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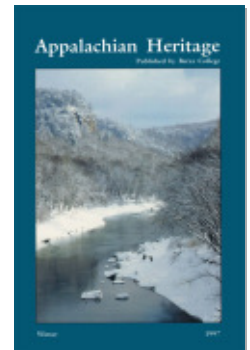
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This Side of the Mountain

Sidney Saylor Farr

Superstitions and Folk Remedies

The Industrial Revolution brought the outside world headlong into some parts of Appalachia, but isolated pockets remained and we continued just as our grandfathers did before us. We were intimate with the land and felt at peace with it when the sun shone, but at night our world closed down to just yellow pools of light spilling outside our windows and doors. It was inevitable that some of the dark tales and superstitions nurtured in Scotland and Ireland, brought here by the early settlers, should flourish in this land. In the mountains there was a deep belief in witchcraft and magic even up to my day.

Grandmother believed that she could stop blood. When someone had an accident and was bleeding pretty badly, she would stand behind the victim and say a Bible verse to herself. They said you could see the blood flow slow down to a drop now and then. She wouldn't tell me what she said. My Uncle Andrew told me. He said she repeated the Bible verse from Ezekiel 16:6: "When I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee . . . Live."

I heard talk of people in the mountains who had the power to draw the fire out of burned flesh, and that if the seventh son of a seventh son blew his breath into the mouth of a baby suffering from thrush, it would be cured. I never witnessed any of these things. But my parents believed them.

Our forefathers lived in constant fear of their environment. They could not explain the workings of nature, and believed that everything was caused by evil spirits. They also believed that the things which they did brought either good luck or bad luck. Most of all, they could not understand infectious diseases, and had no idea that bacteria and viruses were everywhere on their hands, in their food and water, and in the air around them.

Superstitions and folk remedies came to Southern Appalachia from many different countries of Europe, and some were created right there in the Appalachian mountains. My people did as they had done down through generations; they used roots and herbs, and bark and leaves, to treat a variety of ailments.

In the spring when sap rises in maple trees it also rises in wild grapevines. We would cut a small place in a big grapevine and set a tin can or lard bucket to catch the sap. Mother diluted it with a little water

and used it as a hair rinse after the weekly shampooing. Mother's hair was a dark tawny shade, mine a light blond, and my sister Della Mae had Father's dark chestnut shade of hair. The rinse set loose millions of gold flecks in Mother's hair and brought out gold lights in mine and red highlights in Della Mae's. We all felt so proud and fine with our clean, shiny hair. Mother always set a bucket under the down spout when it rained and saved rainwater for washing our hair and the delicate garments which she washed by hand.

Being fair-skinned and blond, I freckled easily in the summer sun. I tried everything I heard about that purported to be a cure for freckles—everything but one cure Aunt Mossie told me about.

Mother's sister, Mossie, married Father's brother, Squire, and the two families lived fairly close to each other. The cousins were teasing me one day and pretending to count all my freckles. Aunt Mossie said that if I could find a tree stump with a hollow in the top where rainwater had collected, and bathe my face in the stumpwater, my freckles would disappear. I found a stump but the ugly scaly growths in it and the yellowish red color of the water were so repulsive I could not bring myself to put it on my face. I have freckles to this day.

There are probably as many remedies for taking off warts as there are communities in the mountains. One that we thought worked the best was to use a piece of chicken gizzard. Peel the inner lining from a gizzard and rub it on the warts. Then bury the skin and try to forget where you buried it. When you forget, the wart will vanish.

Here are some more examples of folk remedies:

- To cure shingles, cut off the head of a black hen and let the blood drip on the affected part. Grandmother and mother would talk about this anytime shingles were mentioned.
- To prevent a cold, smell your socks when you go to bed, the right one first.
- A dirty sock or stocking worn around the throat will cure a sore throat.
- Tying an onion to a bedpost will keep away colds.
- To stop foot cramp, turn your shoe upside down before going to bed.

- To cure a sty, rub the tail of a black cat over the eye.
- To cure a child of thrash (thrush), have the seventh son of a seventh son blow in the child's mouth.
- If you carry a buckeye in pocket or purse, you will not have headaches; it will also keep you from being bothered by hemorrhoids.
- When you cut your hair do not let a bird use any of it to build a nest; if it does you will have headaches.
- Club moss gathered on the third day of the new moon is good against all diseases of the eye.
- Sap from a grapevine will grow hair on a bald head.
- It is bad luck to kill a toad, because, if you do, your cow will give bloody milk. Father and Grandpa were always careful during spring plowing so as not to accidentally kill a toad.
- Should a pregnant woman drink from a cracked cup, her baby will be harelipped.
- If a crow flies over your house and caws thrice, someone in the family will die.
- If a rooster stands on the front porch, looks outward, and crows, it means someone will be carried out the door sick or dead. Mother always took a broom to any rooster that dared to come up on our porch.

I went through a time in my life when I questioned everything and was very critical of the old-time ways and beliefs. Now I have an open mind on the subject. If the moon can exert enough of a force to cause the ocean to come in and make high tides and recede and make low tides, then I believe it can also affect seeds planted in the ground, and animals, plants, and humans above the ground.