

IN SEARCH OF THE INDIAN DOCTRESS

BY MARGE BRUCHAC, INTERPRETATION CONSULTANT

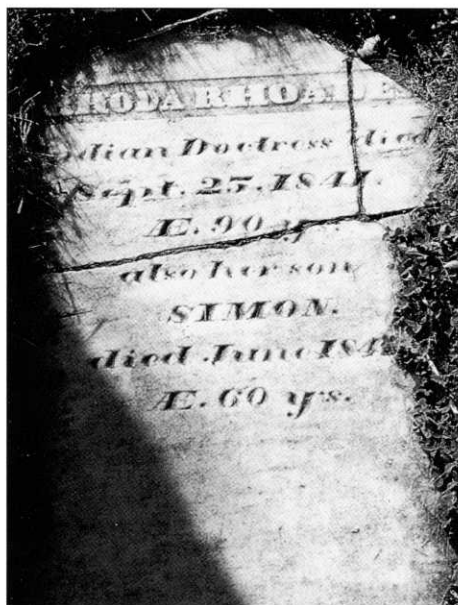
In January of 1980 Jack Larkin, then a research historian at the Village, discovered the unpublished autobiography of a rural Massachusetts printer in the Beinecke Library at Yale. The manuscript reminiscences of Homer Merriam proved an illuminating source for the interpretation of country printing. They were compelling for another reason. At the end of a lengthy search for health between 1834 and 1836, Merriam sought out — and was cured by — an “Indian doctress” in the town of Norwich, (now Huntington) Mass.

Larkin transcribed Merriam’s detailed description of his stay with the doctress. His account has been one of the key clues leading to the development of the museum’s own Indian doctress Molly Geet, and it is being used to re-create the interior of a doctress’s small house for the upcoming “Picture of Health” exhibit. Interpretation Consultant Marge Bruchac, who portrays the Village’s Molly Geet, has been researching Native American medical practices and is now able to add some detail to our picture of the Indian doctress of Huntington.

In November of 1836, Homer Merriam was still not feeling well. “In a sort of desperation” about his chronic dyspepsia, he wrote, “I decided to try the skills of an Indian doctress” in the town of Huntington, Mass., about 20 miles from Springfield. “She was I believe pure Indian, had a good knowledge of roots and herbs and their medical properties, and a good degree of skill in the use of them,” wrote Merriam. After staying with her for a few months, he

“improved very decidedly in health.” He described his healer as “having cured or helped a good many sick people,” but he did *not* reveal her name, leaving us with the question, who was Merriam’s mysterious doctress?

After Merriam’s account was mentioned in the Fall 1997 *Visitor* (“The Enduring American”), Village Member Janet Grzybowski wrote to the museum, in excitement, that she had come upon a stone at the Norwich Bridge Cemetery reading: “Rhoda Rhoades, Indian Doctress died Sept. 25, 1841, AE 90 yrs., also her son Simon, died June 1842 AE 60 yrs.” Grzybowski asked, “Could this be the Indian healer in your story?” Her find was our entry into what Huntington Town Historian Pam Donovan Hall calls the “Forgotten Valley,” an outlying country neighborhood that was permanently displaced by the building of the Knightville Dam in the 1930s. Hall has spent 12 years researching the lives of the “dirt farmers and honest folk,” both Indian and non-Indian, who lived in this small community, with a particular focus on the woman she familiarly calls “Aunt Rhoda.”



The burials and gravestones of Indian Hollow were removed to Norwich Bridge Cemetery, and the Historical Society has seen to the placing of a memorial boulder remembering those graves that would otherwise be unmarked. There is as yet no published history of Indian Hollow, but Hall is currently writing one, following in the footsteps of Myron Munson, a Huntington historian of the last century who began the reconstruction of the neighborhood’s past by conducting numerous interviews with surviving residents in the 1880s.

As town historians have reconstructed it, Indian Hollow began as a community when Yankee settler Zebulon Fuller of Rhode Island arrived in Norwich in the late 1750s. He married a local Mahican Indian woman, settled on a terrace of land above the Agawam River, and eventually acquired over a hundred acres of land. There was a strong healing tradition in the Fuller family; local residents interviewed by Munson remembered Fuller’s children — Zebulon Jr. and Rhoda Fuller Rhoades — as successful physicians ministering to a large region that included the towns of Westfield, Springfield, and Northampton, and extended even to Hartford, Conn. Zebulon Jr. may well have been the Indian healer who had a confrontation with Dr. Chauncy Brewster of Springfield some time in the 1820s. When one of the Indian doctor’s patients “did not improve to the satisfaction of friends,” according to a 1904 history of medicine in Hamden County, Mass., they called in Dr. Brewster to consult. The learned physician “decided that the treatment was not appropriate. The diagnosis of the case and directions for treatment were written out in the Latin language, and the friends were directed to lay the papers before the Indian and ask his opinion. When the Indian came

to see his patient the papers were presented to him The Indian turned the guns upon his enemies, wrote out in the Indian language directions for the white doctors to follow, and quietly bade them good-by. With the shrewdness of the joke all were pleased. The patient recovered.”

“Dr.” Rhoda Rhoades acquired a reputation for healing even stronger than her brother’s. “Old Rhoda could cure anyone outside of the grave, and — almost — those who had lain in it only a little while,” one Huntington resident recalled. Part of her practice took the form of house calls, like her brother’s. “She sometimes went to the homes of patients and remained with them . . . [and] used to be summoned from Northampton, Windsor and Hartford, and all over the country,” noted another interviewee from the 1880s. She also “used to have a great many genteel folks come to stay with her in her old house,” testified a third neighbor who had known her. One of her residential patients was a minister from Springfield, who first visited the doctress while he was a theological student. Like Homer Merriam, he “had been round the world in a vain search for health . . . came up and spent a week, and was helped by Rhoda. The following season he stayed all winter. He lodged there, and had provisions sent up from Springfield.”

Rhoda Rhoades was a highly proficient herbalist who, it was noted by an earlier town historian, “gave prominence, let us say, pre-eminence, to plants, flowers and roots, as remedies.” Along with searching “the meadows, swamps and woodlands for medicinal vegetation that was growing wild,” she “cultivated a great variety and abundance of medical herbage on the Fuller place.” In 1881 a Mr. Miller recalled that “every kind of flower that I ever saw grew in her garden” and that she used them in making an herbal medicine called “The Extract.” She and her son Simon gathered large quantities of this medical herbage and boiled it down, in a big potash kettle, to a tar-like substance they measured out in clamshell-sized doses to be diluted for use. “The price of the medicine,” he remembered, “was two dollars; she made no charge for diagnosis and advice.” In

1837 the *Massachusetts Spy* carried an illustrated advertisement for a patent medicine called “The Indian Doctress,” which claimed to contain over 50 different herbs; this seems to have been a commercial attempt to capitalize on the widespread use of the herbal medicines prepared by Rhoades and other Native American healers.

We don’t yet know very much about the relationships between Indian medicine and the professional practice of non-Indian physicians. A number of Yankee doctors made major efforts to learn from their Native colleagues, some borrowing from Indian practice without admitting it, others acknowledging the contributions gratefully. Dr. John Williams, in his *Last Legacy and Family Guide* of 1826, wrote of “a native Indian who had been instructed in all the arts of civilized life” who taught him “the Indian method of treating disorders and the medical virtues of the vegetable kingdom.” When a group of Abenaki Indians visited Deerfield, Mass., from Canada in 1837, Dr. Stephen West Williams discussed medicine with “Louis Watso, their doctor” and noted that Watso gave him “an account of the principal medicine plants which they used in their practice.” Williams’ Herbarium, or collection of identified medicinal plants, survives today, held by the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Society. It contains a number of specimens collected with the aid of Watso. But when Williams himself became “much affected with palpitation of the heart” he proved unwilling to try Watso’s remedy — *Asarum canadense* (or snakeroot). Believing that Williams was ignorantly passing up the best treatment for his complaint, the Abenakis were “much offended.”

The “Picture of Health” exhibit at the Village will portray the important role of Indian medicine in the early nineteenth century by reconstructing part of the interior of Rhoda Rhoades’ “small house,” complete with baskets, herbs, a large potash kettle in the kitchen, and small, plain beds upstairs for resident patients.

In the years after 1860, New England moved increasingly toward “scientific”

medicine and away from traditional patterns of healing. Indian doctors were seen as part of a vanished world — sometimes supernaturally gifted and intuitive healers, but primitive and superstitious. While patent medicines came to use the names and images of Indian healers on labels and advertisements, real traditional physicians like Rhoda Rhoades were almost lost to history. Fortunately, Rhoades’ history has not been lost. Huntington’s local historians still know the house sites, the rock piles, and the gravesites of Indian Hollow, and have preserved the recollections of those who remembered its famous Native physicians. In a real sense, Rhoades has been rediscovered in this new age of herbal medicine, when burdock, turkey rhubarb, and slippery elm have been re-introduced as traditional Indian cancer remedies, and even chain drugstores stock herbal teas. And each year in late summer, as if from memory, Indian Hollow blooms luxuriantly with Jerusalem artichoke, goldenrod, boneset, and joe pye weed — the staple plants of Rhoda Rhoades’ “Extract.”

Old Sturbridge Village is grateful to Pam Donovan Hall and to the family of former town historian Bill Gaitenby for sharing their information and to the Huntington Historical Society for allowing us to use and quote from Myron Munson’s materials.



The author, right, confers with Village Program Coordinator for Horticulture Christie White in the Parsonage garden.