

[Note: this was written as the foreword to the German edition of Herbal Antibiotics, second edition.]

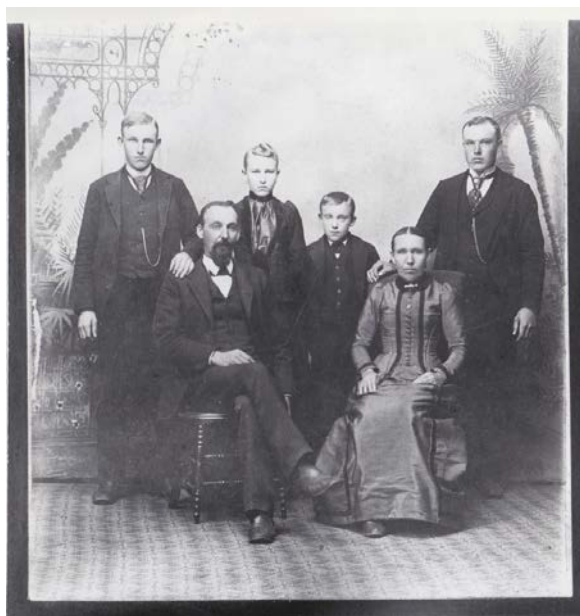
HERBAL BEGINNINGS

Stephen Harrod Buhner

There's a story that has stayed with me for more than forty years. A missionary asked a member of an African tribe (I no longer remember which one) whether he ever prayed to God, and he said, "No, for God is far away and busy with many things. We don't like to bother him with our little problems. We pray to our ancestors for they, of all the spirits, are closest to human beings. They can more easily hear our prayers. They still remember what it was like to be alive."

Something in that story has always resonated with me. It has seemed to me, over the years, that I could feel my own ancestors close to me – those I knew when they were alive, those who had passed long before I was born. It always seemed that I could feel them, sometimes stirring in my blood, sometimes helping me when I was in need, in many subtle ways shaping part of who I've become in this life. We've been taught that our DNA shapes our bodily form: Our hair color, our eye color. Though few ever put it more accurately: DNA holds within it certain kinds of memories that come reverberating up out of the past and shape the physical form we possess in this lifetime. But I think that DNA carries more than just physical memory. I think it carries other kinds of memories, too. From them come glimpses of the lives of ancestors whose DNA still stirs inside us. I think that is why, when I come upon old photographs of ancestors I never knew in life, they sometimes seem so familiar to me – as if I had known them always. I think,

too, that the gifts they had, certain quirks of mind, perceptual sensitivities, inborn talents, the work they were drawn to in life, are also held in DNA as memories, memories that have influenced me at a level more subtle than I ever suspected.



So, when I find that my ancestor Elizabeth Lusterheide (1807-1879) was an herbalist and midwife, that my great-grandfather Cecil Harrod (from whom my middle name comes) was a physician who used many herbal preparations in his practice, and that there have been doctors and healers of various sorts in my family for 300 years, I begin to wonder about how the memories in my DNA might have shaped my life.

My herbalist ancestor, Elizabeth, has long fascinated me. She was born and raised in a small town in northwestern Germany, Bramsche, about 20 kilometers north of Osnabruck – and just down the road from the small village of Buhner. (I was recently on the internet, looking at some photographs taken in Bramsche, and came across the photograph of a young man who bears a remarkable resemblance to my brother David.) Elizabeth, as a descendant once wrote, “was quite tall, robust and strong as a man. She had jet black hair, a very fair complexion, and a sunny disposition.” (You can see some of her complexion, I think, in the face of her son John Rudolph, my great-great-grandfather. He’s the patriarch seated in the photograph, taken in 1895.) Elizabeth’s husband, John Rudolph Buhner (1807-1847), was also from Bramsche, and a farmer

– as so many people were back then. As Albert, that distant cousin of mine, once described it, Rudolph was “a big strong man, over six feet tall, had yellow curly hair and light blue eyes.” (You can see a bit of him, too, I think, in the face of my great-grandfather Frederick Ferdinand Buhner, 1874-1967. He’s the young man in his early twenties standing to the left in the photograph. The other children are, left to right, Jane Marie, 1878-1944, Martin, 1880-1903 [appendicitis], and Rudolph, 1871-1960.)

Four of the Bramsche Buhners (siblings) and their families traveled to the United States in the 1830s and early 1840s. They eventually settled in the small town of Seymour, Indiana in the midst of, what was then, the primeval forests of the Ohio River Valley. Rudolph and Elizabeth left from the port of Bremen (so the records show) in early September of 1840, traveling steerage to the port of New Orleans in the United States. Their three children, John Henry (10), Elizabeth (5), and William (1) were with them.

Land in many parts of the United States could be purchased for very little money then – for those who were willing to farm it – and large numbers of German immigrants were settling in the Ohio River Valley. Rudolph’s brother and sister were already there as was a large German ex-patriot settlement in Seymour. So Rudolph and Elizabeth sold nearly everything they owned, paid the \$17 needed to buy 160 acres (65 hectares) of land six miles (9.5 km) south of Seymour.

The food they prepared for the journey to their new home (as their son John Rudolph told Albert long ago) included smoked sausage and fish, cheese, and many loaves of a dark rye bread. Gathering their few bags and saying goodbye to their relatives and friends, they set out for

Bremen, 111 km away. The trip by sea lasted three and a half months. On December 26, 1840 they arrived in the port of New Orleans.

I have often wondered what that must have been like, to spend 100 days in the hold of a ship filled to overflowing with so many people, all immigrants seeking a new life just like Rudolph and Elizabeth. The cramped quarters, the lack of privacy, the smells of too many people in too close confinement for far too long. The long days in the hold, the far too few moments above deck in the fresh air. (I always wonder what they did about diapers and taking care of William who was so young.) And finally the moment when they arrived in New Orleans. When the ship finally stopped. When the gangplank was lowered and they took those first few steps into a new life.

The city was bustling then, it was one of the major ports to the new world. Thousands of immigrants were pouring into the city, from all over the world. I can imagine the crowds, the multitudes of different languages, the clothing from so many different cultures. And sometimes I see the look of wonder and awe on their faces as they disembarked after so long at sea, finding themselves for the first time in a completely new world. Rudolph and Elizabeth wore the traditional dress common in that region of Germany in the 1840s. They spoke both Dutch and German, and yes, they wore wooden shoes (which I have been told are actually very comfortable).

They didn't stay very long in New Orleans. They soon bought passage on one of the great paddle wheel steamboats and spent the next month traveling up the Mississippi River. They journeyed just past the major port of Louisville, Kentucky where they disembarked at the small

dock and trading post of Madison, Indiana. From there they took a wagon and made the 40 mile (64 km) trip, to their new home. It was a long, slow trip in the middle of winter, the roads were muddy and difficult.

(Rudolph's brother Johann Heinrich (1811-1886) and sister Anna Regina (1818-1889) had immigrated to Seymour in 1834. I always think that Rudolph and Elizabeth must have stayed with them at first.)

It was early February, 1841, when the family arrived. There must have been a lot of snow (for it used to snow a great deal in that region in those days) and I imagine it was pretty cold. Yet, I always picture them getting out of that wagon, standing in the midst of the forest, looking around themselves, feeling the immensity of the work that faced them. And, I think, they must have been feeling a bit alone and scared at what they had taken on. (I know I would have.) I am always moved by their courage.

Over time they cleared the land and began to farm. Their early pole-house was very simple, the big log house they built by hand came years later. Rudolph dug a well, also by hand of course; later generations were still using it, every so often, as late as 1959. Once they were settled, Elizabeth began learning the local plants and harvesting them for medicine. Herbs hung from the rafters of the house, drying, awaiting the moment when she would need them for healing. People came, sometimes from far distances, bringing their complaints, their illnesses, their pregnancies. (My great, great-grandfather, John Rudolph, the patriarch in the photo, was born in that cabin, delivered by Elizabeth herself in 1842, and I would imagine, surrounded by some of her female relatives and friends.)

As the crops came in Rudolph and John Henry would take the wagon and travel once again to the Madison trading post, shipping their fall root crops by river to Cincinnati and Louisville. It was on one of these trips, in October of 1847, that Rudolph fell ill with pneumonia. John Henry (then 16) laid him in the bottom of the wagon and brought him, as he grew increasingly delirious, back home. The family, alarmed at his state, carried him into the house, placing him on the bed. Despite everything Elizabeth did, he grew worse, and after a few days, he died.

(His will, written in Dutch, left everything to Elizabeth and exhorted her to “raise and educate the children,” including the youngest, with whom Elizabeth was then pregnant.)

Elizabeth did raise and educate their children, each of them attending the exacting schools in the nearby town. Seymour was a strongly Lutheran community and nearly all the residents were German. They built good schools and even bigger churches. The school books were, all of them, in German and remained so until after the first world war (and, I have been told, a few still were until WWII).

I still remember the strong German accent that my great-grandfather Frederick Ferdinand had when he spoke.

John Henry took over the running of the farm until 1864 when he was drafted to fight in the American Civil War; he died (of pneumonia oddly enough) on November 9 of that year and was buried in Chattanooga, Tennessee. (I am still unclear why they drafted him, he was 54 at the time.) After John Henry was drafted, John Rudolph took over the running of the farm, until 1869 anyway. He had married Anna Siefker in December of 1868 and they wanted their own place.

She's in the photograph as well but she doesn't look like she's very much fun. (Siefkers and Buhners would intermarry multiple times over the years, many of them going into business together.) In 1869 John Rudolph and Anna bought their own farm and moved a few kilometers closer to town. John was a successful farmer for the next 15 years, though he tired of it eventually. In 1886, he had an epiphany and began, with his friend Joseph Egbert, and William Siefker (his relative by marriage) what would eventually become the largest fertilizer company in the Ohio River Valley. (Nearly 80 years later Exxon bought it from the family; it's been sold a number of times since then, first to Monsanto, then to other multinationals).

John and Anna's oldest son, Rudolph, didn't like farming very much, so he became, at first, a blacksmith, then a mechanic as the world around him changed. Thus it was that John's second son Frederick Ferdinand (F.F.) inherited the farm . . . and the fertilizer business. It was he who made it the multi-million dollar company it eventually became.

In the 1930s, his sons (Carl John – my grandfather, Mart, and Edward) began a trucking company to better transport their fertilizer to the farms and stores that needed it. By the late 1960s, when they sold the company, it had become one of the largest trucking companies in the United States. (And despite my childhood hopes, the millions were long gone by the time I came to inherit.) Carl John (1904-1969) married Edna Harrod (1906-1983) in 1929. (They honeymooned in Havana, Cuba in fall of 1929 which has always made me jealous . . . and curious. Depression, stock market crash?)

Edna's father, Cecil Harrod, was a horse and buggy physician who began his practice in 1911 in Burney, Indiana. (He met and married Mary Burney there in 1912 – her first husband

Josh was a professional baseball player; he had a lot of affairs “they” said, which is presumably the reason for the divorce.)

I still have pictures of the first car they bought, an old Model T Ford. My grandmother Edna is eight years old, standing on the running board, looking out at the world, with all her life before her.

I spent a lot of time with my great-grandfather Cecil as I was growing up – though no one ever called him that. He was Bud or Dad or Doctor Harrod or Grampa. I remember his office in the back of that big house they had in Columbus, Indiana. Always, there was the smell of the medicines, the way the leather couch creaked as I sat on it, the feel of the place . . . no doctors’ offices I have been in have ever felt like that again.

I remember the way he looked at me as we sat and talked in that room, as if he could see deep inside me, in ways I didn’t, as a young child, understand. I remember the shape of his hands, the veins on their backs, the smell of tobacco, and the sound of his voice. I remember his touch and how he held me late at night as I lay in bed with him. He told me stories of ancient days and magical times and I slowly fell asleep in his arms. I knew in some indefinable way that I was loved into the depths of me. And, I remember, too, our long walks in the woods in those ancient, long ago days of the late 1950s.

I remember the smell of the soil, the green of the plants around us, the feel of deep forest in summertime. I remember, too, how he looked at his patients, how he attended deeply to what they said. And I remember how he worked with them, seeking to find whatever healing he could to bring them back to health.

I remember lying in bed one night, when the story was done, looking up at him through slitted eyes, and thinking to myself, I want to be a man, like this man, when I am grown. And throughout all these years, I have done my best to become so. He died in 1963, when I was eleven and a light went out of my life. Even after all this time I still grieve. But I still feel him. He has lived inside me all these years, offering comfort from time to time when I was in deep need. Sometimes, he has brought me the wisdom that only ancestors can truly know.

Nine years after his death I moved to a small, late nineteenth-century cabin high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. I learned how to survive harsh winters, how to carpenter a house, how to build an outhouse that did not smell, to work a wood burning stove, and to recognize the plants that surrounded me, some of which I used for food and some for medicine. And I remember the moment, many years later, when I became ill with something physicians could not diagnose and how I turned to a simple plant that was growing on our land there at 9000 feet in those rocky mountains.

Once you are healed by a plant, I found, things are never the same again. Thus did my journey into the world of plant medicine begin; it's been over thirty years now that I have worked in depth with them. They taught me, more than most of my human teachers, what it means to be a human being. Always, along the way, I have felt my ancestors inside me, urging me on. They have given me the shape of my body, many of my strengths, and some weaknesses as well. They have brought me comfort, and wisdom, and sometimes even whispered into my ears in the depths of darkneses that I did not know how to face. Somehow during the journey, I got caught up in the lineage of those who become People of the Plant. Somewhere deep in my

DNA that lineage resides. And somehow, in ways that science cannot fathom, it took hold of me one day and brought me one of the most amazing, and deeply fulfilling, adventures I have ever known.

There was a moment, over 20 years ago, that I felt that ancient lineage emerge powerfully into my awareness. I wrote about it in a poem called Ancient Herbals.

Today I read the description

Of a medicinal plant

In a seventeenth-century herbal.

The words,

In intimate detail, described *Potentilla*

And how the author used it to heal long, long ago.

After I closed the book,

And shut out the strange, time-distorted vocabulary

I took my staff,

And walked the fields

Surrounding my home.

I do not know why I paused

And looked down

To see the same Potentilla

Three hundred years later.

The description from the book,

Like an insubstantial shadow in my mind,

Arranged itself

Over the five jagged fingers of Potentilla's leaves,

His straggly stem,

Swaying yellow flowers,

And clicked into place.

Wind,

Blowing down

A million years of plant medicine

Brushed against me

I flickered and was gone,

Insubstantial shadow in the mind of Earth.

And for a moment,

I was an old herbalist in 1720,

Brushing back my cloak with my hand

As I bent to look

At a plant That Hippocrates had used 2000 years before me.