

EXCERPT FROM RECORDED INTERVIEW OF JACK REAKOFF TALKING ABOUT THE  
USE OF SPRUCE PITCH  
CONDUCTED BY CAROL SCOTT  
IN WISEMAN, ALASKA  
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ORAL HISTORY 95-50-05-PT.4\_SIDE A

JACK REAKOFF: And then there's spruce pitch. And that is about the best medicine in this country for cuts.

CAROL SCOTT: Really?

JACK REAKOFF: Yeah. Last year I was cutting up a moose. You can see the scar right here. It goes from right here all the way around.

CAROL SCOTT: Yeah.

JACK REAKOFF: My knife slipped and it cut all the way down to the tendon and just -- I mean my knife -- I was cutting and the handle was slippery and it slipped forward and it just cut all the way down to the bone and like, "Oops." There's a lot of blood. And when you're cutting -- every time I ever work on a moose, if you nick your fingers on a sharp bone or something, they'll like to get infected right away. I was like, "Oh no." 'Cause I had another one right down to the bone here into the tendon sheath, and I almost had that finger go stiff, but I got spruce pitch and put it in there. I tried other things.

CAROL SCOTT: Huh.

JACK REAKOFF: And then I put spruce pitch in there and it -- it just -- that's what it naturally does to the spruce tree.

CAROL SCOTT: Oh, right. Ok.

JACK REAKOFF: You know, you cut into a spruce tree like you cut and blaze it. The spruce pitch weeps out and it's -- it's actually the turpines in the pitch act as a antibacteria, and it seals itself off with this antibacteria salve. And so bacteria can't penetrate the wood, and that's what -- that's what it does. So it works the same way for humans. It's an antibacteria. So after I came home, took hydrogen peroxide and cleaned out all the pieces of moose hairs and junk out from inside there.

ROMA REAKOFF: It was deep.

JACK REAKOFF: Huh?

ROMA REAKOFF: It was deep.

JACK REAKOFF: Real deep. Now you can see in my tendon sheath, see the fat or this gristle layer here? The whole shebang. Cleaned it all out, and I went out in the yard here and the way to get -- I found the best way to find -- get the spruce pitch without really damaging the tree is to come to a new or a young tree, like from about three to just four or five inches that has smooth bark. A white spruce. And if you look at it, on the side, you'll see little blisters in the skin.

CAROL SCOTT: Right, you can.

JACK REAKOFF: And there's pitch blisters there and if you take your knife and just poke in at the bottom of the blister, in like summer or fall, spring, you can push on that. And out'll come a big drop of -- and you use the real fresh pitch. You can't use old dry pitch. All the turpins have dried out and you can't do anything much with it. I'll use it if I -- semi-dried ones if I'm in a pinch. So you're going to squeeze that out of there and salve it right in there. Then I put butter -- two butterflies (bandages) on it and bandaged it, and I dressed it twice a day. And then ten days it looked just like that. It was completely -- I never got any infection.

CAROL SCOTT: You didn't put -- you didn't put new pitch in?

JACK REAKOFF: Yeah, well, every -- twice a day, I was re-pitching it.

CAROL SCOTT: Oh, ok. Ok.

JACK REAKOFF: That's the first couple times it was open, and I would have to -- would put it down inside there. It doesn't burn. It actually feels real nice. It's real -- I mean, it actually sort of -- actually takes away some of the pain. It feels sort of like warmish and -- You can actually -- when it -- when you put it in like a cut that's infected, you actually can feel it drawing the pitch out of there. In fact, we learned this thing from a guy that stayed here. He stayed here with Kalhabuk's (Florence Jones) daughter one winter, and he'd gotten a bad infection. He almost felt like cutting his finger off. And he was trying peroxide and everything he had here, and one of the old timers who had learned it from one of the old Eskimos said, "Use spruce pitch." Well, this guy had been to college and he was like, "That sounds like something hillbillies do." You know, he wasn't going to do that. He kept fooling around, fooling around. Finally, he went and got some spruce pitch and put it. And he says it like was unreal. You could just feel it drawing. I felt it. You can feel it like pulling at the infection. It feels like it is. And it'll just like draw it right out. Actually, there'll be some stuff start weeping out of there, and it'll heal. You -- you can -- I have had real -- You got to have real good pitch though. If you get any kind of pitch that's discolored, there's that. I've gotten in the bad pitch and it doesn't seem to have much -- It doesn't help very well. So you gotta have real nice clear new pitch. In the winter, you can get it by taking a piece of a tree like that and bring it in and then poke it. Or I -- I've gone around and poked some of those things on these trees, right by the side of the house here in the fall and let 'em weep out. And then if I got a wound, I just go out and grab one and stick it in there. I mean it's -- it's readily available. It's way better than -- I've used neosporin and all these kinds of things like that, that -- that stuff's garbage compared to spruce pitch. Spruce pitch is way, way better than any of that.