

TREES AND VITAMIN C

IN THE EARLY days of long-distance sailing ships, many sailors experienced the symptoms of scurvy, a dreadful disease (see Glossary). No European doctor at the time understood what the cause was, imagining it to be caused by “bad air,” so it became an accepted risk and health challenge for all long-distance sailors on their limited diet.

The first good news that scurvy was treatable came when Jacques Cartier, on his second voyage of exploration in the winter of 1535–36, got caught in the ice with his three ships in the St. Lawrence River, near the present site of Montreal. The crew of 110 men had to take to land to wait out the winter with the food they had stored in their ships.

In mid-March 1536, as his sailors were getting emaciated and debilitated from scurvy and twenty-five had already died of it, Cartier took the fateful step of asking the local Iroquoian people what to do about this malady. He had noticed several of the Native peoples with scurvy symptoms, and soon thereafter recovering completely.

Instead of fulfilling his fear of being attacked while the Frenchmen were “down,” the Native chief, Domagaia, responded by showing them how to prepare a tea of the local Annedda Tree. The Native women “gathered branches of the magical Tree, boiling the bark and leaves for a decoction to drink. And placing the dregs upon the legs.” (Note: *Doma Gaia* = “Home on Earth.”)

The tea, over eight days, totally cured all the men of scurvy and even cured some of syphilis. Cartier wrote in his journal, “no amount of drugs from Europe or Africa could have done what the Native drugs did in a week.” It was a Tree that Cartier did not recognize, yet he wrote down the name.

Cartier brought the good news back to Europe that there was a cure for scurvy. However, on his return back up the St. Lawrence, the Iroquoian peoples had moved their village and were no longer there to reacquaint him with the right Tree. In 1609, the French under Champlain chose to make war on the Iroquois, so they did not learn that the Onondaga word for Hemlock is Annedda, also spelled Ohnetda.

Many people have wondered what Tree the Annedda was. Some have speculated that it was White Cedar, Balsam Fir, White Spruce, or White Pine. We must remember that Cartier was