

EXPLORING THE
HEALING PROMISE OF
PLANT MEDICINES
IN A GLOBAL
INDUSTRY



The Business of Botanicals

ANN ARMBRECHT

Exclusive
Excerpt



PRAISE FOR *THE BUSINESS OF BOTANICALS*

“In *The Business of Botanicals*, Ann Armbrecht brings readers along on a wholly engaging exploration of her questions and hard learnings about whether the healing power of plants can truly make it into the factory-sealed supplement bottles on our grocery shelves.”

—K a t e W i l l i a m s , CEO of 1% for the Planet

“Ann Armbrecht establishes herself as a gifted storyteller, weaving the practical aspects of the global botanical industry with the lesser explored and more nuanced threads that make up the tapestry of sourcing, producing, and selling herbal products. The result is a riveting journey, one that tackles hard questions not explored by most. For those who loved *Braiding Sweetgrass*, this book is a perfect opportunity to go deeper into understanding the complex and co-evolutionary journey of plants and people in creating the herbal products we love.”

—A n g e l a M c E l w e e , president and CEO of Gaia Herbs

“*The Business of Botanicals* is a chronicle of the modern-day global herb trade, peppered with historical context, anecdotes, and wisdom from modern pioneers of the herb industry. The quality of the technical information is lovingly translated with practical examples into interesting and relevant guidance for small growers and herb users. And beyond the technical narrative, the author poses philosophical questions about the ethics, authenticity, and sustainability of the modern herb market.”

—C i n d y A n g e r h o f e r , executive fellow of
Botanical Research, Aveda Corporation

“I read this brilliant book from cover to cover like a story I couldn’t tear myself away from. Like herbs themselves, *The Business of Botanicals* is rich in colors, scents, and flavors and is rooted in the earth—exquisite and messy, beautiful and dirty all at the same time.”

—A n n e M c I n t y r e , MAPA, MCPP, fellow of the National Institute of
Medical Herbalists, author of *Dispensing with Tradition* and *The Ayurveda Bible*

“The high-quality organic herbs in your teacup, tincture, or supplement did not materialize out of thin air. More than fifty years ago, the seeds of an industry were planted by a few unique and talented individuals—farmers, herbalists, and entrepreneurs who have dedicated their lives to improving planetary, human, and animal well-being. This well-researched and fascinating book tells their stories and lays out a clear path for a healthier sustainable future.”

—D a v i d W i n s t o n , RH (AHG), dean of David Winston’s Center
for Herbal Studies; founder of Herbal Theapeutics Research Library

“Ann Armbrecht acknowledges the racist, imperialist roots of the international trade in botanicals and examines the impressive progress being made to transform this legacy of economic oppression. The evolving supply chain acknowledges the ecology of issues beyond profit. Armbrecht introduces these holistic, ecological perspectives as a sign of great hope for the future and celebrates the rich diversity of people and backgrounds that make the planet’s herbal abundance accessible to the West.”

—David Hoffman, RH (AHG), fellow of the National Institute of Medical Herbalists, chief formulator for Traditional Medicinals

“Ann Armbrecht has looked under the bonnet and found that the engine of herbal healing is in need of repair. Even well-intentioned conflicts of interest in this industry too often get in the way of quality and sustainability. Ann concludes that the answer here, as ever, is about nurturing relationships and supporting the interests of everyone in the herbal web. Everyone who loves herbs needs to read this book!”

—Simon Mills, herbal clinician and elder, author of *Out of the Earth*, coauthor of *Principles and Practice of Phytotherapy*

“*The Business of Botanicals* is a thoroughly engaging, must-read book for all herbalists, herbal medicine makers, herb growers, and anyone who turns to herbs for their health. I was immediately drawn into the story of botanical medicines and the complexities within each bottle of herbal tincture on store shelves.”

—Roseleela Forêt, herbalist and author of *Alchemy of Herbs*, coauthor of *Wild Remedies*

“Ann Armbrecht writes with deep respect for the essence of plants and their capacity to heal, seeking to reconcile the spirit of botanicals with the realm of brands and tradeshow.”

—Judith D. Schwartz, author of *The Reindeer Chronicles* and *Water in Plain Sight*

“Ann Armbrecht’s engaging book provides perceptive and important insights into what is too often an invisible trade despite its immense importance to the livelihoods, traditions, and interests of a great many people around the world.”

—Steven Broad, executive director of TRAFFIC and member of the Board of the FairWild Foundation

“A vastly important and enlightening dive into the complexities of the botanical industry that is a must read for conscious consumers and industry professionals alike.”

—Erin Smith, director of Herbal Science & Research, Banyan Botanicals; co-chair of the Sustainability Committee at the American Herbal Products Association

“This well-written and well-researched book provides fascinating and important insights into how herbal remedies make it into our homes. Ann Armbrecht’s passion for the subject shines through.”

—Susan Curtis, director of Natural Health, Neal’s Yard Remedies

The Business *of* Botanicals

EXPLORING THE HEALING
PROMISE OF PLANT MEDICINES
IN A GLOBAL INDUSTRY

Ann Armbrecht

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Deciding

One mine the Indians worked had
gold so good they left it there
for God to keep.

At night sometimes you think
your way that far, that deep,
or almost.

You hold all things or not depending
not on greed but whether they suit what
life begins to mean.

Like those workers you study what moves,
what stays. You bow, and then, like them,
you know—

What's God, what's world, what's gold.

—Wil l i a m S t a f f o r d

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CHAPTER TWO

The Modern Renaissance of Herbal Medicine

*The seed is the whole potential of the plant
contracted to a single point.*

—Rudolf Steiner

A history of what philosopher Paul Lee coined the “herbal renaissance” in the United States has yet to be written, but a book titled *Herbal Pathfinders* captures the diversity and creativity of that period of time.¹ The book is a collection of interviews with men and women active in the herbal revival of the 1970s as well as brief introductory essays by the book’s authors, Robert Conrow and Arlene Hecksel. Each essay traces the lineage of learning—from Shakers to Rudolf Steiner to Native Americans to Ayurvedic texts to elders to *curanderos* to books. The diversity of the contributors captures the creativity of the herbal movement at that time. The voices were eclectic. There were essays on vision quests, responsible harvesting practices, medicinal uses of herbs, the spiritual dimensions of herbalism, and more.² No one claimed to have the only valid perspective. Each was one thread in reintroducing practices that had been lost—or simply weren’t visible—in mainstream culture.

The common theme across all the interviews in the book is the power of learning directly from the plants: from the spirit of the plants or by experimenting with using plants as medicine. The relationship is at the heart of the healing.

THE BUSINESS OF BOTANICALS

There are many ways to tell the story of the herbal renaissance. Unlike countries where the traditional systems of medicine that relied on plants never died out, in the United States herbal medicine had fallen from mainstream use by the early mid-1900s. Even so, in rural communities without access to formal health care, in African American communities in urban areas, in Native American communities, in pockets of Appalachia and more, these methods were kept alive and passed through the generations. Just because no one was talking about plant medicine in mainstream circles didn't mean no one was using plants as medicine. These communities became the sources of inspiration for the women and men who "rediscovered" these practices in the 1970s.

Because there was no strong cultural framework for learning about the practice of plant medicine, the individuals rediscovering it played a large role in shaping how traditional Western herbalism reemerged. Those eager to learn gathered knowledge wherever they could and in turn shared that knowledge with whoever would listen. In this chapter I describe what I learned of this revitalization by tracing the stories of the teachers with whom I studied, particularly those who went on to create the companies that many other herbalists in turn now advise their students to support.

This account is based on my experience, and as such, it is not a complete history of herbalism or of the herbal renaissance in the United States. I present it in this way because the herbal medicine that was widespread in the late 1990s and early 2000s primarily catered to white audiences who, because of their economic class and ethnicity, had the resources to access this information, either by attending conferences or enrolling in in-person apprentice programs. Similarly, those with resources, financial and cultural, were more likely to start businesses than those without. Other voices and stories are now entering the conversation, revealing the ways that people of color have been excluded and their practices ignored or taken without acknowledgment. An entirely different book can, and I hope will, be written about these practices, historically and in the present, and the movement to bring this diversity to herbalism in the United States.

Rosemary Gladstar

For me the story begins with Rosemary Gladstar. “As a child, I was infused with the plants,” Rosemary once told me. As she said this, I imagined an infusion of nettles, steeping overnight in a mason jar. By morning the clear water has turned a dark green. I think of Rosemary infused in the same way, filled with the colors and vibrations of plants.

We were sitting in the cozy, comfortable living room of her home at Sage Mountain on a rainy autumn day. Herb books were stacked on the coffee table and on bookshelves. Potted plants sat on a bench by the row of windows. Candles, small statues, rocks, an incense burner, a vase of dried flowers, photos of her grandson filled the mantel.

Rosemary spent uncounted hours as a child with her grandmother, Mary Egithanoff, in the garden, weeding and gathering herbs for cooking. Rosemary’s grandmother had escaped from Armenia in the early 1900s, fleeing starvation and persecution. Her grandmother showed her amaranth, chickweed, purslane, the native plants they had eaten in Armenia when they were starving. “She loved purslane,” Rosemary said. She paused. “I grew up being nurtured on this cellular level by this ancient information. That was important. It kind of encoded me.”

Rosemary told me about the earliest childhood dream she could remember, when she was four or five years old. “I’m in this kind of foggy place, and I’m running through the mist and then into a beautiful meadow of violets. The feeling I had—I can still feel it as if it were yesterday—was like, *I’ve come home.*”

Another time, in an experience that wasn’t a dream, she and her brothers and sisters were in the field with the cows from their dairy farm in California. Suddenly the cows started running toward the children. “We thought they would trample us to death, so we ran across the field and climbed an enormous willow tree. It was dark and the cattle were coming, and what I remember, again, it’s just like yesterday, was sitting completely protected and held by this giant willow and feeling this incredible oneness with that tree.”

Rosemary graduated from high school in the late 1960s, just as the back-to-the-land movement was beginning. “It was incredible, you just

got pulled into it,” she said. But she didn’t need to go back to the land, because she already lived in rural America. Instead she went to the wilderness. Rosemary spent three years in the Sierra Nevada, living out of a backpack in the woods and learning from the plants, her books, and the people she met. Herbal medicine was still alive and well as a system of folk healing in this area. “These teachers were just people living,” Rosemary said. “Th y weren’t teaching from a book. Th y were just like, here you go, let me show you what is around here and here is how you make this.”

Each summer she came down from the high country to town to earn some money. She cared for the children of the Roma people who worked in the circus. She cleaned toilets at the Guerneville natural food store. Once she’d made some money, she headed back to the mountains. She recalls it as a time of grace, a time when she was able to drink deeply of the world, to fi l herself with adventure. It wasn’t a way of life she could continue, though. And so when she came back to town to stay, she was ready to “give back.”

Baiseti *thuma* (which translates as “grandmother”) was a tiny woman whose hands were gnarled from years of working the soil in the remote Himalayan village of Hedangna. Rosemary has the same direct, clear presence that Baiseti thuma had, like a forest-spirit. She would have been a shamani, Baiseti thuma once told me, had she been a man. Being a woman didn’t stop Rosemary.

Rosemary’s joy and apparent lightheartedness belie an incredible depth of knowledge and an equally incredible capacity for hard work, for doing what it takes to get things done. She can make it seem like everything is easy. At one of the countless conferences she has organized, in a moment when I could see Rosemary’s weariness showing through, she told me that she *chooses* joy. She sees the good in people, not necessarily because that good is always easily available, but because she intentionally chooses to focus on it.

In 1972 Rosemary began working in the herb section at the Guerneville natural food store, mixing herbal medicines. People began

buying her custom formulas. Seeing how well the formulas worked, their friends came to buy them as well. Soon she made arrangements to rent a small wing in the store. “It was like a closet, really,” Rosemary said. That was her first business, Rosemary’s Garden. Like many of Rosemary’s creations, it still operates today (under different ownership).

Rosemary continued mixing formulas in her small shop. Customers who came in would describe the symptoms of their ailment, and as they spoke Rosemary’s hands would begin gathering a pinch of this herb and a pinch of that, her body intuiting what each individual needed. “It wasn’t like I wasn’t thinking,” she said. “It was that I was moving into a part of myself that knew more than my brain alone knew. My brain could help understand what I was doing, but the process was happening on some deeper level.

“Some people have a knack for aspects of herbalism, maybe a knack for making things or listening to people. I found I had an incredible knack for formulation.” More and more people began to request her formulas. Rosemary was also giving public lectures and being invited to teach. Filling bags of the same formula for customers was becoming repetitive, so her partner, Drake Sadler, suggested that she pre-package the blends in brown paper bags, the type used to hold bulk coffee, and label the bags “throat formula” or “nursing formula,” as appropriate. A mutual friend told Drake and Rosemary they should create a brand with names for the formulas that people would remember. One evening Rosemary, Drake, and two of their friends (one also named Rosemary and her partner, Warren), sat around a woodstove drinking tea, brainstorming names for the formulas: Smooth Move, Mother’s Milk, Th oat Coat, Gypsy Cold Care. Warren drew images—for Smooth Move, a sketch of a person in an outhouse.

I didn’t meet Drake until well after I first got to know Rosemary. Terry and I interviewed him for *Numen*, and then I also talked with him again by phone while researching this book. I asked Drake how the business evolved after that first meeting around the woodstove. He told me that he was an astrologer at that time, and he traveled along the California coast each fall to sell his silk-screened astrology calendars. He suggested taking along some bags of the bulk tea on his next trip to see whether they would sell.

According to Drake, Rosemary was not interested in creating products to sell beyond her store, fearing that selling their teas would be the “further dissolution of herbalism and commercialization.” He convinced her by suggesting that he would try to sell ten thousand bags at \$1 a bag, and then they could use that \$10,000 to travel to Mexico. “It was a hippie dream,” Drake said, “to make \$10,000. But Rosemary loved to travel almost as much as she loved the plants, and so she agreed.”

It was an era when the established institutions of political and economic power were showing their vulnerability. Close to half a million people had attended the three-day music festival at Woodstock, New York, in the concert that has come to epitomize the counterculture of the time. In 1970 four unarmed students were shot by members of the Ohio National Guard during a mass protest against the Vietnam War at Kent State University. The Pentagon Papers were published. In 1972 five White House operatives were arrested for burglarizing the Democratic National Committee office marking what became the Watergate scandal. Antiwar demonstrations drew an estimated hundred thousand people in US cities. Three hundred thalidomide victims were offered nearly \$12 million in compensation after a twenty-year fight in court. Richard Nixon made an unprecedented visit to China and met with Mao Zedong, after years of impasse. The last US ground troops withdrew from Vietnam. In 1973 the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in a seventy-one-day standoff with federal authorities. In August 1974 President Nixon resigned from office.

Amid so much unrest, change on many fronts suddenly seemed possible. For California hippies like Rosemary and Drake, the right response was to seek a way to live simply, off the land, using one’s hands and reconnecting with all that had been cast aside in the pursuit of profit and power.

There was a lot of mixing and mingling of traditions—Tibetan Buddhism or Zen, tantric yoga or hatha yoga or Transcendental Meditation—and a lot of drugs. Young men and women pursued what worked for their own spiritual transformation and discarded the rest.³ Herbal medicine was no different. For better and for worse, the men

and women who were rediscovering plant medicine didn't worry much about documenting the genealogy of their inspirations. It was a time of loosening and breaking rigid traditions; there was an openness and sense of freedom that made possible a tremendous amount of creativity.

Dressed in a long cape, with what he called his Charles Manson beard, and driving a Volkswagen van filled with herbal tea, Drake headed up the California coast in 1974 and into that awakening. He sold all ten thousand bags in eleven days. He called Rosemary from a pay phone by the side of Highway 1 and told her to order more herbs and brown bags.

Rosemary recalled Drake's "orders for so many tea bags, and then another stop and more tea bags! And I remember thinking, *Oh, that's going to be a lot of mixing and bagging!*" She told him to come back home. They talked things over. Rosemary agreed to try selling the tea for nine months, since that had been their original plan, but only if they used the bags to educate consumers about herbalism. And so they started including leaflets along with the herbs with instructions for making infusions and salves, information on the history of wild collecting in America, promotion of good causes like clean water and their local birth clinic and community center, and poems and quotations. "There was more information than tea in those bags!" Drake exclaimed.

The images on boxes of Traditional Medicinals tea are no longer hand-drawn sketches, and the wording on the label speaks about details of sourcing and certifications that weren't part of the picture in the 1970s. And the details of the Traditional Medicinals origin story have blurred a bit, depending on who is telling it. Yet regardless of the specifics what emerges is that Rosemary and Drake had vision, and they had stamina. There was plenty of room in the 1970s for that combination—room to start a business, room to set up a school, room to teach. Listening to the stories of that era, it's easy to feel envious. There was so much possibility. Drake saw the potential and jumped in. Nine months later they were managing a warehouse and twelve employees and had invested \$100,000 into the business. "It just exploded," Drake said. The company filled a unique niche in

the United States at the time. Celestial Seasonings, another herbal tea company that came out of the back-to-the-land movement, had begun to focus exclusively on beverage teas, not medicinal ones. Alvita Tea, a family brand that dates back to the 1920s, sold single herbs as medicine, so it was up to the customer to know how to use them as teas. Rosemary and Drake's teas were the only pre-blended formulas available as a consumer product. They created a niche for themselves that they hadn't even known existed.

After a few years it became clear to Rosemary that Drake had an amazing sense of how to develop a business and that he really loved the work. It was equally clear that she did not. "I remember thinking, *This is not fun*," she told me. "*It's not what I want to be doing*." She loved sharing information and helping people. "Part of my fascination is with the healing aspect of the plants, their wildness, their spirit. And also with the people I met—they were just incredible characters. People who had missions in life. They were brilliant and wild and passionate and willing to be different. The plants were clearly directing them and they were willing to follow. That's who I wanted to spend time with."

Rosemary and Drake separated. In 1978 she set up the California School of Herbal Studies, the first herbal school in the state. She also founded Mountain Rose Herbs as a mail-order company to provide bulk herbs to students who wanted to prepare their own remedies. By 1987 she decided it was time for a change and moved to five hundred acres of wilderness in Vermont. Once there, she became aware of and concerned about the impact of the herbal renaissance on wild plant populations of North America. She turned her new home, Sage Mountain, into an herbal retreat center and botanical sanctuary where she continued to teach. In 1994, with a group of concerned herbalists, she founded a nonprofit organization called United Plant Savers, a nonprofit dedicated to the conservation and cultivation of native medicinal plants. Though many men and women were part of and leaders in the herbal renaissance, Rosemary stands out. Herbalist David Winston said it this way: "The amazing thing about Rosemary Gladstar is that she has vision *and* she manifests that vision."

Ed Smith

Around the time that Rosemary was starting Rosemary's Garden, Ed Smith started reading a borrowed copy of Jethro Kloss's book *Back to Eden* while riding on a bus in Colombia. First published in 1935, *Back to Eden* was the bible for the natural living movement in the late 1960s. It introduced Kloss's method of natural self-healing based on herbs and a diet that eschewed meat, fat, and eggs. (By the 1980s almost three million copies had been sold.)

Ed read the book cover-to-cover. It was his first exposure to the use of plants as medicine, and he was hooked. He began visiting the village markets to speak to the curanderos who sold fresh herbs, and he tried preparing the remedies they described for himself. For several years Ed traveled between his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and South America to continue studying herbal medicine. Although he wouldn't have predicted it at the time, this initial exposure to plant medicine in Colombia would eventually lead him to start an herb business, Herb Pharm, that has thrived for decades.

Ed and his then-partner, Sara Katz, founded Herb Pharm in 1979. I met Ed and Sara when Terry and I visited Herb Pharm to film the farm and production facility in Williams, Oregon, for *Numen*. Ed was a regular teacher at herb conferences at the time, and like Traditional Medicinals their company was among those most often recommended by herbalists. I also spoke with Ed and Sara separately about their memories of the company.

Ed told me that on his first time back in Cambridge after being in Colombia, he visited a local health food store to buy some herbs. He was disappointed with what he found. Colombian healers used vibrant, vital, fresh herbs. In the stores in Cambridge, though, the herbs were overdried and stale. The arnica had gone to seed. Mints didn't smell like mint. "The herbs were just good enough to keep people interested," Ed said. "But that was all."

Ed got a Peterson field guide and began gathering wild plants from the woods around Boston, continuing to learn about their medicinal uses from whatever sources he could find. A few years later he and Sara

moved to Oregon, where they helped Dr. John Christopher, who was starting a naturopathic school of medicine. Often called the father of the modern herbal tradition, Dr. Christopher was a naturopathic physician from Utah known for his teachings on herbs and natural healing especially among the Mormons in Utah, during a time when few people were teaching about the use of plants.

In Oregon, Ed continued harvesting wild plants, and he also explored secondhand bookstores. On one visit he stumbled across the entire collection of a retired pharmacist, which included books about liquid extracts written by the Eclectic physicians. Ed couldn't believe his good fortune and told me he spent his last \$300 on the books.

The Eclectic physicians were a group of nineteenth-century sectarian medical practitioners marginal to the history of allopathic medicine but central to that of herbalism. Their practice emerged in response to the growing dissatisfaction in communities in America with the harsh, heroic healing therapies—especially use of leeches and heavy metals like mercury and arsenic—common among medical providers in the mid- to late 1800s.

In the late 1880s and early 1900s, Ed said, you could walk into any pharmacy, apothecary, or doctor's office and find liquid extracts, bitter-tasting liquids in brown bottles. These extracts were made by the leading drug companies of the time, such as Eli Lilly and Parke, Davis and Company.⁴ John King and John Milton Scudder, the two leading Eclectic physicians in the late 1800s, developed a theory of medicine making based on analyzing the specific medicinal qualities of individual plants.⁵ They then hired a gifted young pharmacist, John Uri Lloyd, to manufacture liquid extracts based on these formulas. Lloyd, along with his two brothers, developed Lloyd Brothers, which was best known for making extracts for use by Eclectic physicians. King and Scudder's formulas were produced from raw materials supplied by a robust trade of what were called raw drugs or crude drugs.⁶ These plants were cultivated by the Shakers (the largest growers of herbs in the United States in the nineteenth century) or wild-harvested from Appalachia.⁷ Most of these plants harvested from Appalachia passed through supply houses in North Carolina. In the late 1800s the largest wholesale botanical drug

dealer in the region, Wallace Brothers, in Statesville, North Carolina, stored more than two thousand varieties of leaves, roots, barks, and berries in its forty-four-thousand-square-foot botanic depot. Historian Gary Freeze describes “rows upon rows of ginseng, sassafras, and cherry bark, stacked in baskets or wrapped in bales awaiting shipment.”⁸ An 1883 North Carolina Agricultural Department report noted that “the bales [of medicinal herbs] seen in the country stores of the mountains were similar to the bales of cotton seen elsewhere.” According to Freeze, Statesville became known “as the place where more medicinal plants are collected and prepared for the trade than in any other [place] in the world.”⁹ By 1875 the root trade, which had been “looked upon almost contemptuously” generated more than \$50,000 (equivalent to over \$1 million today), and provided a living to many people.¹⁰

These plants were shipped to the Lloyd Brothers in Cincinnati, a center for the botanical trade in the late 1800s and early 1900s, to be manufactured into the liquid extracts that King and Scudder used in their practice.¹¹ The two doctors treated tens of thousands of patients over the course of almost fifty years. Their success was in large part due to the quality of these formulations.

This information faded from public view, only to reemerge when aspiring herbal practitioners discovered books written by King and Scudder, which documented their clinical practice and formulas in great detail, while rummaging through secondhand bookstores. Herbalists often return to the Eclectics as the source of information about high-quality material and herbal medicine. This is both because of the quality of their clinical work and the botanical medicines they produced *and* because, unlike many others from whom they acquired their knowledge—early American settlers who drew on European traditions, Native Americans, African American slaves, midwives, homeopaths, physiomedicalists, and others—the Eclectics were some of the only ones at the time who wrote books about their practice.¹²

Though not part of mainstream medicine, as educated white men, the Eclectics had the access to resources that allowed them to codify their knowledge, the freedom to practice, and the available time to document their learning. They were educated in institutions that

valued written culture over oral traditions and had access to circles and audiences who could further and perpetuate their beliefs. When I spoke with Richard Mandelbaum, the director of the ArborVitae School of Traditional Herbalism, about the legacy of the Eclectics, he told me that they rarely attributed the foundational sources of their knowledge, or at least not more than in passing, instead presenting it as if they had discovered this knowledge themselves. Even if they didn't intend to exclude the sources of their knowledge, by translating that knowledge into their own words and books, often without citations, in fact they did.¹³

Ed gathered herbs by day. At night he pored through the books of King, Scudder, and others, taking notes longhand on yellow legal pads, noting which plants and formulas were used and how. He gathered herbs and ground them in a coffee grinder, mixed them with alcohol and water in mason jars, and left them to stand until he had time to strain and bottle the finished tincture. As every budding herbalist discovers, extracting herbs produces a lot of tincture. Ed ended up with ten ounces of arnica tincture, nine ounces of yarrow. He shared the extra with friends, who saw the tinctures were effective. As with Rosemary's tea blends, they told their friends, who came to purchase some for themselves. And without intending to, Ed realized he had started a company.

The key to the success of his remedies, Ed believes, was the attention paid to the quality of the raw material; he wanted to match the kind of vitality he had seen in the herbs displayed at the Colombian markets. He made a pegboard to use during classes he taught at Dr. Christopher's school. He divided the board in two, and on one side he attached yarrow from a local health food store. On the other, he displayed yarrow he had picked himself. He pointed out the silvery green leaves and vibrant white flowers of the yarrow he had harvested and dried, and the faded, brown and gray leaves and flowers of the yarrow from the store. "You didn't have to be a master herbalist to tell the difference," he told me.

Ed is quite well known for making this point at every opportunity when he has an audience. Sienna Craig, an anthropologist, described

meeting Ed at a conference on traditional systems of medicine in Bhutan in 2009. Ed pounded a fist on the table as he told the audience of academics, “You don’t have to have a PhD to tell good-quality plants!”

Rosemary recalled sitting in on one of Ed’s classes back in the 1970s, a time when no one was really thinking or teaching about the importance of herb quality. She invited him to teach at Orr Hot Springs Resort in the California redwoods. After his class Ed displayed bottles of his tinctures on a Guatemalan blanket. Students bought every bottle. He left with \$300 in cash. Rosemary invited him to teach again, at another hot springs site in Northern California. He brought along a bigger blanket—and left with \$600 in hand. As he was packing up, a student who ran an herb store asked whether Ed had a wholesale catalog. “No,” he said. “But we will next week!” He and Sara immediately registered the name Herb Pharm and made a logo. Sara typed up two pages describing twelve to fifteen herbs. That was their first catalog.

More orders came in. Herb Pharm, which made its mark by knowing the “pedigree” of its herbs and selling only “organic, custom, wild-crafted plants,” began to take off. Ed and Sara made enough money to pay the rent and put food on the table. They took a weeklong vacation to Mexico. Sara said they were never goal-driven. They had the good fortune to be doing something that wasn’t widespread but had widespread popularity, which meant they never had to be clever about marketing or sales. “The whole industry was so fledgling and naive. We were always just ahead of the curve. We showed up all day, every day, and did the work. People loved the medicine we made. It was thrilling—we would say to each other, ‘Let’s go home and make some more!’

“You couldn’t do that today,” she continued after a pause. “We were able to get where we did because of hard work and passion and because of the times.”

“When we first started Herb Pharm, we never dreamed it would turn into a multimillion-dollar business,” Ed explained. “We were basically two hippies trying to avoid getting a job. Not that we didn’t want to work—we just didn’t want to work for The Man. We were trying to earn a right livelihood, to do work we believed in, work that was good for our fellow citizens and good for the planet.”

Phyllis Light

Realizing that we needed to diversify the voices we were recording for *Numen*, we headed to Arab, Alabama, to interview Phyllis Light, a fourth-generation practitioner of what she calls Southern Folk Medicine. Our conversations with Phyllis brought in the perspective of the practice of herbalism passed through family in a tradition that was never broken.

Phyllis is more rooted in the physical and cultural place of her home than anyone else I have met in the North American herb community. She still lives in Arab, the town where her ancestors lived and where what she calls the mishmash of cultures that make up her heritage came together. Phyllis's entire family—on both sides—was involved in folk healing, a mix of Native American knowledge about plants and the spiritual knowledge of African slaves who had been brought to North America by the Spanish. Europeans added their system based on the ancient Greek humoral methods made popular by Galen. The Scots-Irish, who came to the area in the 1700s and 1800s, brought in a superstitious or magical framework that they combined with what they found in the Bible and Christianity.¹⁴ “So we have about a four-hundred-year history of folk medicine in the South. Other parts of the country can't say that,” Phyllis told me with pride.

The Civil War helped solidify herbal use in the South, she continued. “I'm not going to get into the politics of it. We all know slavery was not a good thing.” But the South was blockaded by land and by sea and so certain foods and medicine weren't available. Southerners had to go back to using herbs as medicine, she explained, adding that some of the best herbal books were written during the Civil War.

After the Civil War, the land was ruined: “The barns and houses had been burned. The fields and crops and soil had been burned. The land was in waste and devastation. The slaves were free, but they had nowhere to go. Reconstruction was a really horrible time. Then too, herbs were the only thing people had as medicine. Every woman had to know to care for her children and her family using herbs, because that was all there was. No one could afford to go to the doctor, and there weren't many doctors even if they could.”

Just as the South's economy was beginning to stabilize, the Depression hit. Phyllis recalled that her grandfather used to say, "I read in the paper that there is a Depression, but we couldn't tell any difference in our family."

When Phyllis was ten years old, she began gathering herbs with her grandmother, who was part Creek and part Cherokee and had been taught by her own mother and grandmother. Phyllis's father took over after her grandmother died. "On my dad's side, I'm part Native American, German, and Jewish German. I'm a little Oriental and definite y Scots-Irish," Phyllis explained.

Phyllis has thin, straight blond hair, cut just below her ears, that ripples as she shakes her head to emphasize her points. In a photo taken when she was seventeen, Phyllis's set jaw shows her determination—like the shake of her head, her expression seems to say, *Don't even think of crossing me*. Sitting at the linoleum table in her kitchen that she uses for teaching, Phyllis described growing up in Arab at a time when everyone lived off the land because that's all they had. "We all had gardens. We all raised our own animals for food. We all farmed and hunted and went to the woods to gather wild food and herbs. Tha 's just the way life was in that part of the South. Drop me in the woods with a knife and I'll make it. I know how to eat, how to make a shelter, I know what foods to eat. I know what herbs I'm gonna need for medicine.

"When I heard people talking about the herbal renaissance, I was like, *What in the world are they talking about?* We didn't need any renaissance because we already had it. We didn't know we were holistic," she added. "We were just poor."

I asked Phyllis about her relationship with plants. She answered by telling me a story.

One morning when she was seventeen, her father told her they were going to the forest to find ginseng. It wasn't the season for digging ginseng, she said, they were simply venturing out to locate some plants. By that time Phyllis had spent plenty of seasons with her family "sanging," as hunting ginseng is called, but she had never tried to find a ginseng plant without the red berries that are its signature. She and her father walked and walked. Finally, after what seemed a long time, he stopped and

told her that “between that creek, them rocks, and that tree, there’s some ginseng plants, and I want you to find them.” And then he pulled out his paperback western from his back pocket, sat down, and began to read.

“The e I was standing in the middle of all these plants that all hit around my knees, and they all looked exactly the same. Th y were all green, and they all had leaves,” Phyllis said.

She looked and looked. She couldn’t see any ginseng. She asked her father for some help, but he ignored her and continued reading his western.

She kept looking. Eventually her father told her, “You better hurry up, we have to get home for supper.”

“And I am so frustrated that I’m starting to cry,” Phyllis told me, her voice inflected with the accent of her home. “I’m getting mad at myself, and I just stopped and took a breath. Right in the middle of all this green stuff, I just paused. And suddenly I didn’t care anymore if I found those ginseng plants or not. I was done. I closed my eyes. I could hear the birds, and I could hear my daddy turning the page in the book, and I could hear the creek bubbling over the rocks, and I could hear the wind fl wing through the trees, and in that instant I really couldn’t tell the difference between myself and the wind, and myself and the creek, and myself and the pages of that book. And when I opened my eyes I saw seven ginseng plants, outlined in light. It was the most amazing experience of my plant life.

“And I looked at my daddy and I said, ‘Here’s one, here’s one, here’s one!’ I was so excited! And he stood up, and he said, ‘Yep. Let’s go eat.’ He put his book in his back pocket and started walking toward home.

“And that was my teaching. Tha’s how my dad always taught me. Tha’s how my grandmother taught me. Th y taught me by making me learn. Th y didn’t teach me with a lot of words. Those were the teachings I had all through my early years of herbalism: *How do you connect? How do you see what isn’t there?*”

The herbal medicine Phyllis learned came from her relationship to a particular place, to the plants that grew there, and to the people who knew those plants and how to use them, steeped in knowledge that had been passed down to them from their mother or father or grandmother.

It wasn't a product separate from the source. It was knowledge rooted in connection.

David Winston

To the north, in New Jersey, David Winston was also becoming interested in herbs. David described the 1930s to the 1960s as the “herbal dark ages.” In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he recalled, he would tell people he was an herbalist and they would ask, “You mean like spices? Potpourri?” Th y thought he was wasting his time. “It was like saying I delivered ice for the icebox or used gas in my lamps,” David said.

“My friends were all interested in *one* herb, and I was interested in all the rest,” he told me, laughing. He thought he was the only person on the East Coast interested in herbs, but gradually he began to meet other people who used plants as medicine—Tommie Bass of Georgia, Catfish Gray in West Virginia, Adele Dawson in Vermont. Th y were members of the generation who kept herbal medicine alive. He fell in love with the way these wise herbalists talked about using plants for healing.

While visiting Goddard College in central Vermont in 1975, David stopped in a general store and noticed an announcement for a book sale tacked to the bulletin board. Intrigued, he stopped by the sale, where he discovered a collection of vintage leather-bound books about herbal medicine—books written by Eclectic physicians including *King's American Dispensatory* by John King and *American Materia Medica, Therapeutics and Pharmacognosy* by Finley Ellingwood. David told me that he was blown away to discover that medical doctors in the United States had used herbs in their practice as recently as the early 1900s. He thought their use had died out hundreds of years ago. Yet on page after page, he found accounts of a rich clinical record using herbs not only to treat conditions like headaches and cramps, but for the most serious diseases of the day. He thought all of this knowledge had been lost—or that it had never existed. It was incredible, he said, to discover a whole history of plants as medicine. All the books were half price. He spent almost every penny he had buying two shopping bags full of the treasures, reserving only enough cash to pay for his bus ticket home, with a dime to spare.

A Community Forms

Many of the social and cultural movements of the 1960s faded or transformed beyond recognition as the front-line individuals grew up and realized they needed to find conventional jobs. What made the herbal movement a true renaissance turned out to be one of the many pivotal projects Rosemary decided to embark upon—organizing a conference. She was inspired by a retreat she attended in the mid-1970s organized by Baba Hari Dass, an Indian guru who, among other accomplishments, was an early proponent of yoga and Ayurveda in the United States. Rosemary decided to do something similar for the herb community.

As Rosemary described that first herb conference to me, it struck me how similar it sounded to conferences I have attended for the past twenty years. Everyone gathered for an opening circle, holding hands. We sang together. There were classes on the uses of plants as medicine and on making remedies with those plants. At these early conferences, in between sessions, the participants took off their clothes and soaked in hot tubs.

Rosemary had grown up with Adventists with a strong sense of family and community. “When I look back on it, I think I brought in some of that sense of community from church, singing together, holding hands, praying over meals, washing each other’s feet. I brought the sense of holiness that I loved in church into what became my spiritual family. Otherwise why would I start off with singing? We didn’t sing or hold hands at the Baba Hari Dass conference. I didn’t make a plan, now we’re going to make a circle and hold hands, even if you are uncomfortable, you’re going to stand here and hold hands. I just thought that’s what we should do—and people did it!” She burst into her huge laugh. “They joined hands and sang—and then we saw that it was good so we kept doing it.”

She paused and then added, “Even if people hadn’t been interested in standing in a circle and singing, I would have continued doing it because I knew gathering in a circle was important. I always felt that these conferences were about more than just educating. Plants bring something deeper than that. They bring the sense that we are connected. We are part of that mycelium. To me, that’s the biggest teachings they offer.”

Rosemary went on to organize a second conference, this time at Breitenbush Hot Springs, southeast of Portland, Oregon. Photos of these early conferences periodically show up on the internet. Some of the key teachers in herbal medicine today are in those photos, too, men with full, bushy beards and thick heads of hair, women with long, flowing hair and long, flowing dresses. Thirty years on, when herb conferences take place regularly all over the world, it is hard to imagine the impact of these early gatherings. David Winston was the only herbalist east of the Rockies to attend that second Breitenbush conference. “It was amazing to be in a room of people, seventy people in a circle, all in love with the idea of using plants as medicine,” he told me when we spoke.

Herbalist Paul Bergner attended his first Breitenbush conference in 1986. I spoke with him on the phone years later. He was living in New Mexico at the time, he said, where there was no social or cultural support for herbalism. Anyone interested in plant medicine was accused of being a fraud. Paul felt like a sailboat “sailing into the wind, an oddball wherever I went.” Attending Breitenbush was like being struck by lightning: “It was electrifying to be in a room where everyone talked to the trees *and*—where the trees talked back.”

David Hoffmann moved to the United States in 1986 from the United Kingdom, where he had studied clinical herbalism in the mid-1980s. He met Rosemary while traveling in California in 1985, and she offered him a job teaching at the California School of Herbal Studies. I first met David when he taught a weekend course in the advanced program at Sage Mountain. Terry and I later interviewed him at the campus of the California school, where he still teaches. He is also chief herbal formulator for the Traditional Medicinals company.

As herbalism became more popular, a core group of herb teachers such as David Hoffmann were able to make a living from their work through teaching, practicing, or selling herbal products. These herbalists didn't have to grow out of their love of plants; that love could be the foundation of their work. The US herb community had something he hadn't encountered in the U.K., David told me during a phone conversation.

Rosemary “infused the movement with hippie love and peace without talking about it in those terms.” There were a lot of different flavors of herbalism then, David mused, including Wise Women, Mormons with Dr. Christopher, hippies from the West Coast, and people like him who leaned more toward clinical herbalism and science. As David said, at conferences “we were all in a room with nothing in common except our love of herbs.” That joy of being with the plants is the heart of herbal medicine. Rosemary’s gift and one of her main legacies was to create bridges between the differences, a container that helped give birth to a viable movement that has grown and developed for decades. “We overcame our differences by not looking at them,” David said, “and that helped give birth to a viable movement that has grown and developed.”

Of course ignoring differences doesn’t make them go away, and herbalism was no exception. David Hoffmann soon found that things weren’t perhaps as “glowy” as he initially thought. Herbalist David Winston shared similar reflections on the herbal renaissance. He described it as the most creative, vital, imaginative blossoming of herbal medicine that has ever occurred, but, echoing what others told me about this period, David went on, “It was sloppy. There was a lack of discernment.” There was no science, he added. In many ways, my own journey with herbalism has followed this trajectory, through my deepening exploration of the industry.

As herbs became more popular with consumers, a disconnect grew between the celebratory joy of plants and the reality of sourcing herbs on a scale needed to meet the growing demand. As demand kept on increasing, the companies started in hippie kitchens in the early 1970s grew. Production spilled into barns and then warehouses. Their demand for plants with which to formulate their products also grew. This entailed finding more sources, processing more plant material, and storing and shipping more dried herbs. The gardens and forests near their homes could not supply enough to meet their requirements, which meant herbalists and those starting companies had to turn to other sources of materials—wholesale companies that imported herbs from around the world.

The pioneers of the herbal renaissance had a vision of changing the world through using plants as medicine. They brought their imagination and intuition and activism to the formulas, the packaging, and more. But as the scale of production ramped up, more and more of the herbs in those packages—the raw material for the revolution—came to them from networks that had been supplying herbs and spices for hundreds of years. A trade that was founded on slavery, theft, and war.

When I began studying herbal medicine, herbalists downplayed their connections with the industry. Herbalists tend to have a high ecological consciousness, David Winston told me, but the industry is an entirely different beast. For a long time, he was embarrassed to be part of it, he admitted, even though his company produces some of the highest-quality products available.

Herbalists criticize people in the industry for compromising on their values. Those in the industry criticize herbalists for being naive. The promise, implicit or explicit, was that herbs offered a “natural” and thus safer and more environmentally responsible alternative to conventional medicine. And that, it followed, buying from companies making these products was better for humanity and the earth. When she taught in the advanced course at Sage Mountain, medical doctor and herbalist Dr. Tieraona Low Dog admonished us to think more critically about herbal medicine. Don’t just repeat what nettles were good for, she told us. Find out where that knowledge originated and whether it was a valid source of information. I asked her about this when we interviewed her for *Numen* at the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine in Tucson, Arizona (at that time, she was head of the fellowship program). She elaborated, “We must bring the same critical edge that we bring to the drug industry to our own industry of herbal medicine. One is big and one is small. But even so, we can’t have a separate set of ethics. We can’t suggest in any way that just because you’re in the field of herbal medicine, just because you dance with the plants, you have high integrity by default.”

I realized I had set aside my own critical lens in my embrace of herbal medicine and the criticisms of the industry. I needed to understand politics and economics, not just culture. And to do so required going further back in time.

NOTES

1. Robert Conrow and Arlene Hecksel, *Herbal Pathfinders: Voices of the Herb Renaissance* (Santa Barbara, CA: Woodbridge, 1983).
2. Conrow and Hecksel, *Herbal Pathfinders*, 12.
3. “The New Age Movement of the 1970s was “a ‘self-dispersing’ movement par excellence: participants almost never affiliated exclusively with a single teacher or organization but cobbled together world views and lifestyles from an enormous menu.” See Dan McKanan, *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 75.
4. Hervey C. Parke, one of the directors of Parke, Davis and Company, sent expeditions to the Amazon for finding new drugs from plants, beginning in 1871. See Margaret Kreig, *Green Medicine: The Search for Plants That Heal* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964).
5. Barbara Griggs, *Green Pharmacy: The History and Evolution of Western Herbal Medicine* (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts, 1981), 235. Also see “An American Practice: Part 1–4,” 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-rPy_0LRXE, a video series by HerbTV that provides a fascinating overview of the history of herbal medicine in America, focusing on the Eclectics and the rediscovery of their works by herbal practitioners in the 1970s and ’80s.
6. Originally the word *drug* referred to dry herbs in rafters. Roy Upton said the word has been bastardized over the centuries, but originally it referred to any substance used as medicine, including plants, rather than specifically to chemicals or pills.
7. Martha Libster, *Herbal Diplomats* (Wauwatosa, WI: Golden Apple Publications, 2004), 140; Edward Price, “Root Digging in the Appalachians: The Geography of Botanical Drugs,” *Geographical Review* 50, no. 1 (1960): 1–20, 12.
8. Gary R. Freeze, “Roots, Barks, Berries, and Jews: The Herb Trade in Gilded-Age North Carolina,” *Essays in Economic and Business History* 13 (1995): 107–27, 109.
9. Freeze, “Roots, Barks, Berries, and Jews,” 109.
10. Freeze, “Roots, Barks, Berries, and Jews,” 109.
11. Freeze, “Roots, Barks, Berries, and Jews,” 126.
12. Griggs, *Green Pharmacy*, 231.
13. See Karen Culpepper, “Cotton Root Bark as Herbal Resistance,” *Journal of the American Herbalists Guild* 15, no. 2 (2017): 45–52; Richard Mandelbaum, “A Tree Without Roots: Lessons for the Future of Herbalism from the 19th Century,” *Journal of the American Herbalists Guild* 12, no. 1 (2014): 26–30.
14. Phyllis Light, *Southern Folk Medicine: Healing Traditions from the Appalachian Fields and Forests* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2018).

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Ann Armbrecht is a writer and anthropologist (PhD, Harvard 1995) whose work explores the relationships between humans and the earth, most recently through her work with plants and plant medicine. She is currently the director of the Sustainable Herbs Program under the auspices of the American Botanical Council. She is the co-producer of the documentary *Numen: The Nature of Plants* and the author of the award-winning ethnographic memoir *Thin Places: A Pilgrimage Home*, based on her research in Nepal. She is a student of herbal medicine and was a 2017 Fulbright-Nehru Scholar documenting the supply chain of medicinal plants in India. She lives with her family in central Vermont.

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