

EXCERPT FROM RECORDED INTERVIEW OF KAREN BROOKS, PART 1

TALKING ABOUT USE OF ARNICA

CONDUCTED BY JENNIFER ANDRULLI

IN SOLDOTNA, ALASKA

DECEMBER 30, 2021

ORAL HISTORY 2021-02-31_PT.1

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: One of the first plants that you started working with was arnica.

KAREN BROOKS: Was arnica, right. Well, as a therapist and working on people's bodies, I would talk about arnica. And this was in the '80s, mid to late '80s. And I would say to people, "Just, you know, go to the health food store and buy arnica and that's really great for muscle pain." And no one would. And so, I decided I would start picking it and make arnica oil. And that's when I started process -- picking and processing arnica. And I gave away the oil to my patients.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: That's wonderful. Where does arnica grow?

KAREN BROOKS: Well, arnica is the first -- I call it the first flower that comes out. It kind of looks like a daisy and it grows in dry, uh, gravelly -- like on the sides of the roads, um, in -- in dry, gravelly dirt.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: And what part of the arnica do you pick?

KAREN BROOKS: The flowers. I pick the flowers. And this, you know, it (laughing) -- for years and years, it was always the end of the first week in June. I would go down -- I'd drive from Fairbanks down to Healy, and there would be arnica a aall the way down. And then it changed. And then it -- you know, with global warming it -- I think one year it was blooming -- I got a call from -- from my daughter, Erin, up in Fairbanks, "Hey, mom, the -- the arnica is blooming." Because I had all you -- the girls, you know, I'd get a couple of cases. And I'd bring the jars and the oil. I'd use um, uh, olive oil, and I'd have it all ready. And so to get this done fast, I would tell you girls, "Okay, you fill one of these quart jars, each one of you, and then we'll go swimming." (laughing) It worked pretty good, 'cause I -- it didn't take long for -- for me to get a case.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: And so, you pick the flowers, put 'em in a jar. And then you cover 'em with olive oil?

KAREN BROOKS: Correct. I was always paying attention to the weather, too. Now, Interior is really hot and dry. And it does, you know -- there's, ahh, thunder showers and rain intermittent. And so, late afternoon, you always -- and this is, I -- you know, a lot of the things you learn as you go. And when there's a lot of moisture, there's a big possibility for mold and mildew to grow. I learned to watch the weather. And even if it rained, if it was windy, a couple of hours later the plant would be dried out. And that's really the best time. There were times that like two o'clock in the morning. It's so light and it's so warm up there, that that was a good time for me to pick. Plus, there wasn't much traffic. And, uh, now, if I miss the growing in, like, let's

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say Healy, you can just head north, because the farther north, the later the plants are because the cold. You know, because of -- that's just the way it is.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: Also in elevation, so --

KAREN BROOKS: Right.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: When you're harvesting along the roadway, you walk off the road, 20, 25 feet or so and there's arnica off along the roadways and on the gravel roads off the main road. Get off and away from the road where there might be contamination?

KAREN BROOKS: Right. Exactly. And --

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: So what do you do with this arnica oil? Is -- do -- how do you use it?

KAREN BROOKS: Well, I -- I sun-infuse the arnica oil. I put it out after -- Okay, I'll start at the beginning. You know, after the -- the plant and the oil are in the jar, you know, I shake it up. If the jars need to be topped off, I top 'em all off with oil, and then I place them in the sun. I keep them -- I keep them from getting wet. I -- you know, I have a roof -- under the roof, but I keep them in the warmest part of the house or under the eaves where the rain won't get to it. I put cheesecloth over the top. Then I screw the lid on. So, the moisture that is left in the plant can dissipate out through the oil. I leave it there for -- 'til fall. And then I press the plants, press all the medicine out of the plants. Either you can put it in a cheesecloth bag and just squeeze it manually with your hands, or you can use a press and a mallet. And then -- I don't really strain it, because I think the little crumbs in it are just medicine. They are meant to be in there.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: And then you bottle it, label it?

KAREN BROOKS: And keep it in a cool, dark place. What it's used for is on -- is topically on the body. This is not used internally at all. In fact, internally can be quite dangerous, and I have made tincture, but, um, that's only for doctors and of natural medicine.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: Tinctures can also be used topically?

KAREN BROOKS: It can be used topically.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: Like a liniment?

KAREN BROOKS: Like a liniment. You know, there's many things you can do with one plant. In herbalism, you know, is one plant can -- depending on what's going on, and depending on what part of the plant, and how you prepare the plant, can be used for many things.