



In these mountains, curved slopes of uniform second-growth green are interrupted by scraggly patches, the last stands, tall old growth groves, each corralled in an isolated, postage-stamp parcel. Spindly, silvered cedar tops point skyward there, waving, showing you where the axe has not fallen. This is where you find them: (*Thuja plicata*) western red-cedars. Go down, under the canopy, where cedar's thick buttressed base anchors reddish-brown bark, rising skyward in straight lines, evaporating into the branchy tangle overhead. Lacy deep green foliage conceals J-shaped branches with terminal-end curve. There will be a sweet smell there, a scattering of tiny cones.

Down, below the dark shadow of the second-growth stand, there are cedars too. Big trees, here and there, cut and toppled, left lying horizontal on the ground, years before. Oily and red with tannins, cedar wood has a remarkable resistance to rot. Leveled decades ago, cedars still hold their value; they are sought out in the deepest soggy brush, cut into shingles, chopped into kindling, taken out in sections and made into furniture. Old growth cedar shingles are best, each tree ring grain packed thin and tight. Original shingles still cling to cabins, the oldest houses in town, their reddish tint long gone grey in rain and salt spray. The grain of second growth wood is coarse, testament to young trees' rapid growth, their anxious skyward scramble. They rot fast. Builders pry them off for replacement, while ancient shingles still cling to the cabin next door. Back in the forest behind town, old cedar stumps still stand intact, where giant spruce and hemlock stumps now rot away, wet red and pulpy, crumbling and overgrown, riddled with probing roots.

Though widespread on this coast, cedar has its limits, preferring wet but well-drained soils, occupying overgrown bogs, rocky slopes, and the most stable of streambanks. Here, now, in our own backyard, these trees are remarkably hard to find. In years past, they were targets, sought out for their waterproof wood, spicy, fragrant, repellent to some insects, with a long, straight grain that can be split into shingles and shakes or carved with ease. A smattering of young trees stand sparse in local second-growth. They have not fared well in the struggle for sunlight, the summer heat, the rapid evaporation that follows each new clearcut, and have been crowded out by opportunistic brush and trees. Many are taken by poachers in pickup trucks, who scavenge old stumps and chop new lean trees into kindling, leaving telltale roadside woodpiles that last for years. Yet, in isolated groves, big cedars still stand: in Oswald West State Park, in other miniscule State Parks parcels, in a gated and off-limits stand within the Cannon Beach municipal watershed. These old trees deserve attention.

To north coast Native Americans, no other tree was so important. Straight grain carves smooth and clear, and generations of master woodcarvers would make the most of it. Carving elaborate totem poles from single, massive trees. Framing giant houses in carved cedar logs and draping their exteriors in heavy cedar planks. Transforming giant cedar logs into canoes, by hollowing them out with adzes and fire, and then heating and steaming and stretching and carving them until hulls took on sleek shapes that could pass through waves with a clean break. Carving cedar pieces into ceremonial masks, and drums, rattles, and whistles designed to communicate with the spirit world. Or shaping them into mundane things - furniture, bowls, tools, arrows, combs, paddles, poles. Or fish hooks, fish clubs, harpoons, and fish smoking racks. Cedar planks would be heated with steam and bent four times to produce boxes, painted and carved, in which food, clothing, masks, and any number of other things were stored. The leftovers provided wood for their fires.

With horizontal adze cut at waist height, bark was separated from the tree, by bark gathering specialists who would pull until the bark snapped loose far overhead. This bark was dried, sometimes soaked, then beaten. Its long, thin fibers separate into soft cottony strands with tensile strength, sturdy and waterproof. This beaten bark was woven into waterproof clothing - flowing skirts, capes, hats, belts. It was woven into towels and washcloths, bandages and bedding. With sturdy cedar roots, bark was woven into waterproof baskets, pouches, soft cradles, mats, and food pouches, or was twined into ropes. Painting brush bristles, formed of fine bark shreds, were attached to cedar stick handles. Cedar bark gathered under strict ceremonial protocols could be braided into shaman's headdresses or regalia for dancing and vision questing. Cedar greenery was used for bedding, mats, or as house decorations; branches were twisted into thick ropes or woven into tidal flat fish traps. Every part had its purpose.

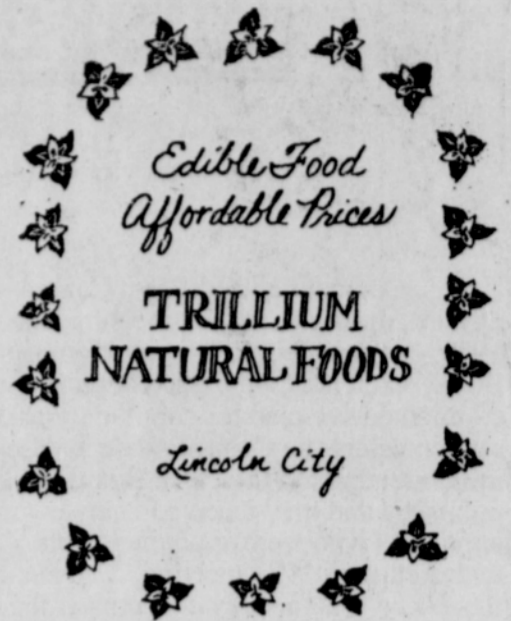
Cedar, called the 'tree of life' by some north coast peoples, eased pains and cured ills; its bark, sap, and wood were sources of many medicines. Legends attest: before the coming of humans, cedars were like us - mobile, sentient beings, with hopes and desires, with families, with friends. They gave up these things for our sake. Yet they continued to hold a potent spirit power all their own. By asking politely, or by merely standing with back against the cedar's base, one might obtain some of this power. Cedar was there at birth, when newborns were washed with cedar bark towels, when children were tucked into carved cradles lined with cottony-soft cedar bark. Cedar was there at death, when bodies were wrapped mummy-like in cedar bark bandages, and placed in cedar coffins that were tucked into trees, or laid to rest in permanently grounded cedar canoes.

Chiefs would own special cedar groves, those with the best trees. These groves were often located far from their village; particularly prized were those trees from the mountains, where trees struggle for survival and the grain is thin and dense. When trees were felled, they were taken gradually, respectfully, with prayers and apologies, using fire or the combined effects of wedges and wind sway. Trees would be brought to the water's edge, lashed to canoes, and paddled to the village-front beach where they would be worked. More often, whole trees were not taken. With prayers and care, boards would be taken from the side of living trees with wedges; taken sparingly, planks were prized possessions, brought along by canoe if a home was abandoned, even temporarily. Bark, too, was taken sparingly, to minimize damage to any one tree. These trees would outlive the harvesters. Apologies for the injury, promises not to waste, offers of enduring respect: bark gatherers and woodcutters were specialists, not only as craftspeople, but also,

importantly, as diplomats between species. Stumbling through old growth underbrush, I sometimes find these trees, tops green and healthy, their old scars partially healed, bark edge curling over bare wood once exposed by wedge and adze. Individual scrapes and cuts still show where reverential hands took what was needed and left the rest. Every time, involuntarily, reflexively, I run my fingers over the exposed wooden face, reflecting on what I might learn from each scrape, each scratch, each cut that marks the exterior of this ancient tree.

A very accessible overview of the use of cedar by Northwest coastal peoples can be found in Hilary Stewart's book "Cedar: Tree of Life to the Northwest Coast Indians." (University of Washington Press, 1984).

Editor's note -- We noticed that Doug's column this month bears a strong connection to a Wildlife on the Edge column of February, 1996. In honor of Sally's new status of "Best Seller" (Lucy's Books, Astoria); and because you can never never talk too much about cedar trees, we are printing that column again.



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