

By H. H. Smith, circa 1924

PART V - Menomini Vegetal Fibers & Dyes

Manataka American Indian Council
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MENOMINI VEGETAL FIBERS

The writer believes that there were plants used for fibers that are not known to the present members of the Menomini tribe. The white man's fiber plants for use as textiles, cordage, in the fine arts, and in all lines of uses are so much better and more cheaply manufactured, that native uses of fibers have become almost a thing of the past. Thread, string, rope, cotton or woolen cloth have all been so inexpensive in the past that it was hardly worth while for the Indian to continue his laborious home manufacture of these often inferior articles.

With the passing of the use of native fiber plants, and the changing from the wigwam to the frame house, the technique of fabricating their wigwams, house furnishings and clothing is also passing so that possibly another ten years will write the end of their native fiber chapter. Nowadays, there are many automobiles owned by the Menomini and there is a marked change in every phase of their life. The writer was fortunate enough to still find some old Menomini who still recalled native uses of fibers. In the pagan settlement around Zoar, one may still see a good deal of native art. The native bone needles, however, have given way to the white man's steel needles and the hum of the sewing machine may be heard in many a Menomini home. It seems likely that we must look to the government schools for the perpetuation of Indian art or design, more than to the instruction of the children by their parents. In the industrial school at Keshena, the children are encouraged in their art and craft work to

preserve the Indian designs, and this is as it should be. Strictly speaking, the use of woods in their houses, for utensils, implements and so forth is not a fiber use, but it will be treated under this head, because it is not so varied as to merit a separate section of this publication.

As before, the families will be listed alphabetically, and descriptions of uses will be given along the same lines as those preceding.



MENOMINI FIBER PLANTS

ACERACEAE (MAPLE FAMILY)

Mountain Maple (*Acer spicatum* Lam.), "sopoma'tik nipia'kum asepa'ka." From this leaf comes the maple leaf design found in Menomini beadwork and applique work. It is not the usual sugar maple-leaf shape, which one might suppose that they would copy. A paper copy of one of these leaves forms a single stencil which is laid down and repeated as often as desired. It is covered with charcoal or flour paste to transfer the design.

APOCYNACEAE (DOGBANE FAMILY)

Spreading Dogbane (*Apocynum androsaemifolium* L.), "sä'nûp." The outer bark or rind of this herb furnished the finest Menomini thread material. The smallest divisions of this bast fiber are finer than our finest cotton thread and stronger. Just before the fruit has ripened the outer bark is peeled. By using three strands, it is plaited so that a very strong cord is obtained. In the old days, this was the way the Menomini made their bow string. It was also by further combining and plaiting made into heavier ropes.

ASCLEPIADACEAE (MILKWEED FAMILY)

Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca* L.), "nänäwi'tca" [thread material]. This and other milkweeds are used in the same way that spreading dogbane is used, for sewing thread and making cords for fishlines, etc.

BETULACEAE (BIRCH FAMILY)

The yellow birch, white birch, hazel shoots, and smooth and speckled alders are all used casually by the Menomini for making medicine lodge frames, fencing and for poles of various kinds, but without any special reference to the fitness of any particular species or any special name other than those already given. Their wide use of white birchbark for storage baskets, sap buckets, wigwam coverings, canoes and many kindred uses is well known.

CAPRIFOLIACEAE (HONEYSUCKLE FAMILY)

Common Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis* L.), "papa'skitci'ksi kanax'tik." Aside from the medical uses, the stems were used by the children to make pop guns after punching out the pith.

CYPERACEAE (SEDGE FAMILY)

Great Bulrush (*Scirpus validus* Vahl.), "nipla'skûn" [weed that grows in the water]. This is the standard Menomini mat material. The writer saw the various processes in the making of mats. The rushes are gathered, cleansed, bleached and dried in the sun, and then sorted for weaving. Native dyes are used in working out patterns, plain mats selling at a dollar a yard. Large sewed mats of the cat-tail were formerly used in making the covering and side walls of wigwams and medicine lodges. In this case, the rushes were pierced and sewed with bone needles, using basswood string for thread.

EQUISETACEAE (HORSETAIL FAMILY)

Field Horsetail (*Equisetum hyemale* L.). "kise'paskûn." This species is employed as a scouring rush for pots and pans in the same manner as it was formerly used by the white man.

FAGACEAE (BEECH FAMILY)

Beech and also oaks were used by the Menomini for fencing, for building and for fuel. The names of the different kinds have already been given in the discussions of medicines and foods.

GRAMINAE (GRASS FAMILY)

Sweet Grass (*Hierochloe odorata* (L.) Wallerib.), "we'nuskwûn" [stinking]. Fragrant and vile odors are all designated by the one word in Menomini, which is translated "stinking." This grass is used in their basketry and as a perfume. The Menomini will find it when it is not in fruit and where the white man would overlook it. It was also said to be used to burn as an oblation to their deities. In sewing, sweet grass is used wet, and when it dries it is tight. Cooked resin was often used to go over the sewing. This resin is called "askapike'wi" and is from the fir or pine tree. A flat skillet is used to heat the resin, and there must be no blaze. It must be cooked slowly. Seasoned hemlock bark, "neisano paianek" [two times blaze], is used for the fuel because it makes a good fire without smoke. This same fuel is used in cooking maple syrup.

OLEACEAE (OLIVE FAMILY)

Black Ash (*Fraxinus nigra* Marsh.), "anepaka'xkwû'tîk." Ash wood is used in the same manner by the Menomini as by the white man. In aboriginal times, bows and arrows were made of black ash.

PINACEAE (PINE FAMILY)

Balsam fir, white spruce, jack, red and white pine, and cedar are all used as woods by the Menomini.

Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana* Lamb), "okika'tîk." The small roots of jack pine, whole or split, are used as cords to sew the birch bark canoe. They are boiled to render them more pliable, and the stitching is sealed with pitch or boiled resin.

Cedar or Arbor-vitae (*Thuja occidentalis* L.), "kesa'wana'uki" [cedar bark]. Cedar bark is very stringy, and this fiber was used by the aboriginal Menomini to weave bags.

ROSACEAE (ROSE FAMILY)

Juneberry, choke cherry, and black cherry woods were used by the Menomini as by the white man.

SALICACEAE (WILLOW FAMILY)

Balm of Gilead, large toothed aspen, and the native willows were all used by the Menomini as ordinary woods. One basket woven from willow twigs was observed.

THYMELEACEAE (MEZEREUM FAMILY)

Leatherwood (*Dirca palustris* L.), "wêx'tike'kop." The tough bark or even twigs of the leatherwood was used for cordage by the aboriginal Menomini. Even now emergency cordage is made from the leatherwood.

TILIACEAE (BASSWOOD FAMILY)

Basswood (*Tilia americana* L.), "wexkop'." Basswood bast or bark fiber was and is the ready cordage for the Menomini. Balls of the twine are kept in every Menomini household, for tying, sewing, or for weaving bags. The women make this twine and go to the forest to gather the raw material. Saplings are peeled in the spring when the cambium is active and it is readily separable. A long strip of bark is peeled off and the outer cortex is slightly cut. Then the bark is bent at the cut until it projects far enough to get the teeth fastened on the outer rind. This is then pulled off and thrown away. It is now ready for use, except dividing it down to the desired size. Should a ball of twine be wanted, the gathered bark is coiled and bound to keep it in a coil, then boiled in lye water. When the fibers begin to spread, it is taken out, dried and seasoned. Then it is cut three feet long and rolled to break up the fibrovascular bundles. Finally, it is twisted and joined by the Menomini woman against her shin and between her palms. Basswood fiber is used widely in many arts. Matting and baskets, fish-nets and nets for snowshoes are made from it.

TYPHACEAE (CAT-TAIL FAMILY)

Cat-tail (*Typha latifolia* L.), "up'akiuoti'pa." The root of the cat-tail is used as a natural oakum for caulking leaks in boats. The leaves are used to make mats to cover the winter lodges, much as the bulrush mats are made. Because of the heavy flat layers, they keep out the rain and snow and are well adapted to winter thatching. In summer they are stored away for the next year's use.

URTICACEAE (NETTLE FAMILY)

Slender Nettle (*Urtica gracilis* Alt.), and wood nettle (*Laportea canadensis* (L.) Gaud.) are both called "Sä'nap," which is the rightful name for another genus. Both are retted to obtain the Indian hemp twine, which is used in making fiber bags called "Sä'nûp mînu'ti."

Slippery Elm (*Ulmus fulva* Mx.), "sausî'kop." The slippery elm bark is gathered and boiled and used in the same manner as basswood bark for making fiber bags, large storage baskets, etc.



MENOMINI VEGETAL DYES

There is some evidence to lead one to believe that the Menomini have forgotten how some of their colors were obtained. Green was said to have been a vegetable dye, but there are none of the Menomini now that know the source of it. All their vegetal dyes were obtained by boiling the part of the plant that yields the color, be it the leaves, root or bark.

The present day Menomini still depends on the native vegetal dyes to a large extent for his red, yellow and black colors. Other colors are supplied by the dyes of the white man. The Menomini says that the white man's dyes are not so permanent as his native dyes, and for this reason prefers his own.

MENOMINI DYE PLANTS

ANACARDIACEAE (SUMAC FAMILY)

Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina* L.), "kaka'kiumênû'ka." The roots of the Sumac when boiled yield the Menomini yellow dye, their word for the color being "wasa'ukîk."

BALSAMINACEAE (TOUCH-ME-NOT FAMILY)

Spotted Touch-me-not (*Impatiens biflora* Walt.), "sewäpoko'tcîkûn." The whole plant is used to make an orange yellow dye.

BETULACEAE (BIRCH FAMILY)

Speckled Alder (*Alnus incana* (L.) Moench.), "wä'top." This alder bark is boiled to yield a reddish brown dyestuff. The cloth or other material to be colored is immersed in the boiling liquid.

JUGLANDACEAE (WALNUT FAMILY)

Butternut (*Juglans cinerea* L.), "puka'nawe." The juice of the husk of this nut was formerly used to dye the Menomini deerskin shirts brown. Butternut bark is used to obtain their black color called "ape'siu," "ä'pänîk" or "äpe'skîk." For a deep black color, the bark was boiled with blue clay.

OXALIDACEAE (OXALIS FAMILY)

Ladies' Sorrel (*Oxalis corniculata* L.), "wasa'wûs." The Menomini do not distinguish between *O. corniculata* and *O. acetosella* and *O. stricta* so far as furnishing the color is concerned. The whole plant, when boiled, gives a yellow dye.

PAPAVERACEAE (POPPY FAMILY)

Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis* L.), "wapitcika'wi." The fresh root of blood root was often used to paint the face of a warrior. The boiled root furnished a dye that the Menomini women used in coloring their mats red or orange red. Other tribes use the fresh juice of the blood root on maple sugar to cure a sore throat, but the writer was unable to find any such practice among the Menomini.

PINACEAE (PINE FAMILY)

Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis* (L.) Carr.), "muisiku'kowe wona'uki" [hemlock bark]. Boiled hemlock bark is the source of the dark red coloring of the Menomini.

RANUNCULACEAE (CROWFOOT FAMILY)

Hooked Crowfoot (*Ranunculus recurvatus* Poir.), "sewapokä'tcîkûn" [sweet water and the added color]. The root of this plant is a coloring material for a shade of red. When it is boiled, the coloring matter is extracted and the material is immersed in the tepid dye water.



MISCELLANEOUS USES OF PLANTS

Under this head will be considered plants used in tanning, love charms and for sacred or ceremonial uses. In the latter class, much of the information might be regarded as pure superstition. Much of the tanning is not done with vegetable matter, but with animal and mineral matter, as described in Mr. Skinner's "Material Culture of the Menomini."⁹ Yet there are roots and herbs used in the preparation of skins with the fur left on, to prevent moths and insects from eating off the hairs. Unfortunately, my informant was not versed in this branch of their art, and was unable to find anyone who could give the information relating to this work.

LYCOPERDALES (PUFFBALL FAMILY)

Gem Puffballs (*L. pyriforme* schaeff.), "iniki'wi opa'skûk." The powder of this puffball was sometimes used by warriors for putting out the eyes of the enemy. When puffed into the enemy's eyes it was said to induce permanent blindness.

APOCYNACEAE (DOGBANE FAMILY)

Spreading Dogbane (*Apocynum androsaemifolium* L.), "nimuskwä'tcîkûn" [hunting medicine]. This plant stalk is also used as a helper to call up deer. It becomes a magnet. The hunter has a regular deer "squacker" and keeps this plant or cynthia in his mouth, sucking it as he proceeds, making believe that he is the fawn, wanting to call the doe because he is hungry. When he is hunting for deer he must not eat pepper, onions, or any sweet. After he has killed the deer, he may eat whatever he chooses.

ARACEAE (ARUM FAMILY)

Dragon Root (*Arisaema dracontium* (L.) Schott.), "miniuv'osêt" [owl's foot]. This root is often found in sacred bundles, where it gives the power of supernatural dreams to the owner.

ARALIACEAE (GINSENG FAMILY)

Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolium* L.), "mätcxetasa" [little Indian]. Ginseng root is also used as a hunting charm, as well as a medicine. The root is chewed and imparts a lure to the breath, assisting the

"squacking" machine or deer call to become effective in luring the deer. It is also put into some war-bundles as well as hunting bundles.

BORAGINACEAE (BORAGE FAMILY)

Hoary Puccoon (*Lithospermum canescens* (Mx.) Lehm.), "mêgi'si'sê" [bead]. It is very difficult for a white man to get any exact information about sacred objects of the Menomini. The white ripened seed of this plant is supposed to be a sort of sacred bead used in the "mitä'wîn" ceremony.

COMPOSITAE (COMPOSITE FAMILY)

Cynthia (*Krigia amplexicaulis* Nutt.), "pitcime'wûs." This and a *Lactuca canadensis* were said to be a deer charm. The old Menomini were able to take the hollow stem, much as children nowadays make a pipe out of dandelion stems to blow a note, and make a wail that simulated a fawn in distress. Because this plant had milk like the doe at that time, it lured the doe, which would come close to the hunter so that he could kill it with his bow and arrow.

CORNACEAE (DOGWOOD FAMILY)

Silky Cornel (*Cornus amomum* Mill.), "kinnikinik," and Alternate leaved Cornel (*Cornus alternifolia* L.f.), also called "kinnikinik." The inner bark of both species was used by the Menomini for smoking tobacco. In these latter days it is mixed with real tobacco, but in olden times it was used alone. It was gathered and toasted to prepare it, the manner of preparation being well told in Dr. Barrett's "Dream Dance of the Chippewa and Menomini Indians of Northern Wisconsin."¹⁰

FUMARIACEAE (FUMITORY FAMILY)

Dutchman's Breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria* (L.) Bernh.), "a'nimau kapotise'sa" [the one that looks like little pants, with his hands in his pockets]. This is probably a translation into¹⁰ Indian of the English name. This is one of the most important love charms of the Menomini. The young swain tries to throw it at his intended and hit her with it. Another way is for him to chew the root, breathing out so that the scent will carry to her. He then circles around the girl and when she catches the scent, she will follow him wherever he goes, even against her will.

PINACEAE (PINE FAMILY)

Cedar (*Thuja occidentalis* L.), "ke'sa'sata'uk." The leaves of the cedar are the Menomini moth balls. They store away clothes with layers of the leaf sprays to keep out the moths.

SAXIFRAGACEAE (SAXIFRAGE FAMILY)

Bishop's Cap (*Mitella diphylla* L.). The small shining black seed of this insignificant plant is the sacred bead, "mê'gîsê," that is swallowed in the medicine dance, during the reinstatement ceremony.

SCROPHULARIACEAE (FIGWORT FAMILY)

Indian Paintbrush, (*Castilleja coccinea* (L.) Spreng.), "mene'nun matciki'kto'." This is a Menomini love charm like the Dutchman's Breeches. However, it is employed in a somewhat different fashion, the scheme being to try to secrete some of the herb upon the person who is the object of the enamour.

Wood Betony (*Pedicularis canadensis* L.), "mitä'mu sewûs otci'pa" [woman enticer root]. The root of this is carried on the person of the Menomini who is contemplating making love advances.

UMBELLIFERAE (PARSLEY FAMILY)

Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum* Mx.), "piki'wûnûs." This herb is always found in the hunting bundle. It is a very personal sort of a deer charm, as only the owner of the bundle can handle it. If others touch it they will turn black and die. After the deer is killed, then it must be hung up and smudged for four days, after certain parts are removed. This plant and the leaves of Cynthia are burned in the smudge to take out the charm, by which the hunter was enabled to kill the deer. This smudge is also to drive away the evil spirit called sokenau, whose special mission is to steal one's hunting luck. On a deer hunt, as soon as the camp is established and the fire built, some of this cow parsnip is thrown into the fire, and the odor and smoke permeate the air for great distances, making it impossible for the sokenau to approach too closely under ordinary circumstances. But if sokenau is desperate and determined to steal one's hunting luck, he may come right into camp, but the smoke of pikiwunus will cause him to go blind. In case a person is afflicted with bad hunting luck, a medicine made of pikiwunus seeds, muskikwus and na'sikun is used. The whole hunting paraphernalia is smoked and smudged to drive away bad luck. The hunter must not eat any of the meat during this four days' smudging process, if he did, the Menomini believe that he would turn black and die. Wild ginger root is boiled with deer meat to remove the hunting charm.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the writer wants to lament the passing of the olden times. It hardly seems necessary, when the Menomini tribe is so numerically weak, that they should struggle to ape the white man. They have a good reservation and have always been self-supporting in their own fashion, and have been in many respects a happier race than the whites. At best, their traditions and instincts keep cropping out, and it is a hard struggle to put themselves on a plane of competition with the white man. They are certainly more interesting and happier among themselves, to follow their own ways, and only a small percentage will ever be absorbed into our population.

Footnotes:

1 The Dream Dance of the Chippewa and Menominee Indians of Northern Wisconsin; Bull., Public Museum, Milwaukee, Vol. I, Art. IV, 1911.

2 Medicine Ceremony of the Menomini, Iowa, and Wahpeton Dakota, with notes on the Ceremony among the Ponca, Bungi, Ojibwa, and Potawatomi. Ind. Notes and Mono., Museum American Indian., Heye Foundation, Vol. IV, 1920, and Material Culture of the Menomini, Ind. Notes and Mono., Museum. American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1921.

3 The Menomini conceives our universe as comprising an island floating in an illimitable ocean, separating the two halves of the universe into an upper and lower portion, presided over by the good and evil spirits, respectively. Each portion is divided into four superimposed tiers, inhabited by supernatural spirits, whose power increases as their distance from the earth increases. In the highest tier above lives the supreme spirit. Early writers agreed that this was the Sun, but through missionary influence he is now personified as the Great Spirit (Mātc hāwā'tuk). Beneath the Great Spirit are three tiers of bird-like deities. First, in the sky, come the Thunderbirds, gods of war. Associated with these is the Morning Star. Next comes the realm of the Golden or War Eagles, and the White Swan, and last, in the tier that touches the earth, birds of all species, headed by the Bald Eagles and various hawks, kites and swallows. All of these birds, regardless of the stratum, are servants and messengers of the Great Spirit.

Except for the Sun and the Morning Star, little attention is paid to the heavenly bodies. The Moon is regarded as possessed of power, but is not important. There are also certain minor sacred personages who dwell in the sky country, among whom are several sisters who preside over the destinies of women, and to whom various colors are appropriate. Their place in the heavenly strata is not fixed. Beneath the earth, in the lowest tier, dwells the Great White Bear with a long copper tail, who in addition to being the chief patron of all earthly bears and the traditional ancestor of the Menomini, is the principal power for evil. He has for a servant a mythical hairless bear. Next, in ascending order, is the great Underground Panther, who figures extensively in the demonology of the Central Algonkian and Southern Siouan tribes. He is represented on earth by the panther and the lynx. Next is the White Deer, prominent in the origin myth of the Medicine Dance. Last of all, close to the earth, and often visible to the inhabitants, is the Horned Hairy Serpent, so generally found in North American mythology. The earth itself is peopled by a myriad of fantastic hobgoblins. Cannibal giants dwell in the icy region of the north; a malevolent living skeleton, with death-dealing eyes, haunts the forest after nightfall. Similar to him, but less terrible, is a mysterious person bearing a sacred bundle upon his back, doomed to travel endlessly for some forgotten sin. He wrestles with the Indians from time to time, and if overcome grants long life to the victor, if he wins then the vanquished will die soon. Rocks, ponds and hills have their fancied denizens. All species of animals are ruled by the supernatural chiefs, most dwelling underground. In swamp-holes, lakes and rivers, under waterfalls and in lonely hills may be found stray horned snakes, bears, panthers, and in modern times, dogs, hogs and horses. See footnote two, second reference, pp. 29-32.

4 The traditional home of the Menomini was located on the upper Michigan peninsula. In their early contact with the whites and up to the time they moved on to their present reservation, their territory extended down to the vicinity of the city of Green Bay on the mainland.

6 Indian Notes and Monographs, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, pp. 164-165. 1921.

7 Op. Cit., pp. 154-156.

8 Op. Cit., pp. 142-152.

9 Op. Cit., pp. 224-229.

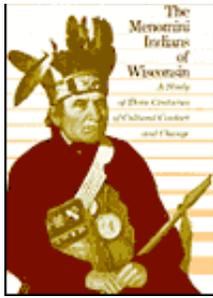
10 Present series, Vol. 1, Art. IV, pp. 357-368.



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CENTURIES OF CULTURAL CONTACT AND CHANGE

The Menomini of Wisconsin have lived in the vicinity of Green Bay for as long as history can record. Archaeologists identify them as descendants of the Middle Woodland Indians. This work, one of the first monographs on an Indian people to employ a model of acculturation is an excellent early example of ethno history." University of Wisconsin Press, January 1987, Soft Cover 307pp. **\$19.95**

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