cleanse the body.



The bark was infused in water to make a tea. This tea was also used as a skin wash for eczema. The Cherokee used the berries for boils, rheumatism, and as a diuretic.

The leaves also had their place in a poultice for burns, cuts, and other skin issues. Elderberry is still popular today. The berries are mostly used,

although some herbalists opt for the leaves, believing them to be more potent than the berries.

### SPICEBUSH

Spicebush, Latin name *Lindera benzoin*, is a wonderfully aromatic plant native to North America. If you happen to walk by it in the summertime, you will definitely smell the pleasantly spicy aroma of this bush.

All parts of this beneficial plant were used by Native Americans. Uses include treating coughs, colds, menstrual issues, cramping, croup, measles, anemia, to purify the blood, rheumatism, and for inducing sweating (likely to lower a fever). The berries in particular were used to treat stomach



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issues. They were also applied to sore muscles, joints, and bruises. Twigs of the plant were used in a tea for colds, parasites, gas, colic, and fevers. This plant is still used today by some herbalists.

### SUMAC

Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*, *R. hirta*) was used by Native Americans to treat a cough. The berries were primarily used in syrup. This was also used to treat female issues and lung complaints.

The root and bark were used for their astringent properties, specifically for bleeding. Other uses for the berries include being infused in tea for fever reduction, inflammation, and sore throats.

Today, the berries are still a popular foraged ingredient used to make a refreshing drink.



### WILD ROSE

Wild roses (*Rosa rugosa*) are abundant and considered invasive in many areas. However, Native Americans used these plants to treat a cold, as well as in a tea to help the kidneys and bladder.



This is because it acts as a mild diuretic. The petals were infused in water and drunk for a sore throat.

Wild roses are still popular today and used by herbalists for their astringent properties, especially the blossoms. The rose hips are also beneficial and contain high amounts of Vitamin C.

### GINSENG

Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*) was a very popular plant among Native Americans living in areas where these were plentiful. Just like today, it was used as a tonic by tribes like the Menominee and Cherokee.

The root was primarily used. The Meskwaki used the plant with other plants to increase their potency. The Penobscot used the roots to increase fertility in women.

It was also used for colic, nervous conditions, headaches, fainting, vertigo, and to induce childbirth. Because ginseng is so effective, its popularity has resulted in overharvesting. It is now



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protected by the federal government. It is still a popular adaptogenic herb today, used by herbalists all over the world.

## WILD BLACK CHERRY

Wild Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*) was used by Native Americans much like it is by herbalists today. The Cherokee used the inner bark to treat coughs, fevers, throat issues, and mouth sores. The Iroquois also used the inner bark to treat coughs, fevers, colds, headaches, and soreness. It was widely used for lung ailments.



The Ojibwa treated many of the same issues with the bark. One of this tree's main medicinal constituents is also toxic. It contains a glycoside that acts like cyanide. Depending on when the bark is harvested, it may be in higher amounts.

Fall is the worst time to harvest the bark, as this is when it is thought to have the highest concentration of glycosides. Dosage is very important when it comes to using this plant

medicinally. Although it is still used in herbal preparations for coughs today, its use should be left to a trained herbalist.

## BIRCH

Paper White Birch (*Betula papyrifera*) is very common in the northern states. Its paper-white bark is very noticeable in any forest. This tree was an important staple to many Native American tribes, with some using it to make canoes.

The inner bark was used by the Menominee to treat dysentery. The inner bark was also used to flavor medicines and help with constipation. It could also be eaten as a survival food.

Sap from the tree was used to drink and to treat scurvy. Birch is still popular today, and is used by herbalists for skin issues, inflammation, and pain.



## ELM

There are two types of elm that were used medicinally. Each species has its own unique use. American Elm (*Ulmus Americana*) was used by the Mohegan to treat colds and coughs.

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The Potawatomi used the inner bark for stomach issues like cramps and diarrhea. The Ojibwa also used the inner bark for similar issues. The bark was often drunk in tea.

It was also used for menstrual issues, bleeding, and hemorrhoids. Slippery Elm (*Ulmus rubra*, *U. fulva*) was used in poultice form by the Osage Indians to extract thorns and similar skin invaders.

The inner bark is very mucilaginous, and when boiled in water, will make a thick tea that can be used to treat sore throats, stomach complaints, coughs, and diarrhea. Slippery Elm is still popular today with herbalists for its mucilage properties.



### **BLACK-EYED SUSAN**

Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) is a common North American wildflower that has been used by the Cherokee for sores, snake bites, inflammation, and pain. The roots were primarily used in a poultice or tea.



The Iroquois drank a tea from the roots for worms. Other tribes drank a tea from the roots to treat colds. This plant is a cousin to Echinacea and strikes a resemblance to Echinacea when it comes to the size and shape of the plant itself. One main difference between the two plants is that Black-Eyed Susan has bright yellow petals and a black center that is not spiky like Echinacea. Because they are cousins, they do share some medicinal similarities as well. One study has shown Black-Eyed Susan roots to be

comparable to Echinacea for its immune system benefits. Although this plant is not near as popular as Echinacea, its popularity is rising.

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## **GOLDENROD**

Sweet Goldenrod (*Solidago odora*, *S. canadensis*) and other goldenrod species pop up in the fall in most North American states. They are often blamed for allergies when this is not usually the case.

This plant was used medicinally by the Cherokee for diarrhea, coughs, fevers, tuberculosis, colds, and measles. All aerial parts were infused in water to drink in a tea. Other uses for goldenrod include use as a diuretic, to treat rheumatism, headaches, stomach issues, dysentery, and colic. Today goldenrod is still used by herbalists due to its diuretic properties. It is thought to be beneficial to the kidneys and urinary system by helping to flush out toxins and bacteria. It has been shown to contain seven times more antioxidants than green tea.



## **PINEAPPLE WEED**

Pineapple Weed (*Matricaria discoidea*), is a pleasantly-scented member of the chamomile family that is quite common in the spring and summer in North America.

It was used by Native Americans in a tea for stomach issues, colds, and fevers. This makes perfect sense, as it is closely related to chamomile.

One distinguishing factor between this plant and chamomile is that it smells like pineapple. It also does not have petals, just bulbous yellow heads. It is still used today for many of the same reasons one would use chamomile.

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## BELLWORT

Bellwort (*Uvularia grandiflora*), a common early spring sight in some regions of North America, was used



by the Potawatomi and Ojibwa for rheumatism. They used the root tea for washing rheumatic eye conditions. It was also thought to have anti-inflammatory properties, and was used in a poultice to treat snake bites, sore muscles, backaches, and other painful or swollen areas of the body.

In addition, it was thought to be a treatment for toothaches (in a poultice). The young shoots were edible, and were likely a source of food for Native Americans. It grows up to two feet tall

and has yellow flowers that hang down like bells. This plant is not widely used by herbalists today.



## BONESET

Boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*) got its name due to its alleged ability to treat dengue, or break-bone fever as it was called. Native Americans used the aerial parts of this plant in a tea to induce sweating and thus lower a fever.

It was also used to treat colds and other viruses. The leaves were also reported to be used to treat malaria, rheumatism, and muscle pains. This plant can grow to four feet tall and has perfoliate leaves. The flowers are

in clusters at the top and are white. Boneset is still a popular natural remedy today for fevers, colds, and other viruses.

## SNAKEROOT

Snakeroot (*Parthenium integrifolium*) grows up to five feet tall and has white, button-like flowers growing in clusters at the top. It was a popular snake bite remedy by Native Americans, thus giving it its name.

The roots of the plant were mostly used by Indigenous people to treat urinary system issues and gonorrhea.

The Catawba made a poultice from the leaves to treat burns. This plant is not as widely used by herbalists today as it once was.



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## POKE

This noticeable plant has a brightly colored magenta stalk and will grow berries in grape-like clusters that hang down in the summer.



Poke berries (*Phytolacca Americana*) were used by Native Americans in tea to treat rheumatism and arthritis. The root was used to treat inflammation, sores, blood conditions, kidney issues, and bruises. Today, this plant is known to have toxic properties, but some more experienced herbalists use the root for its antibiotic properties.

The berries are a popular folk remedy to treat gout and arthritis. It is likely that the brightly colored berries were also used by Indigenous people to dye clothing and other objects.

## SOLOMON'S SEAL

Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), beloved by herbalists, has been used by Native Americans for the treatment of many conditions. The Chippewa used the root to help them sleep. It was also infused in water and drunk for coughs, pains, and stomach issues.

The roots were poultice to treat bruises, sores, cuts, and other skin conditions. Today, herbalists still use this plant for its anti-inflammatory properties. The roots contain the most therapeutic benefits. Solomon's Seal is often confused with False Solomon's Seal. However, when the flowers emerge, the two are very easy to tell apart. The flowers of False Solomon's Seal are on top of the plant, while the flowers of true Solomon's Seal hang in bells from the plant, along the bent stalk.



Thousands more plants were used by Indigenous people for ailments ranging from mild to serious.

Some were also used in religious ceremonies and customs. In the next half of this book, you will learn more about these customs, religious ceremonies, and healing practices.

# 4 SMUDGING: AN ANCIENT INDIGENOUS HEALING ART

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The art of smudging has been practiced by centuries by different Indigenous tribes. Their love and appreciation for nature and its healing plants is reflected in this healing practice.

## 4.1 WHAT IS SMUDGING?

Smudging, on the surface, is the practice of burning various plants and letting the smoke cleanse a person or area. It is believed to dispel negative energy and aid in healing. Plants are valued in Native American Culture and are considered medicine. Plants are considered to be living relatives to some Indigenous people. Their use in this act is intentional and mindful. When a person is surrounded by the smoke from smudging, they are bathing in plant medicine. As the healing smoke washes over a person, it is washing away impurities and purifying.



When plants are gathered for this act, they are gathered fresh and only what is absolutely needed is taken. Sometimes, an offering of tobacco or another plant will be laid down at the collection site, as a way of giving something back for their sacrifice. The utmost respect toward nature is applied in every Native American practice, and this practice is no different.

Plants used vary according to what is available in that region, but some of the most widely used plants for smudging include sage, cedar, tobacco, and sweetgrass. These four plants represent the Four Directions

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and are integral to the Medicine Wheel in Native American culture. More on this will be discussed in the next section. First, let's discuss the symbolism behind sage, cedar, tobacco, and sweetgrass:

**Sage:** Sage represents the northern direction and protection from negativity. It was a very important part of the smudging process. The type of sage used varied, but one of the most sacred was white sage.

**Cedar:** Cedar represents the western direction and promotes harmony. It was also used to ward off sickness.

**Tobacco:** Tobacco represents the eastern direction and promotes balance. It was also thought to chase away bad energy and bring in good energy.

**Sweetgrass:** Sweetgrass represents the southern direction and promotes kindness and positivity. It was also thought to attract beauty.



### 4.2 THE MEDICINE WHEEL AND THE FOUR DIRECTIONS

As discussed in the previous section, there are four plants (sage, cedar, tobacco, and sweetgrass) that represent the Four Directions. This is part of the Medicine Wheel, or Sacred Hoop, as it is sometimes referred to. The Medicine Wheel is often represented by a circle, but there is much more to this than meets the eye.

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The circle of the Medicine Wheel represents the sacred outer boundary of the earth. It also represents the great circle of life and death, the sun and moon, a drum, the shape of a dwelling, and many other sacred aspects of Native American life.

The horizontal and vertical lines in the wheel symbolize man's path, as well as the sun's path. The lines cross in the middle, representing the center of the earth.

Sometimes a feather from an eagle is placed in the center of the circle. This represents The Great Spirit's power over all.

Different Native American tribes interpret aspects of The Medicine Wheel and The Four Directions differently. Sometimes, the Medicine Wheel may have four different colors (usually black, yellow, red, and white) to represent the Four Directions. Color symbolism may vary, but typically North is red, East is yellow, South is white, and West is black.

The Four Directions may also represent the four seasons, the four elements, or the four stages of life. The act of smudging keeps all the aforementioned concepts in mind, and is performed in a way that reflects the sacredness of the Four Directions and the Medicine Wheel.



### 4.3 THE PROCESS OF SMUDGING

There is more to smudging than just burning plants, if one is to follow traditional Native American practices. Most of the time, a person will face in the Eastern direction when first lighting the smudge. This direction is associated with birth and beginnings. Next, each of the remaining four directions will be faced as the smoke rises around them. A feather (usually an eagle feather) is used to waft the smoke in these directions during the act. Other tools that are traditionally used include an abalone shell to collect the ashes.

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A person will also wash their hands in the smoke and then wash their eyes, mouth and ears in smoke. This is thought to represent protection from what we hear, see (even in visions or dreams), and the ability to find the words that need to be said. Some will also wash their head, arms, and behind them. They may bring the smoke up their left arm toward their heart for strength and down their right arm to represent giving up part of themselves.

Smudging is a time for prayer. One may call upon their creator to help and guide them. They may give thanks. They may pray for people they love. Sometimes, depending on the tribe, they may end the prayer with "All My Relations." This means we are all related and demonstrates the connectedness that they feel with everything around them.



### **4.4 THE ROLE OF SMUDGING IN A HEALING CIRCLE**

A Healing Circle is a group ceremony that often begins with smudging. It may begin with one person going around the circle with the smudging tools in their right hand and then each person in the circle smudges. This is done to invite the spirit world into the group setting and foster a sense of connectedness. When one person is smudging, the others may pray for them. There may be words or a prayer from an Elder of the tribe.

The eagle feather is often employed during this healing circle time. It is passed clockwise among everyone and the person with the eagle feather may share. They are not interrupted, but are given this time to talk about whatever is on their heart.

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This time to share is an important aspect of Native American life and a great representation of how many tribes dealt with issues. They believed in the power of talking things out and sharing their feelings in a safe setting. They believed this was the best way to solve problems. These types of circles were done for centuries as a way to communicate, lift each other up, and respectfully solve a number of issues. These meetings were often closed with words or a prayer from an elder.

### 4.5 OTHER PLANTS USED FOR SMUDGING

Although plants that represented the four directions were the most popular for smudging, other plants were used as well. Not all of these plants were available at all times, especially depending on the region, drought, etc. The following plants were also used for smudging. Some have symbolic meaning, while the meaning of other plants is unknown:

**Juniper:** Juniper was widely used by Native Americans for healing. It was thought to clear negative energy and create a safe space.

**Lavender:** Lavender was thought to bring a spiritual blessing.

**Copal:** This was used in resin form for pleasing the creator, clearing negative energy, and allowing positive changes to occur.

**Yerba Santa:** This fragrant herb was used to bring health to young ones, bring love, honor ancestors, purify, and heal.

**Palo Santo:** This wonderfully aromatic wood is taken from a tree. Today, this is not a very sustainable source of smudge as the tree's populations decline. Palo Santo was thought to purify, cleanse an area of bad spirits, heal, and bring good fortune.

**Pinion:** Pinion pine was used to combat illness, clear negative energy, and promote fertility.

# 5 THE NATIVE AMERICAN APPROACH TO HEALING: A HOLISTIC MODEL

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The Native American approach to healing encompassed more than just looking at a person and treating their symptoms. They followed a more holistic model of healing. Today, a holistic model of healing is still popular and a great way to treat any person by seeing them as a whole person and not just an illness.

## 5.1 WHAT IS “HOLISTIC” HEALING?

Traditional Native American holistic healing is defined by the National Institutes of Health/National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine as a “Whole medical system that encompasses a range of holistic treatments used by indigenous healers for a multitude of acute and chronic conditions or to promote health and wellbeing.”

Each tribe used the holistic model differently, but some similarities among tribes include addressing a person’s mental, spiritual, and emotional needs in addition to their physical needs. In short, the focus was on healing the whole person: mind, body, and spirit.

Many Native Americans believed that the outward physical issue was not necessarily rooted in that specific area, but may have been the result of a spiritual imbalance as well. A combination of herbs, meditation, and rituals were employed to treat the affected person.

When we look at healing today, it is not difficult to see that addressing the mind and other areas is very important to aid in healing. For instance, stress is a major factor in a large number of health problems. However, when these health problems occur, how often is a person treated for the stress in addition to the health issue that resulted from the stress (like high blood pressure, heart disease, etc.)? Is it common for stress-relieving techniques to be taught in conjunction with the distribution of heart medication? This is why the holistic model is so valuable.

Today, some integrative medicine practitioners practice similar holistic healing models with patients in a modern setting. Integrative medicine is an approach that puts the patient first by addressing not only their physical issues, but looking at their emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and environmental needs as well.

## 5.2 HOW HOLISTIC HEALING LOOKED FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Holistic healing looked different for each individual and each tribe. This is because a very personal approach was used with each patient. Some techniques often involved not only the patient, but the patient’s family and community. This was a powerful way to gather healing energy from everyone and give it to the person in need. Sometimes the community and family were involved for one ceremony, and other times, the whole community may have gathered for several days to weeks to support the affected person. This gathering of healing love might have employed singing, dancing, and group prayer.

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There are many tools today's holistic practitioners use that were adapted from ancient Native American healing practices. The Sweat Lodge is one example. This is a Native American ritual used for purification. It entailed an often dome-shaped hut in which there would be a sauna-like environment for people to sit in. This environment is created by using hot rocks to create steam when water is poured over them. In true holistic fashion, this ritual was intended to heal the body physically, mentally, and spiritually. For mental healing, a sweat lodge is thought to help bring mental clarity. For physical healing, it is thought to provide purifying, cleansing, and wound-healing benefits. For spiritual healing, it is thought to allow time for meditation and connection to a higher realm.

Ceremonial peace pipes are another example of how Native Americans sought to heal in more than one way. This was an important way they could connect with the spirit realm. They believed the pipe was a link between the earth and sky. The pipe's smoke might symbolize prayers going up. Depending on what was smoked in the pipe, it could help bring peace and clarity. So not only did this help heal a person spiritually, it helped heal them mentally and physically. Tobacco was sacred to Indigenous people, so it was often smoked in pipes. However, other plants used include various herbs like sage, tree bark, and bearberry leaves. Some tribes smoked peyote (from a cactus), and although this is illegal due to hallucinogenic properties, they are allowed to do this as part of religious ceremonies.

Many Native Americans used healing talismans as part of a holistic approach to healing and health. These amulets or talismans could have been made from crystals, shells, feathers, bones, or gemstones. One example of a sacred healing amulet was a dreamcatcher. These were often crafted for children to help with nightmares. These relics likely provided a sense of comfort and protection for the ones who had them.

Often, herbs were incorporated into the holistic healing model. Native Americans had a vast and comprehensive knowledge of many herbs, as well as how to prepare them to heal the body, mind, and spirit. Tribes would have several elders or medicine men that would treat the sick in a variety of ways with plants and other tools.

### **5.3 THE MEDICINE MAN AND HIS MEDICINE BAG**

The Medicine Man may have been a man or a woman, depending on the tribe. They did not just treat conditions with plants, although plants were often part of their healing process. They would employ a holistic approach unique to the patient. This could range from offering prayers to healing songs. Objects called fetishes were often used to facilitate healing. Fetishes are sacred objects (like feathers, animal skins, bones, etc.) that were used as tools to bring self-awakening, help with prayer, or used for protection/healing.

Ceremonies intended to facilitate healing were common. The length and type of ceremony varied. Fetishes may have been used during this time as well. A patient may have been instructed to change their diet or even abstain from food during treatment, depending on the condition being treated.

When it comes to plant medicine, Native Americans had a broad knowledge of plants that could treat wounds, induce sweating to lower a fever, or even cause one to vomit. Plants that induce vomiting are called emetic plants. These did have their place for healing in Native American culture. Sometimes these plants were used to provide emotional release or to rid the body of something causing stomach upset.

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One example of an emetic plant has been previously mentioned in the first section of this book. It is called Indian Tobacco. Even in moderate doses, this plant may cause vomiting.

Some plants were used to bring a menstrual period. These plants may have been used to induce abortion. Plants that bring a menstrual period/induce abortion are called abortifacient plants. Blue Cohosh is one example of this. It was used as a type of birth control by some tribes. It contains an abortifacient substance that mimics oxytocin. This can cause the uterus to contract. There are additional abortifacient compounds in this plant as well.

The parts of the plants used to heal varied. Roots were most often used, but bark, twigs, leaves, and sometimes flowers or seeds, were used as well. Depending on the issue, these plants could have been poultice or mashed and applied directly to a wound, or boiled to extract oils and other medicinal compounds for consumption. The Medicine Man often gave the patient a single, considerable dose in the morning and then they would monitor the symptoms from there.

Some tribes used animals and insects for healing. The Papago used crickets for medicine. Some southwestern tribes used parts of the same snake that bit a person to treat the snakebite. It was not uncommon for clay or charcoal to be used for healing as well. The Navajo used a type of clay called red ocher to treat a sunburn. The Hopi used charcoal to counteract inflammation.

Sometimes, the cause of the illness was not apparent. In cases like this, the cause may have been determined to be supernatural. It may have been blamed on a bad spirit that entered the body. Sometimes, a member of the tribe called a Mystery Man was assigned to this. A Mystery Man was thought to have the power to recognize the origin of the illness and help treat it with specific and unique prayers, songs, or fetishes. Some tribes had a Mystery Man and a Medicine Man. Both were very respected members of the tribe.

When examining a patient, a Medicine Man would inquire into a variety of aspects of the afflicted person's life. They wanted to know about the physical symptoms, but also the spiritual and mental issues the patient may have been facing. These were all important to detecting the root cause and treating the patient as a whole.

The medicine bag was often carried by the Medicine Man, as well as many tribe members. This was a pouch that stored items considered sacred and meaningful. This pouch was carried to bring inner strength to the wearer when they were on a journey. Oftentimes, these pouches carried herbs like sage, sweetgrass, tobacco, and cedar for smudging. They may have also contained personal possessions given to them by loved ones. This bag was worn around the neck to be close to the heart. They were usually made of leather and sometimes were decorated with beads, shells, or bone. The bag spiritually represented the wearer. The items in a medicine bag inspired well-being and health, whether it was mental, spiritual, or physical.

# 6 HEALING THROUGH CEREMONY AND COMMUNITY

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Ceremonies and rituals were an integral way Native Americans helped facilitate healing and well-being among the tribe. The community was often involved, whether through collective dance, singing, or prayer.

## 6.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF CEREMONY IN INDIGENOUS HEALING

Ceremonies were a way to connect spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically. These were practiced by a few or the whole community at once, depending on the reason. Large ceremonies were not usually practiced for healing, but it was not uncommon for a group to get together to promote healing for an afflicted person. Ceremonies were a way for people to come together to promote harmony as a tribe. This strong sense of community and harmony with each other and the earth is what helped to foster peace among people.

One type of ceremony is called a pow-wow. This is an event in which people meet to sing, dance, socialize, and honor Indigenous culture. These events may have included both Native Americans and non-Native Americans. Some pow-wows are a time for people to dress up in cultural clothing, paint their bodies, and display their handmade arts and crafts.

Today, the largest pow-wow in the United States takes place on the fourth weekend of April in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This huge event encompasses singing, dancing, a pageant, and a market.

Death Ceremonies are also an important part of Native American culture. With a deep and strong belief in an afterlife, Native Americans did not necessarily mourn like others. They believe death was a time of celebration of the deceased person's journey to the Spirit World. The ceremonies performed varied amongst different tribes, but doubtless aided in healing the community and families affected by the passing of one of their own. Because they often believed the deceased person was going on a journey, they would perform afterlife rituals for a safe journey, as well as offer food, herbs, and other tools.

The Green Corn Festival is another ceremony performed by tribes such as the Creek, Cherokee, Seminole, Yuchi, and Iroquois. This could be considered a religious ceremony, as well as a celebration. When the crops ripened in late summer, this festival would often place. This was a way to give thanks to the Great Spirit for the corn harvest. Ceremonies included dancing, singing, a feast, and religious ceremonies. Some tribes use this time to hold councils to forgive minor crimes or issues. Other tribes choose this time to give their babies their names. Tournaments and cleansing activities are also said to take place among certain tribes.

Vision Quests are another type of ritual that is sacred to Native American culture. Many cultures have their "coming of age" ceremonies. For example, in Jewish culture, one might have a Bah Mitzvah or a Bat Mitzvah to acknowledge a young boy or girl's coming into an age of accountability. In Native American culture, a vision quest is a way to encourage a young adult to find themselves by seeking an interaction with a guardian spirit. Each tribe had its own way of carrying this out. Some tribes would have the youth

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go alone into the wilderness for a length of time. Other tribes would require the youth to fast or go without sleep prior to the quest. The quest could take place in the wilderness or in a small room. Once the youth experienced the presence of the spirit, they would realize their life direction and pursue this.

All the ceremonies performed by Native Americans fostered a sense of community, a connection with a higher realm, and peace among the tribe. Many of these rituals and ceremonies brought the community together, whether it was to send a friend to the afterlife or celebrate another year's harvest.

### **6.2 NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND THEIR ROLE IN HEALING**

Like the Medicine Man and Mystery Man, religious leaders were a valued part of some Native American communities. Sometimes The Medicine Man was also the shaman, or a man who helped bridge the spirit world and the world of man. The shaman was often a man of power in the tribe. This man may have performed several duties. Some shamans were said to be possessed by a spirit that helped them perform their healing. Some shamans danced to connect with the spirit realm and other shamans used tools like rattles to call upon the spirits. Sometimes a shaman and a priest were the same person, and sometimes they were two separate tribe members.

Some maladies were thought to be the cause of a bad spirit. Religious leaders would attempt to remedy this issue by performing certain rituals and even attempting to detect the person responsible for throwing the spirit upon the afflicted person. Some issues were thought to be the cause of a "wandering spirit." For these, a religious leader would attempt to return the soul to the body. Sometimes a shaman's job was to figure out what taboo had been broken, as this was assumed to be the reason why a person was sick. The job of some shamans was to perform certain rituals to ensure rainfall, thus ensuring a plentiful harvest of crops in the fall.

In some tribes, women were shamans as well. Most tribes believed that the shaman inherited his powers. Oftentimes, the role of shaman was passed down in families.

### **6.3 DANCES**

Dances were an important aspect of Native American community. Some dances were performed as part of a religious ceremony, some were to bring rain, some dances were performed to ensure the well-being of the community, and other dances are based on interesting legends that are still told amongst tribe members today. Some dances have survived to this day and are practiced by tribes wishing to preserve their heritage. Other dances have been lost to time. These dances brought communities together and sometimes even multiple Native American tribes. They were a way to bring everyone together to celebrate, mourn, or worship. Sometimes dancing was a way to offer prayers and healing for a person, the community, or the world.

One touching example of a healing dance has occurred recently. With the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping across the world, a young Native American girl from South Carolina made headlines when she performed a healing dance to help spread peace and healing during the outbreak.

The Ghost Dance is a more recent dance, dating back to the 1880s when Native Americans were being persecuted on reservations. This dance was created to inspire hope in Native Americans suffering as a result of the conditions they were forced to live in. It is said that a Northern Paiute man had a dream that

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inspired the dance. In his dream he saw the earth swallowing up the ones who were persecuting them and peace being restored. He said that if they danced this dance continually, the dream may come true. It was often performed in secret.

The stomp dance was a dance performed by Eastern Woodland tribes. It involves both religious and community activity. It is not uncommon for fasting and going without sleep to precede the dance. This dance is thought to guarantee the tribe's well-being. Both men and women perform this dance. They usually dance around a fire, dancing and stomping. The least-experienced dancers are to go to the end of the line, while the most experienced go to the front.

The Rain Dance is a popular dance to bring about rain so crops can grow well. This dance was especially popular in dry climates like the southwest. Oftentimes, this dance was performed in the spring when the crops were being planted, but sometimes rain was needed badly due to an especially dry time, so the rain dance was performed to bring much-needed rain.

### 6.4 TOTEMS

Some tribes believed that certain animals were spirit guides. Native Americans believed that wisdom can be gleaned from each animal, and the animal can help guide and protect a person. It was believed that the animal chooses the person, and not the other way around. Totems were symbols of the animals. They weren't always a totem pole, but could be depicted in a figurine, engraving, or painting.

Once a person figured out what their spirit animal was, they could obtain wisdom and guidance from the qualities the animal symbolizes or possesses. This concept helped to provide comfort and a feeling of well-being throughout a person's life.

Below are some healing spirit animals and their symbolism:

**Bear:** The bear was thought to be a powerful healing animal. It symbolized great strength, courageousness, and was a guardian of the world.

**Armadillo:** This armored animal symbolized a peaceful, neutral nature. It also represented safety and groundedness. Although it has thick armor, it was thought to symbolize a sensitivity to attack.

**Alligator:** This ancient creature symbolized maternal instincts, as well as survival, aggression, and the propensity to seek revenge.

**Beaver:** The beaver symbolized a builder, someone who was a protector and overseer. It also represented a determined, strong-willed nature.

**Buffalo:** The buffalo was a sacred animal. It symbolized blessings, stability, abundance, and sacredness.

**Coyote:** The coyote was a symbol of craftiness, skill, and trickery. It also represented intelligence and wisdom.

**Deer:** The deer represented peace and gentleness. It was seen as innocent, feminine, and compassionate.

**Eagle:** The eagle was a sacred animal as well. It represented a connection to a higher power (eagle feathers were often used during smudging) and healing. It also symbolized courage and sacrifice.

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**Fox:** The fox is often associated with cunningness, and this is exactly how Native Americans saw this spirit animal. It also represented quickness, agility, and shape-shifting.

**Hawk:** The hawk was a symbol for healing, victory, and cleansing. It was also associated with visionary power.

**Horse:** Horses are often associated with a free-spirit and stamina. This is true for the horse spirit animal as well. The horse also represented mobility, travel, and grace.

**Owl:** The owl spirit animal is associated with wisdom, mystery, secrets, and intuition.

**Raven:** The raven was regarded as a magical creature. It was associated with psychic powers, divination, and self-realization. It was also thought to be courageous.

**Snail:** Another healing spirit animal, the snail was associated with time/cycles, awareness, and a tender nature.

**Frog:** The Frog symbolized medicine. It also represented water, peace, transformation, and cleansing.

A person might recognize their spirit animal from early on and decide to carry around a totem of this animal in a medicine bag for support throughout their lifetime. Totems were a way for Native Americans to develop a deeper knowledge about themselves, as well as the spiritual realm. They were used to heal the mind and spirit, in addition to being used for physical healing. One way a person knew they had found their spirit animal guide was through recurring dreams. Other ways this happened was by seeing this animal on many occasions. Sometimes, it was brought to light by the realization of a subconscious fascination for the animal. It is believed that one can communicate with their spirit animal in different ways. This does not always mean that they are communicating with the actual animal, but rather they are opening themselves up to being led by this animal and absorbing its wisdom. This unique belief in a special connection with an animal is just another way Native Americans show respect for nature and all that dwell within it.