

Chapter 1- Conditions Prior to Settlement

Resources with Commercial Value - Seneca Snake Root

The second natural resource with important commercial value commonly found in great abundance in the Theodore area was Seneca Snake Root, an herb with medicinal properties useful in the treatment of earaches, toothaches, sore throats, croup and colds. The major sources of Seneca snakeroot in North American are still Manitoba and Saskatchewan. And, as the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* noted in 1913 the plant grew almost everywhere.¹ Land considered to be marginal, at best for most crops, but suited best for pasture, could still produce large quantities of Seneca root which provided many of the early settlers with a cash income.

Almost everyone in the Theodore area was aware of Seneca root, and those who did not dig it themselves can almost certainly identify a family member who did. Seneca root held a very important place in the economic life of Theodore in the early days for two reasons. First, because there was a demand for it, was a source of much needed cash or credit with the local merchants. Second, the demand for Seneca root meant that the local merchants could always sell everything they could get from the local farmers. The cash received by the local merchants meant that they, in turn, could pay their suppliers in cash. Over the years many tons of Seneca root were dug, washed, dried, and shipped out of Theodore.²

While there are numerous references to people digging Seneca root in the various community history books published in the 1980's and in many obituaries published in western newspapers, there is very little information to be found on the actual job of digging and preparing Seneca root for sale. In spite of this lack of information, however, several patterns do emerge.

It appears that the primary producers of Seneca root were the wives and children of Ukrainian Settlers. In other parts of Western Canada the principal producers of Seneca root included First Nations People, Metis, and Doukhobors. It is interesting to note that the first reference to anyone digging Seneca root in the Theodore area to appear in *The Yorkton Enterprise* occurred in 1901 when it was noted that, "Batches of Doukhobors are parading the district in search of Seneca root."³ It is also interesting to note that none of people who dug Seneca root could ever be described as either wealthy or even well off.

Second, while there are many references to the tool used to dig Seneca root, there are few descriptions of the tool. This may be due to the fact that for the most part Seneca Root diggers were not a commercially produced tool, but rather were usually handmade on the homestead by the family using them. The Seneca root digger, unlike a shovel which is quite wide, was a narrow instrument, made by attaching a piece of metal such as a broken leaf spring to a handle and fitting it with a cross-piece for the digger's foot.

Third, the production of Seneca Root was a very labour intensive method of earning what seems to be a small amount of money. Once the plant was dug and carried home it had to be washed, thoroughly dried and bagged. It takes about 80 green plants to produce one pound of dried Seneca root⁴ and it appears that a person could dig about three pounds of it in a day.⁵

Fourth, when sold, the person who had spent many hours of what has been called extremely back-breaking labour could expect to get a price that averaged about 16 or 17 cents per pound in the late 1890's and sometimes as much as 20 or 22 cents per pound. Fortunately, for those who had to dig Seneca in order to survive, it appears that by 1902 the supply could not match the demand and prices rose dramatically. According to an item in *The Yorkton Enterprise*

price quotation from Minneapolis, where dried Seneca Root was traded, were up to fifty cents per pound.⁶ The news item went on to say that those who dug Seneca Root were very busy gathering it and making the most of the situation.

Although the prices quoted for Seneca root appear to be extremely low by any current standard, the overall impact of the Seneca root harvest to a community such as Theodore can be estimated from a general report on the Doukhobors presented to the Canadian government in 1899. The report stated that a single colony was able to dig, cure and export 48,000 pounds of Seneca root, which when sold at a price of 22 cents per pound brought a total of \$10,500 into the community.⁷ While \$10,500 may not seem like much money in the twenty-first century, it must be remembered that in 1900 it had a tremendous purchasing power. Good farm land could be purchased for \$3.00 per acre, and a house could be bought for only a few hundred dollars.

So important was Seneca Root to the economic well-being of the community in the 1890's and the first few decades of the twentieth century that it was harvested to the point of scarcity.

Writing in the summer of 1923, J. S. Anderson, the Theodore correspondent to *The Yorkton Enterprise* said:

Seneca root is being marketed freely, and provides a means of raising pocket money for the younger generation, also a means of support for many of the poorer families. Thousands of dollars worth of this product have been sold in Theodore in the past fifteen years. In fact, it was almost the sole means of support of dozens of the Ruthenian settlers, who up to that time had not been able to put much land under cultivation, so were forced to depend on the Seneca root crop for subsistence. This root was dug by the women and children while the male population devoted their energies to clearing and breaking land, building, and etc.⁸

The digging and sale of Seneca root seems to have declined significantly during the prosperous years of the first World War, but was revived again during the postwar recession it

occurred in the early 1920s. The prosperity of the late 1920s caused another decline in Seneca root production. In 1930, at the beginning of the great depression, J. S. Anderson described some of the changes in business practices that had occurred in the Theodore area in the previous two or three decades. According to Anderson, business in the early days was chiefly a matter of trading general merchandise, implements, or what have you, for cord wood, furs, Seneca root, butter, eggs, hides and other lines, and a local merchant might purchase more Seneca root in a single day in 1910 than was shipped out of Theodore in a whole season in the late 1920's.⁹ Similar conditions were, unfortunately, soon to return

During the great depression, of the 1930's when cash was again in very short supply, Seneca root regained some of its economic importance in Theodore

Small quantities of Seneca root are daily offered for sale at local stores by those whose means of livelihood has become limited to this means owing to hard times. Some years ago this point was noted for the heavy shipments of this commodity daily shipped out, but of late years the supply has become almost exhausted. However, there are still patches of the plant to be found among the scrub bluffs, and these are now being sought out, dug and marketed and provide a means of securing the necessary supplies of groceries for those without funds.¹⁰

In 1941 Anderson again commented on Seneca root, again noting that so much Seneca root had been dug in the early years of the twentieth century that the plant which once had been abundant had, at one point, had become almost extinct in the Theodore area.¹¹ He also noted, however, that by 1941 the plant had recovered and had increased in abundance to the point where it was again “a common sight to see women and children roaming the prairie and scrub lands with sack and digger in hand in search of the plant.”¹² For the most part, the Seneca root harvest seems to have died out during the general prosperity which followed the second World War.¹³

While the author has not yet found any photographs of Seneca Root digging in the Theodore area, a 1949 photograph from the Kamsack-Verigin area taken during the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the Doukhobors in Saskatchewan shows a group of women re-enacting picking over Seneca root.



Seneca Root Digger - Courtesy Emily Polowick



Re-enactment of Doukhobor Women and Children Preparing to Dig Seneca Root
Saskatchewan Archives S-b9591



Re-enactment of Doukhobor Women Picking Over Seneca Root
Saskatchewan Archives S-b9595

Notes:

1. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 6 June, 1913.
2. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 19 June, 1941.
3. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 12 July, 1901.
4. "Polygala senega" *Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia*.
5. Senft, Leonard, *I Am My Brother's*, Friesen Press, Victoria. P. 12.
6. "Local and General," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 20 June, 1902.
7. Government of Canada, *Sessional Papers*, Volume 35, Issue 10, p. 118 Retrieved 14 March 2015 from <https://books.google.com/books>
8. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 12 June 1923.
9. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 9 December, 1930.
10. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 16 June, 1931.
11. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 19 June, 1941.
12. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 19 June, 1941.
13. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 19 June, 1941.