



4. Household Superstitions

The signs and omens listed in this chapter are mostly concerned with matters of no great import, but they are seriously considered none the less, especially by women and children. The arrival of a visitor, for example, is an important event in a backwoods cabin, and there are numerous signs and portents of his coming.

(When a woman drops a dishrag she knows at once that some dirty individual is coming toward the cabin; if the cloth falls in a compact wad the visitor will be a woman, if it spreads out upon the floor a man is to be expected. It is bad luck to drop a dishrag anyhow, and many women take the cuss off by throwing a pinch of salt over the left shoulder immediately. To drop the towel used in drying dishes means that a stranger will arrive very soon, and if the towel is dropped twice it means that the newcomer will be hungry, and a meal must be prepared. The accidental dropping of cutlery also signifies a guest—a fork means a man, a case knife a woman. If you help yourself to something at table, when you already have some of the same stuff on your plate, it means that somebody is coming who is hungry for that particular article of food.)

If the coffeepot rattles back and forth on the stove, or a rocking chair moves along the floor as the woman rocks in it, she expects company before night and makes her household preparations accordingly. If she accidentally drops a bit of food on the floor, she knows that the visitor will be hungry. Children sometimes try to “fetch company” by running in one door and out another, or jumping out the window if the cabin

has only one door, which is frequently the case. If coffee grounds cling to the sides of the cup, high up, it is a sign that company is coming with good news.

When two roosters fight in the yard, it is said that two young men will soon arrive; if two hens fight, female visitors are expected. If a dog rolls on the ground before the door, the children watch him closely, knowing that when he gets up his nose will point in the direction from which a stranger is approaching.

If the housewife's nose itches, it means that some unexpected company is on the way. An itching on the right side of the nose indicates a man, an itching on the left side means a woman. Some hillfolk say that such a visitor will be poor or needy, according to the old rhyme:

If your nose itches, if your nose itches,
Somebody coming with a hole in his britches.

If the woman's right hand itches, it means that she will soon shake hands with an unexpected guest. When the joint of either thumb itches, she expects an unwelcome visitor within an hour or two.

A pretty girl who lives appropriately enough in a town called Blue Eye, Missouri, told me that "if your right eye itches you'll be lucky, but if your left eye itches it means a disappointment." Most Ozarkers don't see it this way, however—they believe that an itching of the right eye signifies bad luck, but when the left eye itches it means that good news is a-comin'. "Never in all my life," an old lady told me, "did my right eye itch *real bad*, without I got into some kind of trouble before the day was out!" Some people think that if your right ear burns, a man is talking about you, while if your left ear burns, a woman is taking your name in vain. Others say that an itching of the right ear means that someone is speaking well of you, but a tickling of the left ear means that someone is talking unfavorably about you. If your left hand suddenly begins to itch, the old folks say, you will shortly receive an unexpected present.

When a woman sneezes before breakfast, it means that company will arrive before noon. If she sneezes during breakfast, it is a sign that two or more people will leave the house before sundown. If she sneezes with food in her mouth, it means that she will hear of a death before twenty-four hours have passed. If she sneezes while telling a story, it is a true story—even though she may believe that it is a lie. Some people say that the girl who sneezes on Monday is sure to kiss a stranger before the week is out.

Mrs. Coral Almy Wilson, of Zinc, Arkansas, quotes the following sneezing-rhyme:

(Sneeze on Monday, sneeze for danger,
 Sneeze on Tuesday, kiss a stranger,
 Sneeze on Wednesday, sneeze for a letter,
 Sneeze on Thursday, sneeze for better,
 Sneeze on Friday, sneeze for sorrow,
 Sneeze on Saturday, a friend you seek,
 Sneeze on Sunday, the Devil will be with you all week.)

Here is a different version from Reynolds county, Missouri.

Sneeze on Monday, sneeze for fun,
 Sneeze on Tuesday, see someone,
 Sneeze on Wednesday, get a letter,
 Sneeze on Thursday, something better,
 Sneeze on Friday, sneeze for sorrow,
 Sneeze on Saturday, see your beau tomorrow,
 Sneeze on Sunday, the Devil will control you all week.

Mrs. Mabel E. Mueller, of Rolla, Missouri, tells me that the old-timers were careful never to let the supply of salt get too low—they believed that to run completely out of salt meant a whole year's poverty and privation for the family. Above all one should make sure that the salt shaker is full on New Year's Day, since this insures prosperity for the coming year.

When I first came to the Ozarks I heard several vulgar wisecracks about candle salt as somehow connected with the sex life of elderly persons; when I asked what candle salt was, they told

me that the old folks used to put salt on tallow candles in the belief that it made them last longer.

At table it is bad form to take a salt shaker from another person's hand, since this may bring evil fortune to both parties; the correct thing is to wait until your neighbor sets the salt shaker down on the table and withdraws his hand, then you are free to pick it up.

If one spills salt at the table it is said that there will be a violent family quarrel, ending only when someone pours water on the salt that has been spilled. Some folks try to "take the cuss off" by throwing a pinch of salt into the fire, or over the left shoulder, but most of the old-timers regard this as childish—the only thing that really helps is to pour water on the spilled salt.

It is bad luck to lend salt, often causing some sort of a "fraction" between the lender and the borrower. The mountain housewife seldom borrows salt if she can possibly avoid doing so, and if she does borrow the stuff, is careful never to pay it back. When a woman borrows a cupful of salt she replaces it with an equal amount of sugar, or molasses, or some other household staple—never salt.

Many people think it is a bad omen to spill pepper, and that the person who does so will have a serious quarrel with one of his best friends.

When a woman burns light bread, so that the crust is black, it is a sign that she will fly into a rage before the day is over. The person who eats this blackened bread will have good luck, however, and among other blessings will never be troubled by intestinal worms.

Some people say that when a woman burns pancakes or biscuits it means that her *old man* is angry. There are many jokes and wisecracks about this notion. I once boarded at the home of a widder woman, and when she burnt the biscuits one morning another lodger cackled: "Well, I don't know which one is the maddest, Randolph or old man Miller!" The widder woman

scowled at this, which she regarded as a very coarse and vulgar remark, and an outrageous falsehood besides, since neither Mr. Miller nor myself had been overintimate with our hostess.

Among the real old-timers, when one gives a neighbor something to eat or drink, the housewife returns the vessel unwashed, since to send it home clean is a sign of an early quarrel with the donor. I have known women in the hill country deliberately to smear a pot or kettle before returning it, in case the vessel had been washed by mistake.

It is very bad luck to give away yeast. A careful housewife doesn't like to lend yeast, either. If one *must* get yeast from a neighbor, it is best to buy it. Women who would be insulted by an offer to pay for any other article of food are glad to accept a penny or a nickel for yeast.

If two persons use the same towel at the same time there is sure to be a quarrel, or some sort of difficulty:

Wash an' dry together,
Weep an' cry together.

In case two persons *should* unthinkingly start to dry their hands on the same towel, they hasten to twist the cloth between them—this is supposed to take the cuss off'n it, in a measure at least.

When two friends are talking together, and a third person suddenly comes between them, they instantly turn away from the intruder for a moment, so as to prevent a quarrel—not a quarrel with the third party, but between themselves. May Stafford Hilburn refers to something of this sort when she says cryptically that “girls turned their backs to each other *to ward off an untoward event* if a third party stepped between them during a conversation.”¹

If two friends are walking side by side, and “unthoughtedly” allow a tree to come between them, it means that they will have a serious quarrel soon. One way to break this spell is for both parties to cry instantly and in concert “Bread-and-Butter!”

¹ *Missouri Magazine* (October, 1933), p. 14.

In Galena, Missouri, some children insist that one of the persons involved should say "Salt-and-Pepper" instead. Another way is for them to touch hands and hook their little fingers together while they chant a certain verse—it is very bad luck to repeat the verse at any other time, so I am unable to obtain the words of it.

No hillman would think of giving a steel blade to a friend—such a gift is sure to sever their friendship. Whenever a knife changes hands, it must be paid for, even if the sum is merely nominal. I have seen a salesman, a graduate of the University of Missouri, present his son with a valuable hunting knife—but he never let it out of his hand till the boy had given him a penny.

The accidental crossing of two case knives at the table must be avoided, as it is likely to cause a desperate fight between members of the family; if knives *are* crossed inadvertently, they must be touched only by the same person who crossed them. If an Ozark woman finds a pair of scissors open, she closes them instantly—if she fails to do this she will quarrel with her dearest friend before the moon changes. If one finds an open clasp knife he snaps the blade shut immediately; if it is a sheath knife of the rigid kind, he thrusts the blade into the ground at once.

A thoughtful hillman is careful to leave a neighbor's house by the same door through which he entered, knowing that to violate this simple rule may cause a serious quarrel. The host, on his part, always politely turns away as a guest leaves his cabin—if he were to watch a departing friend out of sight he feels that they might never meet again.

If the fire spits and sputters without any apparent cause, it means that two members of the family will quarrel within twenty-four hours.

It is very bad luck to return to the house for anything which has been forgotten, or to come back to the house when you have started to go somewhere. If you *must* return, however,

always make a cross in the dust of the road and spit on the cross, before setting out again. Some old-timers insist that the cross must be marked on the doorstep. Other people take the cuss off by sitting down in a chair and counting ten, or sitting down and making a wish, before leaving the cabin for the second time. Some say one has only to sit down for a moment and spit three times on the floor. Others think it is necessary to walk backward out of the house, while counting "ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, AMEN!"

When a hillman starts out on a journey which he regards as important, he is careful never to look back as he leaves his own premises.

Some people won't drive down a road if they see a little whirlwind in it—a journey which takes one through a whirlwind is always unlucky.

It is bad luck to close a gate which one finds open, and the mountain man who inadvertently does so is often quite upset; some hillfolk, starting on a journey, regard this matter of the gate as such an evil omen that they postpone the trip until another day.

I once knew a man near Pine Bluff, Arkansas, who threw little pieces of tobacco into the river whenever he was about to start on a journey. He was a white man, of some education, but he had learned this propitiation of the river gods from Negroes, I think.

When you meet a cross-eyed woman at a place where the road forks, always spit in your hand, or on the ground, and mark a cross in the saliva. One fellow told me that he always spit in his hat on such occasions and "let the cross go by." Some say it is well to cross one's fingers and count ten backward, also.

When starting to visit someone, if you meet a flock of geese you'll be a welcome guest, but if you find hogs in the road you will not be so well received.

To encounter a red-haired girl on a white horse is always a good omen; to meet a red-haired girl on a white *mule* is superlative.

Some people of Polk county, Arkansas, believe that it is bad luck to ride in a vehicle painted green. When a local sportsman suffered a series of accidents on the new highway, Mrs. Emma Dusenbury, of Mena, Arkansas, was heard to ask: "Well, what could he expect, with that old green car?"

Never let anyone step directly into your tracks in mud or snow, for this may cause headaches or even blindness. It is wise not to step in anybody else's tracks, either.

When you find a pin in the road, never fail to pick it up:

See a pin, pick it up,
All day long, good luck;
See a pin, leave it lay,
Have bad luck all day.

Another view is that if the head of the pin is toward the finder he will have good luck, but if the point is toward him it means that he has a dangerous enemy to contend with.

To find a hairpin in the path means that you will soon meet a new friend. If the prongs of the hairpin are of equal length, the new friend will be a girl; if one prong is a bit longer than the other, it's a boy.

Never pick up a spoon lying in the road. Women who are unlucky in their household affairs sometimes throw away a spoon, believing that their bad luck will pass to the person who picks it up.

Many of the old settlers say that it is good luck to find a rock with a hole in it, but that such a stone found in running water is superlucky. At several homes in the Ozarks I have seen little boxes containing stones with holes in them, placed under the porch or the wooden doorstep. Near Marvel Cave, in Taney county, Missouri, the Lynch sisters who own the cavern used to have a lot of these stones strung on wire; when Nancy Clemens

and I visited the place in 1936, Miss Miriam Lynch took down one of these wires and gravely presented each of us with a lucky stone. Some say that lucky stones keep off witches and evil spirits; others tie one of the stones to a bedpost in the belief that it somehow prevents nightmare. Near Harrison, Arkansas, children are told that it is good luck to find a round stone with a hole in it, but that such a stone must be thrown away at once and never carried in the pocket.

Do not pick up a black or dark-colored button in the road. There is some tale about such buttons being left by people who think they are sick because of witchcraft, and that the sickness will go to whoever picks up the button. I haven't been able to get any definite information on this. Everybody agrees, however, that it is *some* sort of bad luck to pick up a black button in the road. Children near Southwest City, Missouri, say that when you find a button in your path it means that you will soon receive a letter with as many pages as there are holes in the button. Asked if they picked up these "letter buttons" the children answered that they always picked up white buttons and carried them home, but that "Mommy don't want no *black* buttons."

A button received as a gift is always lucky, no matter what the color. Years ago, many an Ozark girl collected buttons from her friends and strung them together into a sort of necklace called a charm string. A charm string not only brought good fortune to the owner but also served as a sort of memory book for women who could not read—one button recalled a beloved aunt, another a friend's wedding, still another a dance or a quilting party or an apple-peelin' or some other pleasant occasion. Nancy Clemens, of Springfield, Missouri, says that the craze for charm strings once reached a point in Douglas county, Missouri, where girls had to borrow pins to fasten their dresses before they could go home from a party. May Stafford Hilburn remarks that "each donor of a choice button came under the

charm, and nothing could break the friendship between that person and the owner of the charm string.”²

Many hillfolk think that the man who finds a horseshoe with the closed end toward him will do well to “leave it lay.” If the open end is toward the finder, he sometimes spits on it and throws it over his left shoulder, a procedure which is supposed to bring good fortune. Or he may place it in a tree or on a fence, saying: “Hang thar, all my bad luck!” In this case, whoever touches the hanging horseshoe falls heir to the misfortune of the man who placed it there. In some parts of the Ozarks one sees dozens of bad-luck horseshoes hanging in trees along the roads, but no real old-timer will touch one of them for love or money. Near the village of Day, Missouri, I have noticed that even my old friend “Doc” Keithley walks wide of these horseshoes, although he is scornful of most taboos and superstitions.

Members of the older generation feel strongly that cornbread must be broken—it is very bad luck to cut it with a knife. Some old-timers are much upset to see a stranger, even in a hotel, cutting cornbread. I have known several who refused to eat at the table where such a thing occurred but got up and left at once. A “furrin” schoolmarm in McDonald county, Missouri, having her first meal at the boardinghouse, offended everybody by cutting a piece of cornpone. “Dang it, she’s sp’iled the bread!” muttered one young man, jumping up from the table.

I know several families near Big Flat, Arkansas, who have a strange notion that one should never allow a piece of bread to fall upon the ground—the idea is that to do so will somehow injure the next crop of corn.

There is an old saying that eating bread crusts brings good luck in fishing and hunting, and also makes one’s hair curly. I think, however, that this is told to children in order to cajole them into eating the crusts and is not taken very seriously by adults.

When a small boy plays at stirring the fire, it is a sign that

² *Missouri Magazine* (December, 1933), p. 11.

he will urinate in his bed that night. This old saying prevents many a little boy from messing with the fire, since whenever he goes near it the other children begin to giggle. People in Baxter county, Arkansas, tell a long story about a girl who was sitting up with her beau, while her little brother kept running in and stirring the fire; this was regarded as very embarrassing, and the poor girl's friends "plagued her plumb to death 'bout it."

To eat or drink at the same time one urinates or defecates is very bad luck, and I have known children to be severely whipped when the mother caught them eating candy in the privy. The child who eats anything under such conditions is said to be "feedin' the Devil an' starvin' God."

There is a persistent notion that Providence is somehow tempted by stepping on cracks in the floor. Some people think that a boy who fails to "miss the cracks" in the schoolhouse steps will fail in his lessons that day and probably be punished for it. Other hillfolk say that by stepping on cracks a boy does some injury to his parents, and I have heard children quote the rhyme:

Put your foot onto a crack
An' you will bust your mother's back.

It is bad luck to put the left shoe on before the right, or to put the left foot out of bed first in the morning. Nearly everybody in the Ozark backwoods is familiar with these notions, but no one has ever told me just what will happen to a man if he should violate such rules of conduct.

A woman mixing a cake always stirs the batter in one direction—if you stir it first one way and then another you'll spoil the cake sure. Another thing to remember is that the person who begins the stirring must stay with it and complete the job, because if two persons try to divide the labor they may as well throw the cake away. Mrs. W. D. Mathes of Galena, Missouri, one of the best pastry cooks in the Ozarks, tells me that cakes must be stirred by hand; she has tried several sorts of electric mixers but never had any luck with them. It is said

that a good cook never allows anyone else to stir the dough that *she* is to bake, but what is supposed to result from the violation of this rule I have never been able to learn.

One often encounters an ancient notion that a woman rendering out lard will never have any luck unless she stirs it with a sassafras "bat," and I have known women to walk quite a distance in order to get a proper stick for this purpose; some say that the bark of the sassafras actually flavors the lard or keeps it from becoming rancid.

There are several interesting superstitions about soft soap, which is made by cooking lye with waste fats from the kitchen. Lye is obtained by pouring water through wood ashes, which are carefully saved in a wooden trough called an ash hopper. Some old-timers say that it is impossible to make lye from the ashes of cherry wood; it is said that the remains of a small twig from a cherry tree, or even a single chip that got into the fire by mistake, will ruin a whole hopperful of good ashes.

Nearly all of the old-timers think that soap will not "make" unless it is stirred by a member of the family—"a strange hand skeers the soap," as the old saying goes. Some believe that soap cooked in March thickens quicker and is somehow superior to that produced at any other season. In the dark of the moon, soap "biles high round the edges an' low in the middle," but in the light of the moon it "spatters up high in the middle of the kettle." Soap made in the increase of the moon is light in color; that made in the decrease of the moon is considerably darker. I believe that the majority of soapmakers prefer to work in the dark of the moon, but there is no unanimity about this. "You can make good soap when the moon's a-fullin', or you can make it right *on* the full," said an old woman in Stone county, Missouri, "but don't never try to cook soap when the moon's a-wanin', or it won't be no good at all."

In making vinegar from molasses and rain water, the Ozark housewife hastens fermentation by putting in nine grains of corn, which she *names* for the meanest, sourest persons of her

acquaintance. This is usually regarded as a sort of joke, but I know many women who never fail to do it, even while they laugh at the idea that it really helps the vinegar. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, Mincy, Missouri, tells me that she never troubled to name the grains of corn, but was always careful to put in nine grains, no more and no less. It was mighty good vinegar too, she says.

Some hillfolk believe that there is no use in trying to make cider or wine when the moon is waning—it will turn sour every time. Others tell me that the best cider is made in clear weather, with the wind a-blowin' from the west, and the moon has nothing to do with it. There is an old proverb to the effect that the best way to keep cider sweet is to drown a water snake in it, but this is not to be taken literally. Who wants to keep cider sweet, anyhow?

Ordinary sauerkraut can be put up without any reference to the moon's phases, or the signs of the zodiac. What is called turnipkraut, however, must be made in one of the "fruitful signs," after the full of the moon; the brine comes to the top and runs over, if you try to make turnipkraut in the increase of the moon.

It is generally believed that a menstruating woman can perform all of her ordinary household tasks save one—she can't pickle cucumbers. I have known women who laughed at most of the backwoods superstitions yet were convinced that there was something in this idea. One girl told me that she and her sister had tried it out repeatedly, and that the pickles prepared by a girl who was menstruating were always soft or flabby, never properly crisp.

Akin to this is the notion that a "bad woman can't make good applesauce"—it will always be mushy, and not sufficiently tart. This is so generally accepted in some sections as to have passed into the language, and the mere statement that a certain woman's applesauce is no good is generally understood as a slighting reference to her morals.

Many apparently insignificant actions must be avoided

simply because they are regarded as unlucky, although no specific penalty is attached to them. For example, it is bad luck to sit on a trunk, or for two persons to sit in one chair at the same time, or to rock a rocking chair when there is nobody in it, or to enter a strange house by the back door, or to count the cars in a train, or to throw water out of a window, or to sleep too near a spring, or to set two lights on one shelf, or to put a stamp upside down on a letter, or to tell a dream at the table, or to begin any important task on a holiday which falls in the light of the moon. Nobody knows just what would happen if one should violate these "chimney-corner laws," but many hillfolk avoid doing so whenever possible, anyhow.

To turn a chair around with one leg as a pivot is always bad luck, and leads to family quarrels. Otto Ernest Rayburn quotes a backwoods girl: "If anybody twirled a chair on one of its legs, we knew father would come home mad as a wet hen about something."³

The typical hillman is upset by any trifling piece of ill luck which happens on his birthday, knowing that one who is unfortunate on this particular day is likely to have bad luck all year.

It is unlucky to cut your fingernails on Sunday—you'll have a pain in the neck for seven days, or the Devil will rule your house all week, or something of the sort. It's bad luck to trim fingernails on Friday, too. Monday is the best day for this, and it is said that people who cut their fingernails on Monday will always have plenty of money.

White spots on fingernails are supposed to represent lies, and little boys often hide their hands to avoid betraying falsehoods. However, there is a fortunetelling rhyme children use when counting these white spots:

A gift, a ghost, a friend, a foe,
A letter to come, a journey to go.

Some people say that a large white spot means a journey—

³ *Ozark Country*, p. 156.

when the spot grows to the end of the nail, you will start on a trip to some distant place.

It is unwise to laugh early in the morning, particularly before getting out of bed. There is an old saying that the woman who laughs before breakfast will cry before supper. Another version lingers in the jingle:

Laugh before it's light,
You'll cry before it's night.

Singing before breakfast is also discouraged in the familiar verse:

Sing before you eat,
You'll cry before you sleep.

The child who sings in bed, or at the table, is likely to bring misfortune upon the whole family and come to a bad end as indicated in the old rhyme:

Sing at the table,
Sing in bed,
Bugger-man will get you
When you are dead!

It is also very bad luck to whistle or sing while urinating or defecating, and the child who does so is certain to get a whipping before sundown, but there isn't any little verse about this so far as I know.

There is some sort of sign in the flame of a candle, which indicates that a letter is coming. While the "letter sign" lasts, a girl who spies it begins to count, rapping on the table with each numeral, and thus determines how many days will pass before the letter arrives. Otto Ernest Rayburn mentions this but doesn't make it clear just what happens in the candle flame.⁴ There is an old song entitled "The Letter in the Candle," which apparently refers to this business.

The woman who suddenly finds a large hole in her stocking regards it as a sign that there is a letter waiting for her at

⁴ *Rayburn's Roadside Chats*, p. 23.

the post office. When a hillman sees a big spider exactly in the middle of the path, he knows that he'll get a letter within a few days. If coffee grounds cling to the sides of a cup, near the bottom, one may expect a letter with good news in it.

When a woman is opening a jar of fruit, and some of the juice spatters into her face, it means that she will hear some welcome news very soon. It is also a sign of good tidings to drop a glass vessel without breaking it. If a man gets charcoal into his hair, accidentally, his friends assure him that he is about to receive a letter containing money.

Mrs. Coral Almy Wilson, of Zinc, Arkansas, reports that her neighbors pay close attention to sweat flies, which they call news bees. A yellow news bee buzzing round one's head means that good news is coming, while a black news bee is a sign of bad tidings.

If a woman accidentally splits a wooden clothespin, so that it falls in two separate pieces, she may expect some bad news from her husband's people.

If there happens to be a snowfall in May, the housewife is supposed to melt some of the snow in the fireplace—a sure way to kill all the fleas and bedbugs in the house. The same happy result is said to be obtained by burning a dirty dishrag the first time you hear it thunder in March. Some Ozark women scatter fresh walnut or butternut leaves about their houses to repel insects, but I can't see that it does any good. Burning old shoes on the hearth is a well-known method of driving snakes out of a house; a schoolmaster who has been to college and made a particular study of reptiles tells me that there may be some truth in this, but I suspect it is merely another superstition.

When backwoods people are troubled by fleas, they just bring a sheep into the cabin for a few days; the fleas all flock to the animal's wool and are thus disposed of. I knew a man in Springfield, Missouri, who wanted to put a sheep into the basement of his daughter's fine new house, but she was too highfalutin; said she'd rather put up with fleas in the bedroom

than have a damned stinking sheep in the cellar. A smart fellow from Lincoln, Arkansas, tells me that there are never any fleas in a shepherd's house, but where a farmer has lots of hogs and no sheep, you'll find fleas all over the place.

A mountain girl who wants a new dress has only to catch a butterfly of the desired color and crush it between her teeth; she mutters some sort of a charm, too, while the insect is in her mouth, but I have never been able to obtain the magic formula. It is said also that the woman who shakes her apron at the new moon, under certain conditions, will get a new dress very shortly—but this latter observation is regarded as somehow improper, and I am not certain just what is meant by it. I have heard allusions to this saying many times, however, all the way from Hot Springs, Arkansas, to Poplar Bluff, Missouri, so I record it here for what it may be worth.

Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, says that the old women she knew as a girl were very careful never to make what is called a "diamond fold" in ironing table linen or bed sheets—anything folded "diamond-shaped" is likely to bring bad luck on the entire household.

Handwoven coverlets and the like should always be washed in snow water, according to the old grannies; some say to ease the spirits of the dead women who made them years ago; others contend more practically that snow water does not cause the old homemade colors to run or fade. Many hillfolk believe that it is bad luck to mend an old quilt or comforter by patching, although there's no harm in darning small rips or tears.

The Ozark housewife seldom begins to make a garment on Friday—never unless she is sure that she can finish it the same day. Many a mountain man is reluctant to start any sort of job on Saturday, in the belief that he will "piddle around" for six additional Saturdays before he gets it done.

A woman who breaks a needle while making a garment for her own use is horrified, fearing that she will never live to wear it out. If the garment is intended for somebody else it doesn't

matter at all, as in that case the broken needle has no sinister significance.

A mountain woman who sews after sunset, or who pours water on a window sill, will be poverty-stricken all her life. A basting inadvertently left in a garment is also a sign of poverty; some people think it means that the cloth is not paid for.

It is very unfortunate for a woman to button a new garment before it has been worn; a newly made shirt should be buttoned first on the person who is to wear it, but if this person is not available, button it around somebody else.

If you put on a garment wrong side out, it means good luck, but you must wear it that way until bedtime. There are many tales of men who refused to do this and were carried home dead before the day was over. It is not uncommon for girls in high school and even in college to attend classes with their petticoats wrong side out because of this superstition.

Many of the old folks figure that May 1 is the proper day to shed heavy winter underwear. Children begin to go barefoot on May 1 too, for the first time that summer. "If you start on May Day," an old woman told me, "you can go bar'foot plumb till snow flies, an' it won't hurt ye a bit!"

Winter clothing is packed away with fresh sassafras leaves, which are said to keep out insects much better than mothballs. The sassafras leaves don't work, however, unless a certain secret sayin' is repeated as the clothes are being packed.

Every old quiltmaker knows that when a quilt is once stretched on the frame it must never be turned around; if it is turned, at least one of the quilters will lose her skill, or her eyesight will fail, or her hands become paralyzed.

It is bad luck to burn floor sweepings or shavings that have been produced inside the house. An old-time Ozark housewife seldom sweeps her cabin after dark, and she never sweeps anything out at the front door. Otto Ernest Rayburn observes that "one of the most progressive merchants in Arkansas will not permit his janitor to sweep dirt out through the door after

dark.”⁵ A woman in Madison county, Arkansas, told me that ghosts and spirits are accustomed to stand about near cabins at night, and it is dangerous to offend these supernatural beings by throwing dirt in their faces. Sweepings are best gathered up and carried out of the house or swept down through a wide crack in the floor so as to fall beneath the cabin, although there are hillfolk who see no harm in sweeping dirt out at the *back* door—always in the daytime, of course. Some people say that once you begin to sweep a room, it is bad luck to stop before the job is done. Many women are careful never to sweep the house on Monday, even in broad daylight, as this is likely to sweep away the family’s “money luck” for the entire week.

Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, Mincy, Missouri, tells me that no true hillbilly ever burns walnut shells. If a walnut shell is inadvertently cast into the fire, some member of the family hastens to snatch it out at any cost.

The hulls or skins of certain vegetables, on the other hand, are always burned, never disposed of in any other manner. I have known households where the women made a great show of saving onion peelings, which were carefully gathered up and burned in the fireplace or the cookstove. One woman told me that people who throw onion peel out on the ground are likely to suffer some financial reverses, and that she knew personally of a case in which carelessness in this matter caused a Civil War veteran to be deprived of his pension.

Never look directly into a fire that is being kindled; if you do it will not burn properly and may bring bad luck to the whole household besides. Some hill people become quite irritated if a guest persists in staring straight into a stove or fireplace, when it is not burning well. To do so is very bad manners and somehow appears to cast discredit upon the family.

It is said that lightning often strikes a cookstove but has never been known to strike one with a fire in it. In Baxter county, Arkansas, several persons warned me never to sit in the “dog

⁵ *Ozark Country*, p. 146.

run"—the covered passage between the two rooms of a log house—during an electrical storm; it seems that lightning often goes through such a passage, killing dogs which have taken refuge there, without damaging the house proper. I know many backwoods families who always try to drive the hounds away from their cabins during a thunderstorm, in the belief that "a dog's tail draws lightnin'."

In some sections of Arkansas there are people who bury the entrails of a black hen under the hearth on "Old Christmas." This is said to protect the house against destruction by lightning or fire. A gentleman at Hot Springs, Arkansas, told me that people used to do this when he was a boy, but added contemptuously that it was "just an old nigger superstition," and that he did not believe it was taken seriously by any white people nowadays. However, I know that some "peckerwood families" did bury chicken guts under their hearths as recently as 1935, not far from the enlightened metropolis of Hot Springs.

A lot of backwoods families are very careful not to use the wood of a lightnin'-struck tree for fuel, in the belief that this renders the cabin more likely to be struck by lightning.

Many hillmen believe that black walnut trees draw lightning and will not go near them in a storm. It is quite common for hillfolk to cut down all the walnuts, even little ones, that grow near their cabins.

When lightning strikes the ground, some woodsmen pretend to look around for the thunderbolt, which is supposed to be a piece of iron about three feet long, forked at one end. These thunderbolts are said to be used in making fish gigs, and a finger ring hammered out of thunderbolt iron is a sure cure for rheumatism. I have myself seen, in Washington county, Arkansas, an old iron ring which the owner told me was made of a thunderbolt recovered in Kentucky before 1815.

I have met hillmen who think that it is bad luck to use the word *thunder*, particularly during an electrical storm. They feel that people who keep talking about thunder are likely to

get struck by lightning. Instead of saying thunder, they use some familiar circumlocution, such as "the 'tater wagon is a-rollin'," or "they're crossin' the old bridge now." Some Ozark farmers deliberately cross their "galluses" on stormy days to guard against lightning, but the man who gets his galluses crossed accidentally, when he puts on his trousers in the morning, will have bad luck all day.

It is very generally believed that thunder and lightning cause milk to sour in a few hours, even in the coldest weather. This can be prevented, however, by putting a rusty nail in the crock or pan. A man who was looked upon as exceptionally intelligent and "well posted," who served several terms in the Missouri state legislature, assured me that this was no superstition at all but a well-established scientific datum, adding that the rusty nail "works somethin' like a lightnin'-rod."

In November, 1943, a big flock of wild geese was struck by lightning at Galena, Missouri, and about three hundred of the birds fell near the village. People went out and picked them up. I got one myself, which we roasted next day, and found it very good indeed. Many people in the vicinity ate them, with no bad results so far as I could find out. But several families would not touch these geese, saying that it was dangerous to eat any creature killed by electricity.

It is very bad luck to bring cedar boughs or mistletoe into the house, except during the Christmas season. Mrs. Isabel Spradley, Van Buren, Arkansas, says that every bit of green stuff must be out of the house before midnight on January 5, or some unspeakable calamity will overtake the whole family. Many old people feel that it is better not to have mistletoe in the house at all. It is always bad luck to carry peacock feathers into a cabin, and several hillfolk actually refused to sleep in my cottage because an old-fashioned fan made of peacock feathers was nailed to the wall as a decoration.

Never carry a hoe or a mattock into the house, even to prevent the tool from being stolen. If a hillman does bring a hoe into his

cabin by mistake, he must carry it out again at once, walking backward. Most people agree, however, that there is no harm in keeping hoes or mattocks under a porch, or even beneath the floor of the cabin itself.

It is always bad luck to place a hat or a shoe or a rifle on a bed. Mountain men sleep with pistols under their pillows, however, without any bad results. Never place a shoe or shoes on the table in a hillman's cabin; this applies even to brand-new shoes in a box, or in a sealed mailing carton just arrived from Montgomery Ward or Sears and Roebuck.

The mountain housewife is careful never to drop a broom so that it falls flat on the floor, and it is doubly unfortunate for a woman to step over a broom handle. Some people say that when a girl, even a very young girl baby, steps over a broom it is a sign that she will be a slovenly housekeeper all her life.

A person may go barefoot or shod anywhere, but it is tempting fate to go out of doors in one's stocking feet, or to walk even in the house with one shoe off and one shoe on.

Hillfolk seldom remodel their houses, except to add a lean-to or "shed room" when an increasing family demands more space. It is bad luck to cut a doorway between two rooms after the house is built, and the average backwoods family will not do this under any condition.

A hillman courts misfortune if he moves his family from one house to another in the dark of the moon, and I have known otherwise intelligent people to put up with a deal of inconvenience rather than make such a move. Even in a case where a house is destroyed by fire, some hillfolk prefer to camp under a ledge, or sleep in a wagon, until such time as the moon is "favorable"—that is, at the appearance of the new moon. The idea is that the family's prosperity will increase as the moon waxes.

In building a new dwelling, the old-time hillman was careful to use a few timbers from an older building. A house composed

entirely of new lumber is sure to bring bad luck, usually sickness or death, upon the persons who live in it.

If you find your initials in spider webs near the door of a new home, it is a sign that you will be lucky as long as you live there. No furniture or supplies should be carried into a new house until the salt and pepper are in their proper places on a shelf. An empty hornets' nest is hung up in the loft of nearly every old-time mountain cabin, and I have seen such a nest tied to the rafters of a new house that had not yet been occupied; some people say that this brings good fortune to the whole household, particularly in connection with childbirth and other sexual matters.

Most people think that it is good luck if a strange black cat visits the house, but very bad luck if the animal takes up its permanent abode there. To *carry* a stray cat into a house brings bad luck, and children are often warned against this folly. It is always bad luck to kill a cat, but the hillfolk do not hesitate to drive a cat away by all sorts of cruel treatment. One of my neighbors in McDonald county, Missouri, would not kill a cat which had annoyed him, but he chopped off one of its feet and threw the animal out into the snow. Whatever happens, *never* burn a dead cat; bury it deep in the ground, or throw it into a running stream.

A few hillfolk say that it is good luck to see a white cat on the road; there is some difference of opinion about this, but everybody agrees that it is a very bad sign when a black cat crosses ahead of a traveler. Many Ozark people turn back or detour to avoid crossing a black cat's trail. I have seen countrymen near Little Rock, Arkansas, take off their hats and turn 'em around on their heads, after seeing a black cat in the path. Black cats are worst, of course. But many people are a bit leery of all cats, particularly on the highways. "I'd just as soon there wouldn't be *no* cat runnin' acrost the road ahead of me," said an old man near Elsey, Missouri, in 1944.

It is very bad luck to be photographed with a cat. I was at Rose O'Neill's place in Taney county, Missouri, when a photographer came out from St. Louis to make some pictures of Miss O'Neill and her house. He took one photo which showed a group of us in the O'Neill library, with the family cat crouching on a table. This was later published in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, and I showed the paper to one of the neighbors. "God Almighty," she shivered, "I wouldn't have set in that there picture for a hundred acres o' land!"

A girl who drops the comb while combing her hair is doomed to some sort of disappointment, but she may "take the cuss off" in a measure by counting backward from ten as she retrieves the comb. To open an umbrella inside a house is tempting Providence, but very few of the real backwoods women own umbrellas anyhow, so it doesn't matter much.

It is said that misfortunes always go in threes, and this is especially true of household mishaps. The housewife who smashes a dish, or burns the cornbread, or barks her shin on the oven door generally expects two more minor accidents before the spell is broken.

The woman who happens to get her first glimpse of the new moon unobstructed by foliage—"cl'ar o' brush," as the old folks put it—considers herself lucky. "Everyone knows," writes May Stafford Hilburn, "that to see the new moon through the leafy branches of a tree means bad luck throughout the month. It still gives me cold shivers to see the moon behind treetops, and I hastily close my eyes, remembering an old 'charm' of childhood, clasp my hands over my heart and say 'bad luck, vanish!' Then I feel better."⁶ A housewife who sees the new moon through a windowpane fears that she will break a valued dish, or some other piece of household equipment, before the moon is new again.

Some of my present associates do not profess religion and never go to church but are nevertheless convinced that it is very

⁶ *Missouri Magazine* (September, 1933), p. 20.

bad luck to do any work about the house on the Sabbath. An old man who is known all over the country as an outspoken free-thinker told me soberly: "I don't hold with this here church business, an' I don't never feed no preachers. But I believe that if a man works six days a week he'll have plenty, and if the same man works seven days a week he's liable to starve out!" Another neighbor assured me that a roof mended during the Christmas holidays will leak worse than ever, and that a spring or well cleaned out on Sunday is likely to go dry.

A great many of the old-timers call December 25 "New Christmas" in order to distinguish it from "Old Christmas," which falls on January 6. They tell me that in pioneer days nearly everybody celebrated Christmas twelve days later than they do now. Old folks say that elderberry always sprouts on the eve of Old Christmas—even if the ground is frozen hard, you'll find the little green shoots under the snow. A man at Pineville, Missouri, told me that bees in a hive always buzz very loudly exactly at midnight on the eve of Old Christmas; if several bee gums are set close together, the "Old Christmas hum" can be heard some distance away. This shows that January 6, not December 25, is the *real* Christmas.

Mrs. Isabel Spradley, Van Buren, Arkansas, tells me that the old folks in her neighborhood sometimes call January 6 "Green Christmas" or the "Twelfth Night." It is on January 5, the eve of Old Christmas, that the cattle are supposed to kneel down and bellow, exactly at midnight, in honor of the birth of Jesus. Some say that the critters have the gift of speech on this night, so that they may pray aloud in English. Mrs. Spradley quotes an old woman with reference to the family water supply: "Our well had a charm put on it *the night the cows talked*, and I wouldn't clean it out for silver!" I don't know what the *charm* is that this old woman referred to, but there are people in Arkansas today who say that the water in certain wells turns into wine at midnight on January 5.

It is said that on the morning of Old Christmas there are

two daybreaks instead of one—I have talked with men who claim to have seen this phenomenon. Boys born on Old Christmas are supposed to be very lucky in raising cattle; some say that these “Old Christmas children” can actually talk the cow brute’s language.

There are old men in the Ozarks today who swear that they have actually seen cattle kneel down and bellow on Old Christmas eve. But skepticism sometimes prevails, even in the Ozarks. A neighbor tells me that when he was a boy he watched repeatedly to see his father’s oxen kneel but was always disappointed. His parents told him, however, that the presence of a human observer broke the spell, and that cattle must always salute the Saviour in private. “But I just drawed a idy right thar,” he added thoughtfully, “that they warn’t nothin’ to it, nohow.”

In some settlements this notion about the cattle kneeling has shifted from Old Christmas to New Year’s. Mr. Elbert Short, of Crane, Missouri, told me that his sister slipped out to the barn one New Year’s Eve “to see the critters kneel down and talk.” At exactly twelve o’clock one old cow fell on her knees and let out two or three low moans. A moment later another animal knelt—but with this the girl suddenly became frightened and ran back to the house. Another funny thing, says Mr. Short, is that if you go out before midnight on New Year’s Eve and cut an elderbush off flush with the ground, by sunrise it will have “pooched up” at least two inches.

Every backwoods family, even if no member of the group is able to read, has a calendar and probably an almanac as well, in order to keep track of the signs and phases of the moon. But it is very bad luck to hang up a calendar or almanac before sunup on New Year’s Day, and I have known children to be severely punished for doing so.

An unexpected visitor on January 1 signifies that many others will come to the house during the year; this prediction is often regarded with mixed emotions, since hillfolk do not care for



saying: "On New Year's you just eat black-eyed peas, with a dime under your plate, an' wear a pair of red garters, an' you'll have good luck the whole year."

A dish known as hoppinjohn, which consists of black-eyed peas cooked with hog jowl, is the traditional New Year's dinner in many well-to-do families who would not eat such coarse food on any other day. Mr. Walter Ridgeway, of West Plains, Missouri, always contended that this custom began in Civil War days; some planters who had nothing to eat but black-eyed peas at a New Year's dinner were lucky enough to regain their fortunes, and later on they somehow connected this good luck with the New Year's hoppinjohn. Other hillfolk, however, have told me that the custom of eating black-eyed peas on New Year's is much older than the War between the States. The Ridgeways say that the name hoppinjohn originated when a guest named John was invited to "hop in" and help himself to the food.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Ozarkers' New Year's behavior is their reluctance to allow anything to be taken out of the house on January 1. I once knew a woman who absent-mindedly carried a bucket of ashes out on New Year's morning; she was shaken almost to the point of hysteria, and the whole family was horrified, although nobody seemed to know just what specific calamity was supposed to result.

Many broad-minded modernists pretend that there is no harm in carrying something out, provided you are careful to take something else in; thus it's permissible to throw out a pan of potato peelings if one immediately lugs in a bucket of water or an armload of wood. The real old-timers figure it is safer not to carry *anything* out of the cabin on January 1, but to pack in as much stuff as possible. Some old folks take this so seriously that they will not allow anyone to enter on that day without depositing something, even if it is only a few walnuts or a handful of chips. This precaution, according to the old tradition, insures a whole year of plenty for the people who live in that

house. "It aint much trouble, just for one day," an old man said as he insisted that I get a stick from the woodpile before coming into his shanty, "an' me an' Maw don't aim to take no chances."

