

Florida's First Drug Trade Harris J. Samuels



Drugs and the drug trade are not new to Florida. One was flourishing here even before the first European contact. The Spanish and the French when they first arrived here sent home accounts of the use of the “black drink” as a performance enhancing drug taken before battle, on arduous treks, and on special occasions. The use was forbidden to women and homosexuals. It was highly prized throughout North America, and our local Indians traded it with other Indians as far away as the Caribbean.

The black drink, also known as cassina, is a tea made from an indigenous plant commonly known as yaupon holly and used locally as an ornamental. The Latin name is *ilex vomitoria*. That unfortunate name comes from one of the native rituals where the participants, at its conclusion, all purged themselves. Despite the name, and from personal experience, the drink is not an emetic. Instead it is a pleasant tasting stimulant.

Ilex Vomitoria is the only plant native to North America that contains caffeine. It also contains significant amounts of theobromine, the active ingredient of chocolate. It is related to *yerba mate*, the South American drink made from another holly, *ilex paraguariensis*. The black drink's effect on a person habituated to caffeine is that of a mild stimulant that also lowers blood pressure. For a person not used to caffeine, the “kick” is more profound. In the Sixteenth Century when Europeans first encountered it here, tea from China was just being introduced in Europe. The early Florida explorers would have had little, if any, prior experience with caffeine. *Ilex Vomitoria* was later cultivated by the early Spanish colonists and used during the American Civil War as a substitute for coffee and tea.

Most scholars believe that Ponce de Leon's “Fountain

of Youth” was a metaphor. While many have searched for a spring, few have given much thought as to what the “Fountain of Youth” may have been a metaphor for. When de Leon first heard of Florida and the “Fountain of Youth” it was from Indian traders in Hispaniola. It is not unlikely they were trading the roasted leaves and twigs used to make the black drink. Ponce de Leon, like the later Spanish explorers, would presumably have been impressed by its qualities. The “Fountain of Youth” may have been right under our noses all the time.

You can see the plant that was the subject of Florida's first drug trade at the Home Depot labeled as “Accent Plant Holly.” Don't be tempted to brew the black drink up without further study. The process involves several steps, and the plant's berries are poisonous.

For further reading I recommend *Black Drink: A Native American Tea* by Charles M. Hudson. Wikipedia has a good article as well at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_drink.

Museum Store Musings Marci Skates, *Manager*

As you probably know by now, I have taken over running the store. I am going to have a column here to tempt you to patronize YOUR store. We have many new and interesting things that you may not know about. We have wonderful new “T” shirts and hats that match with turtles, dolphins, sharks and gators. They have sayings on them that you just have to see!! There is a great new find called “Tales of a Florida Boyhood” by R.J. Longstreet (I know you recognize that name!) for only \$5.00. He was born in Mt. Dora and spent his summers with his grandparents in Coronado. I could not put it down! Please come and visit us on the first Saturday of the month. We have a sale table in front of the museum with different things marked down each time. We also have paintings and prints.

It's not too early to be thinking about Christmas. There are note card boxes for small gifts, T shirts for brother or grandchild, fishing books for husband, son or daughter, history books for that history buff, children's books for grandchildren, prints and maps for the hard to buy for and many more. Think of us first. Thanks for reading and see you soon, Marci.