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# Ozark Superstitions

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The people who live in the Ozark country of Missouri and Arkansas were, until very recently, the most deliberately unprogressive people in the United States. Descended from pioneers who came West from the Southern Appalachians at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they made little contact with the outer world for more than a hundred years. They seem like foreigners to the average urban American, but nearly all of them come of British stock, and many families have lived in America since colonial days. Their material heirlooms are few, but like all isolated illiterates

they have clung to the old songs and obsolete sayings and outworn customs of their ancestors.

Sophisticated visitors sometimes regard the "hillbilly" as a simple child of nature, whose inmost thoughts and motivations may be read at a glance. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The hill man is secretive and sensitive beyond anything that the average city dweller can imagine, but he isn't simple. His mind moves in a tremendously involved system of signs and omens and esoteric auguries. He has little interest in the mental procedure that the moderns call science, and his ways of arranging data and evaluating evidence are very different from those currently favored in the world beyond the hilltops. The Ozark hillfolk have often been described as superstitious people in America. It is "true" that some of them have retained certain ancient customs which have been discarded and forgotten in more progressive sections of the United States.

It has been said that the Ozarker got his folklore from the Negro, but the fact is that Negroes were never numerous in the hill country, and there are many adults in the Ozarks today who have never even seen a Negro. Another view is that the hillman's superstitions are largely of Indian origin, and there may be a measure of truth in this; the pioneers did mingle freely with the Indians, and some of our best Ozark families still boast of their Cherokee blood. My own feeling is that most of the hillman's folk beliefs came with his ancestors from England or Scotland. I believe that a

comparison of my material with that recorded by British antiquarians will substantiate this opinion.

The collection of some types of folklore riddles, party games, or folksongs, for example is a comparatively easy matter, even in the Ozark country. If a hillman knows an old ballad or game song any reasonably diplomatic collector can induce him to sing it, or at least to recite the words. But the mention of superstition raises the question of one's personal belief, a matter which the Ozarker does not care to discuss with "furriners." The stranger who inquires about love charms or witchcraft will meet only blank looks and derisive laughter.

Authentic data in this field cannot be gathered by running "Old-Timer" columns in newspapers, because the people who contribute to such columns are not typical backwoods folk at all; the real old-timers seldom read newspapers, much less write letters for publication. The questionnaire method, too, has been tried at our whistle-stop colleges and among rural schoolmarms without any conspicuous success. The man who wants to study the Ozark superstitions must live with the Ozark people year after year and gradually absorb folklore through the rind, as it were. The information obtained in this manner is more trustworthy, in my opinion, than that elicited by any sort of direct questioning.

I first visited the Ozark country in 1899, and since 1920 I have spent practically all of my time here, living in many parts of the region, sometimes in the villages and

sometimes in the wildest and most isolated "hollers." I fished and fought and hunted and danced and gambled with my backwoods neighbors; I traveled the ridge roads in a covered wagon, consorting with peddlers and horse traders and medicine doctors and moonshiners; I learned to chew tobacco, and dabbled in village politics, and became a deputy sheriff, and solicited local items for the newspapers. By marriage and otherwise I associated myself with several old backwoods families, in both Missouri and Arkansas. I spared no effort to become intimately acquainted with Ozarkers of the hillbilly type, and succeeded insofar as such intimacy is possible to one who was born a lowlander.

The Ozarker's wealth of folk material fascinated me from the very beginning. I carried scraps of newsprint in my pocket, and along with locals for the paper I recorded other things that interested me: folksongs, tall tales, backwoods jokes, riddles, party games, dialect, old customs, and superstitions. This stuff was later typed on cards and placed in a trunk which I had converted into a filing cabinet, indexed and classified so that I could put my finger on any given item at a moment's notice. I made no secret of the fact that I was gathering old songs and intended to publish a book of them some day, but the other material was collected more or less surreptitiously.

The cards in the file marked SUPERSTITIONS accumulated very slowly for the first three or four years, but my neighbors gradually became accustomed to seeing me around, and began to talk a bit more freely in my presence. In 1924 some witchcraft material which came to

my attention seemed so extraordinary that I suspected my friends were greening me....greening is a dialect word which means spoofing. It was only after checking and double-checking these tales, and getting almost identical items from different people in widely separated sections of the hill country, that I began to realize the extent to which superstition still flourished in this region.

In all the years of my collecting I have never known a hillman to admit a belief in anything which he regarded as superstition. "I aint superstitious myself," one old man told me, "but some things that folks call superstitious is just as true as God's own gospel!" Most of the real old-timers adhere to traditions wild and strange, and the fact that many of them contradict each other matters not at all. Nobody could possibly believe, or even remember, all of the items listed in this book, but nearly every one of them is credited by hillfolk within my own circle of friends and neighbors. The man who laughs at witchcraft and supernatural warning is found to be a firm believer in the moon's influence upon crops, while the woman who doesn't believe in dummy suppers takes the question of prenatal "marking" very seriously indeed.

One might expect to find a definite negative correlation between superstition and intelligence, or at least between superstition and education, but this does not seem to be the case. Perhaps the most famous water witch who ever lived in southwest Missouri was a physician, a graduate of Washington University, and a man of really extraordinary attainments.

One of the most credulous and superstitious hillmen I ever knew was intelligent enough to learn surveying and had sufficient book learning to enable him to teach the district school with unprecedented success.

It must be admitted that some of the items in this collection are folk tales rather than superstitions proper. That is, they are not really believed by intelligent adults, but are repeated to children just as parents elsewhere tell the story of Santa Claus or assure their offspring that rabbits lay parti-colored eggs on Easter Sunday. The old sayin' that killing a toad will make the cows give bloody milk, for example, is probably just a way of teaching children to let toads alone; the farmer knows that toads destroy insects, and he likes to see them around his doorstep on summer evenings. Every backwoods child has heard a little rhyme to the effect that one who defecates in a path will get a "sty" on his posterior a notion doubtless promulgated by barefoot housewives who wish to keep the catwalks clean. Perhaps the children don't really believe all this either, but it sometimes amuses them to pretend that they do, and thus the stories are preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next. But even here I do not presume to define the exact limits of credulity. Sometimes it appears that backwoods parents begin by telling outrageous whoppers to their children and end by half believing the wildest of these tales themselves.

Many of the civic boosters in the Ozark towns are sensitive about their hillbilly background and regard anybody who mentions the old customs or folk beliefs in the light of a

public enemy. This sentiment is reflected in the Ozark newspapers, particularly in the smaller cities. An address of mine, delivered before the State Historical Society at Columbia, Missouri, in 1938, offended people all over the Ozarks because it dealt in part with backwoods superstition. Once in Springfield, Missouri, during a dinner at which I had been invited to speak by the Chamber of Commerce, a casual reference to superstition so moved the president of that body that he suddenly sprang up and denounced me and all my works. Another time, in the dining room of a hotel at Joplin, Missouri, an old gentleman cursed me at the top of his voice and even made as if to strike me with his stick, because I had published something about Ozark superstition in Esquire. Others who have spoken or written on the subject have had similar experiences. The general feeling is that the persistence of the old folklore is somehow discreditable to the whole region, and the less said about it the better.

A Little Rock attorney who read this book in manuscript says that "it applies only to a few ignorant old folks who live in the most backward and isolated sections of the Ozark country." Well, it is true that much of my information was obtained from elderly people in the back hills. The educated young folk are certainly less concerned with witchcraft and the like than were their parents and grandparents. And yet I have known college boys, proud possessors of dinner jackets and fraternity pins, to say and do things which would be quite inexplicable to anyone not familiar with the superstitions of their childhood. And there was a pretty girl once, a senior at one of our best Ozark

colleges, who obtained her heart's desire by a semipublic "conjunction" which would not seem out of place in a medieval book on demonology.

The wildest kind of superstition was accepted as a matter of course by the grandparents of these backwoods collegians, and resistance to change has always been the chief regional characteristic of the Ozark people. The principle of organic evolution has been pretty well accepted everywhere for a long time, but as I write these lines it is still against the law to teach evolution at the University of Arkansas.

A Missouri politician writes me that "the old superstitions you describe may have existed in my district fifty years ago. In fact, I know personally that some of the most fantastic did exist as late as 1900. But you may rest assured that the folks down there do not believe any such nonsense today." To this I can only reply that nearly all of my material was gathered since 1920, and that many of the most striking items in the collection came from the locality indicated in this man's letter.

It is difficult to see why our civic leaders and politicians should be so concerned about these matters. Surely they must know that people in other sections of the country, even in the great cities, have superstitions of their own. Some very eminent gentlemen in Washington are known to consult mediums and fortunetellers on occasion, and there are many women in New York who still believe in astrology and numerology.



I think that the hillfolk are somewhat less superstitious today than when I began this study, twenty-five years ago. Much of my best material came from men and women who were old in the 1920's, and nearly all of them are dead now. One has only to compare the young people with their grandparents, or the isolated settlements with the villages along our new motor highways, to appreciate the present status of folklore in the Ozark country.

Wherever railroads and highways penetrate, wherever newspapers and movies and radios are introduced, the people gradually lose their distinctive local traits and assume the drab color which characterizes conventional Americans elsewhere. The Ozarkers are changing rather rapidly just now, and it may be that a few more years of progress will find them thinking and acting very much like country folk in other parts of the United States. This standardizing transformation is still far from complete, however. A great body of folk belief dies very slowly, and I suspect that some vestiges of backwoods superstition will be with us for a long time to come.