



6. Mountain Medicine

Regular physicians are not very numerous in the Ozarks, and a great many "chills-an'-fever doctors" are practicing illegally. Most of these are men who had a year or two of training at some Southern medical college, but others have just "picked up doctorin'" by assisting some old physician whose practice they have inherited. The "chills-an'-fever doctors" save the overworked M.D. many a long night ride and are frequently protected and advised by the medical profession. The average hillman, of course, knows nothing of this distinction between qualified and unqualified physicians. He calls 'em all "Doc" and lets it go at that.

Besides the regular and irregular physicians, who live mostly in the villages, the backwoods country swarms with "yarb doctors" and "rubbin' doctors" and "nature doctors" who have never studied medicine at all. Some of these nature doctors are women, others are preachers who do a little doctorin' on the side, and many of them are unable to read or write. They rely mainly upon herbs, barks, roots, and the like. For internal medication these substances are steeped in hot water, and "horse doses" of the resulting teas are administered at frequent intervals. In some cases the tea is boiled down to a thick paste called ooze, or mixed with strained honey to make a syrup. The yarb doctors are great believers in poultices, which are applied both hot and cold for all sorts of ailments. Doubtless some of these homely remedies have real value and may be listed in the *Pharmacopoeia* for all I know. The hillfolk, however, seem to feel that the efficacy of a treatment varies directly with its

unpleasantness; bitter tea is always best, and the more a poultice hurts the better they like it.

"God Almighty never put us here without a remedy for every ailment," said old Jimmy Van Zandt of Kirbyville, Missouri. "Out in the woods there's plants that will cure all kinds of sickness, and all we got to do is hunt for 'em."

Mullein-flower tea is supposed to be good for colds, sore throat, flu, and even pneumonia. A tea made of sumac berries is favored for coughs and sore throat. Strong cider vinegar, with salt and pepper added, is used as a gargle. Cranesbill (*Geranium maculatum*) is brewed into a fine astringent medicine for sore throats. Pine needles, steeped in water over night and boiled down with sorghum, make another popular cough remedy, but a tea made of linn or basswood flowers is better for a cold in the head. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, Mincy, Missouri, says that she has broken up many a bad cold with "red-pepper tea, simmered in butter and water, and made pretty sticky with sugar."

Horehound is one of the best cold remedies. Just take a handful of horehound leaves, add water, and keep warm on the back of the stove for several days. Then pour off the liquid and concentrate it further by boiling. This is the standard cough medicine of the Ozarks, but it's pretty bitter. Many people think that horehound tea should be mixed with wild honey—the blacker the honey the more effective the syrup. Some young folk like it better if the mother adds a lot of sugar to make horehound candy, which is poured out on a buttered platter and allowed to harden, then broken into pieces and distributed among the children.

Many Ozark youngsters are dosed with large quantities of skunk oil for throat ailments, particularly croup. This stuff is rendered from the fat of skunks trapped in the winter—a strong stinking mess which makes many children vomit. There are tales also of yarb doctors who use liniments made of rattlesnake oil, but I have never seen any of this myself. Croup is treated ex-

ternally by a poultice of lard and fried onions, applied very hot.

Charley Cummins, veteran newspaperman of Springfield, Missouri, always called a severe cold a *tissic*—that's his own spelling. He said the only way to cure such a cold was to apply a poultice of lard, camphor, turpentine, and fried onions.

Dr. W. O. Cralle, of Springfield, Missouri, writes me that some backwoods friends of his have used a tea of onions and wild lobelia with great success, in cases of "pneumony fever." Some old settlers make poultices of chicken manure mixed with lard as a treatment for pneumonia; it is said that the dung of black chickens is best. A hot poultice of hopvine cones and leaves is a famous remedy for pneumonia; I have seen this used hour after hour, fresh poultices always in the making, and a new one applied every fifteen minutes.

A tea made from the roots of butterfly weed (*Asclepias*), also known as pleurisy root, is used for "lung trouble," which usually means the late stages of tuberculosis. Some hillfolk believe that drinking fresh warm blood is the best treatment for "lung trouble"; I knew an elderly couple who sold their farm and moved to a city so that their consumptive daughter could get fresh blood from a slaughterhouse every day. One old man said that he had kept his family free of disease by putting ground dandelion root into their coffee, but many hillfolk use dandelion root as a coffee substitute or adulterant with no thought of tuberculosis.

A pinch of gunpowder, washed down with a glass of warm water or sour milk, was regarded as a sure cure for diphtheria in the Ozark country, long before we ever heard of vaccines or antitoxin.

A family at Lamar, Missouri, claims to cure hay fever by feeding the patient honey made from Spanish needles. Sumac leaves are supposed to cure asthma and hay fever; some people make a sumac tea, others dry the leaves and smoke them in a pipe. Jimson-weed (*Datura*) is used in treating bronchial troubles and asthma. Wild plum bark, *scraped down*, is a

specific for asthma; most yarb doctors just make a strong tea with a little sweetening, but some add a great deal of sugar or molasses and make a regular syrup of it.

In scraping bark from a tree or shrub, the direction in which it is cut may make a vast difference in its effect as medicine. Peach-tree bark, for example, if the tree is shaved upward, is supposed to prevent vomiting, or to stop a diarrhea. But if the bark is scraped downward, the tea made from it is regarded as a violent purgative. In general, the old-timers say that if the pain is in the lower part of the body, it is best to scrape the bark downward, to drive the disease into the legs and out at the toes. If the bark in such a case were stripped upward, it might force the pizen up into the patient's heart, lungs, or head, and kill him instantly.

The root of the yellow puccoon or golden-seal is fine for all sorts of stomach and intestinal troubles. If a hillman "gets to pukin' an' caint keep nothin' on his stummick," he just drinks a little yellow puccoon tea, or eats a bit of the fresh root every day. Some people carry a piece of this root in their pockets and chew it like tobacco or chewing gum.

The inner lining of a chicken's gizzard, chopped fine and made into a tea, is used in cases of dyspepsia, stomach cramps, colitis, and so on. They tell me that this stuff "settles the stummick" quicker than anything found in the drugstore.

Rattlesnake weed (*Polygala senega*) is good for bellyache, flatulence, and intestinal pains; the natives make a strong tea from the dried root and drink it hot.

Many hillfolk chew angelica root, which is another famous stomach remedy, supposed to cure everything from gastric ulcers to appendicitis; six-year-old Dorothy Farris died near Hartville, Missouri, in 1938, because she mistook poisonous water hemlock (*Conium*) for the aromatic angelica, which her mother had told her to gather and eat every day.

Red-pepper tea, catnip tea, horsemint (*Monarda*) tea—all of these are mightily cried up as remedies for stomach cramps

or bellyache. Strong onion tea without salt, taken in small doses every fifteen minutes, is said to be a sure cure for "wind-on-the-stummick." Dr. W. O. Cralle, Springfield, Missouri, tells me that a decoction of "milk pursley" is highly recommended in all sorts of stomach and bowel trouble. Wild ginger (*Asarum*) and Indian turnip (*Arisaema triphyllum*) are also good for digestive difficulties; the root of the latter can't be eaten in its natural state, but they say that it loses its bite when boiled. Snakeroot (*Aristolochia serpentaria*) is often made into a tea and substituted for the more drastic Indian turnip.

Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, Mincy, Missouri, tells of a neighbor who "burned a saucer of whiskey, the blue flame toasting a rancid bacon rind, the juice dripping down into the saucer." When the flame went out, this "witchified potion" was given to a man with severe stomach pains. He made a rapid recovery, too.

Slippery-elm bark, boiled down to a thick ooze, is a common remedy for all sorts of digestive troubles—particularly such as are caused by excessive use of alcoholic liquors. The gelatinous bark is widely used also as a capsule for quinine, or any other medicine that has an unpleasant taste. Some yarb doctors treat typhoid by administering large doses of slippery-elm ooze, forbidding the patient to eat any solid food, and finally building up a great smudge of corncobs under the bed.

Slippery-elm bark is sometimes given in cases of poisoning, to produce vomiting, and seems very effective. A thick ooze of peach-tree leaves is another valuable emetic, according to Mr. Lewis Kelley, of Cyclone, Missouri. So is a tea made of puke root (*Gillenia stipulata*), also known as wild ipecac. Some yarb doctors get the same result by taking a living fly, preferably a green stable fly, and washing it down the patient's throat in a cup of coffee or a glass of warm milk.

The yarb doctors are familiar with many purgatives or "loosenin' weeds." One of the most violent and griping is the root of the May apple or mandrake, made into a thick tea or

ooze. The so-called black physic (*Veronica virginica*) is another root with a strong cathartic action. The inner bark of the white walnut or butternut is also a popular laxative; most people boil this down to a thick syrupy mess, then thicken it with flour and roll it into pills, which are allowed to dry with a little sugar on the outside. Flaxseed is also highly recommended for chronic constipation.

Near Walnut Shade, Missouri, a man told me that the early settlers didn't bother much with vegetable purgatives, as they all preferred to take Epsom salts. When I asked where the pioneers obtained Epsom salts, he said that there was a whole mountain of it down the road. At the time it did not occur to me that the man was in earnest, but I learned later that there is a high ridge nearby called Salts Bluff. I went to this place and saw for myself the white powdery substance on the rocks under some overhanging ledges. I tasted the stuff, and it is like Glauber's or horse salts rather than Epsom. But it is evidently cathartic in its action, and there is no doubt that the early settlers did gather this material and use it as medicine.

Ragweed tea, made by steeping the fresh leaves in cold water, is a famous cure for diarrhea—what the hillfolk call *flux*. An old woman at Pineville, Missouri, talked me into trying this once, and it worked like magic in my case. Smartweed (the kind with red stems) is used in the same way, except that in this case the tea is made with hot water instead of cold. The root of a plant called cranesbill (*Geranium maculatum*) is also a popular "flux stopper." A tea of white-oak bark is good for diarrhea too, and in small frequent doses is indicated in chronic indigestion or colitis.

Backwoods babies seem particularly subject to an intestinal disorder known as "summer complaint." Many children die of this ailment, and the only sure cure is a tea made from the roots of the wild artichoke. A young couple in Tulsa, Oklahoma, came near losing their baby, and the city doctors didn't seem to do the child any good. The father went out and searched

the country around Tulsa but could not find any wild artichoke. Finally he got into his car and drove back to his old home in Taney county, Missouri, where he obtained a good supply of artichoke roots. When he got back to Tulsa the doctors thought the baby was dying, but the artichoke tea brought relief within a few hours, and a week later the child was as well as ever. This is the story, anyhow, and there are many old-timers around Forsyth, Missouri, who believe it.

Where no artichoke is obtainable, some folks treat summer complaint with a tea made by mashing up sow bugs and steeping them in hot water; some mountain healers give large doses of this mess to sick babies. I have seen this tried, and the child recovered in spite of the sow bugs.

A young girl near Forsyth, Missouri, used to take large quantities of tea made by boiling toasted egg shells in water, but I was unable to find out what was the matter with her, or what effect this "egg-shell tea" was expected to produce. Children are sometimes dosed with chamber lye—which means urine—mixed with sweet oil; it is said that this is a sure cure for stomach cramps.

When an Ozark child has colic, the mother squeezes a little of her own milk into a teacup. Then she takes a reed pipestem and blows clouds of tobacco smoke into the cup, so that it bubbles up through the milk. When the baby drinks this nicotinized milk it becomes quiet at once and soon falls asleep. Other people treat a "colicky" infant simply by blowing tobacco smoke up under its clothes; I have seen this done several times, and it really did seem to relieve the pain—or at least to distract the child's attention for the moment.

Tobacco is used in other ways by the yarb doctors and granny-women. I have seen severe abdominal pain, later diagnosed as appendicitis and cured by surgery, apparently relieved at once with a poultice of tobacco leaves soaked in hot water. The tobacco poultice is very generally used for cuts, stings, bites, bruises, and even bullet wounds. A poultice of tobacco

leaves in cold water is often applied to "draw the pizen" out of a boil or a risin'. Some people think such a poultice is more effective if fresh mullein leaves are bound on outside the tobacco.

For rectal troubles the yarb doctor favors a salve made by boiling bittersweet berries in lard. Sometimes, however, the patient is merely directed to sew a piece of sheep's intestine to the tail of his shirt. Charley Cummins, old-time newspaper reporter of Springfield, Missouri, always claimed that he could make an "almost infallible pile cure" out of mullein leaves, but he would never give me any details of the treatment. Several herbalists have told me of the "balm-o'-gilly" tree, doubtless identical with the Balm of Gilead, said to be a kind of poplar; they cook the waxy buds of this tree with tallow, and the resulting salve is used in treating burns and abrasions as well as hemorrhoids.

There are several outlandish semimagical methods of curing piles, which involve some hocus-pocus with urine. The following story is vouched for by a sober and respectable business woman in Mountain Grove, Missouri, who would never have believed such a tale had she not known all the parties involved and seen the thing for herself:

An old woman on relief at Mountain Grove, Mo., kept asking for a suit of brand-new underwear. Finally a member of the Ladies' Aid bought it for her. The old woman did not wear the suit, but sent it, with a dollar bill attached, to one of her neighbors; she asked the neighbor to wear it ten days, then send it back to her unwashed, and she would wear it for three days—this would *cure her piles*, she said.

The neighbor wanted to humor the old woman, so she sent back the dollar and put on the union suit. A few days later the old woman wrote again, saying that she hated to tell the whole story at first, but that the cure demanded something more. After wearing the suit ten days, the neighbor was to take it off and urinate on it, wetting it all over, and then drying it in the sun without washing. Next, the old woman would wear it for three days, then wash it and return it to the neighbor, as the whole process had to be gone through with again.

The neighbor was kind of discouraged by this time, and sent the underwear back to the old woman, with a note saying that she did not

believe in superstitions, and recommending a certain patent medicine for piles.

It is not stated what happened after that, but at last reports the old woman still had her hemorrhoids.

Some years ago a prominent Ozark farmer suffered from hiccoughs, which continued for many days, so that his life was endangered. One yarb doctor said that if the man would just grind up some white beans, mix the resulting powder with vinegar, and take a teaspoonful every thirty minutes, he would stop hiccoughing within twenty-four hours—this was tried without any results. Other local healers contended that a big dose of dill tea, or tea made of the inner lining of a chicken gizzard, would cure hiccoughs almost immediately. An old woman from Rocky Comfort, Missouri, wrote the man's doctor suggesting that he "drench" the patient with sweet milk and black-pepper tea. A poultice of raw potatoes, fastened tightly across the abdomen, was also highly recommended. An amateur herbalist at Pineville, Missouri, told me that a tonic mixture of whiskey, tansy, and ragweed leaves was indicated in all such cases; "I take it every day myself," said he, "an' it agrees with me fine. I aint had the hiccoughs but once in fourteen year!"

Many hillfolk treat sprains by tying on rags soaked in hot vinegar to which salt has been added. Others put mullein leaves in the vinegar instead of salt. A poultice of red clay moistened into a paste with vinegar is also common. Another application for sprains is a hot mixture of cornmeal and buttermilk, with a little bran stirred into it. A poultice made by boiling down the inner bark of black oak, stiffened with bran or sawdust, is said to reduce the swelling of sprains and bruises. Also recommended are the leaves of horse balm (*Collinsonia canadensis*), widely used to poultice bruises and even open wounds.

A poultice made of the root bark of polecat weed (a little aromatic bush with yellow flowers) chopped fine and boiled in salt water is very good for wounds and bruises. Some folk seem to think that a poultice of mullein leaves simmered in vinegar

is helpful in almost any sort of painful condition. I have seen such a poultice applied to a wound made by a charge of bird shot; it not only eases pain, I was told, but "loosens up the shot" so that the doctor can easily extract the pellets.

A weed called square stalk, apparently a kind of figwort, is used in making poultices to reduce swelling. At the same time, it is supposed to "bring a risin' to a head." A mixture of soft soap and brown sugar seems to get the same results. Some people cure boils by soaking a piece of snake skin in vinegar and tying it on the affected part. Sour-dock leaves are also used to bind up boils or carbuncles. Fresh possum-grape leaves are tied on open sores, or on boils which have come to a head.

Dr. W. O. Cralle, Springfield, Missouri, tells me that Aunt Mary Johnson, of Theodosia, Missouri, treats "proud flesh" or "blood poison" with a poultice of prickly pear, beets, and sweet milk cooked together and applied as hot as the patient can bear it. Old leg sores, and the condition called milk-leg, are said to be relieved by binding "the pup bag of a bitch dog" on the affected part and wearing it for seven days. A wound made by a rusty nail is best treated by fastening a very old corroded penny over the puncture—it is believed that the "green moss" on the copper will draw out the poison and prevent tetanus. Another method is to burn woolen rags in a copper kettle and hold the injured member in the thick smoke for several minutes.

Chimney soot, thoroughly mixed with molasses, is good for cuts and open wounds. Spider webs are used for this purpose, too, and are said to stop bleeding at once. Best of all is the dry dust from the fungi called puffballs, especially the big yellow kind known as the Devil's snuffbox. Golden-seal root, ground into a fine dry powder and dusted on an open wound or sore, seems to cure it up about as well as anything. The pain of a bee sting is relieved by applying the crushed leaves of three plants—any three will do, just so they are of different species—to the painful area.

The hillfolk use kerosene or coal oil both externally and in-

ternally, for many minor ailments and injuries. Some of them claim Biblical authority for this treatment in the passage: "Nothing but the *oil of the earth* will cure ye in the latter days," but I have not been able to locate this in the Bible, so far. I have seen snake bite treated by sticking the swollen leg into a bucket of kerosene; if the snake was really poisonous, it is said that the "pizen" forms a greenish scum on the top of the oil; many of those present claimed to see the green venom very distinctly, but I saw nothing but the iridescent surface color of the kerosene. A poultice of soft soap mixed with salt is sometimes used for snake bites and is believed to draw out the poison if it is applied in time. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, of Taney county, Missouri, recommends "a bit of real snake-weed, boiled in sweet milk," but it is a rare plant, and I have not been able to find a specimen. "The leaves are slender, almost like blades of corn," she writes, "but four come out of the stalk, all exactly opposite each other, and at the top is a little white blossom."

For kidney and bladder trouble, the yarb doctor usually burns the dried blood of a rabbit and makes a tea by boiling the ashes in water and decanting off the liquid. Gravelroot (*Eupatorium*) is good too—it is boiled down to a strong tea, and then diluted with water as taken. A tea brewed from parsley is also a popular kidney medicine. The root of sevenbark (*Hydrangea arborescens*) is a remedy for scanty or difficult urination, as is the shrub known as ninebark, which looks very much like the common white spiraea seen in flower gardens.

Corn-silk tea, made by steeping corn silks in very hot water, is said to cure bed wetting in children. Some people think that sumac-berry tea is better, however. Similar claims are made for a strong decoction of finely chopped watermelon seeds. Another sure cure for bed wetting is to feed the child a pancake with bedbugs cooked into it; I saw this tried once and noted that the patient was not told about the bugs until several hours after he had eaten the pancake. Miss Betrenia Watt, who taught the village school at Preston, in Hickory county, Missouri, tells

me that the old-timers use *seven* bedbugs to each pancake, but the folks in my neighborhood didn't bother to count the "cheenches."

I remember a young woman near Pineville, Missouri, who was very ill indeed. The local M.D. said that she had Bright's disease and held little hope for her recovery. One of this woman's male relatives searched the hills for days and finally dug up a root which seemed to do her more good than any of the doctor's prescriptions. She was still alive several years later, apparently much improved in health. I interviewed the man who found the magic root. He boasted that he had cured the woman "after all the doctors done give her up" but refused to tell me the name of the root that did the business. A yarb doctor who saw the stuff, however, told me that it looked to him like yellow-root, by which he meant golden-seal (*Hydrastis*).

Plenty of sexual intercourse is regarded as a sure cure for bladder and kidney ailments in women. It is often said of a widow who remarries: "Well, I guess Lizzie has throwed away her gravel medicine." Perhaps this is somehow related to the hillman's habit of saying, as a sort of toast when he takes a drink of whiskey: "Well, this is for my wife's kidneys!" I have heard this remark many times, in different parts of the Ozark country, but am not certain just what is meant by it.

The yarb doctor is brother to the witch and close cousin to the preacher, and not infrequently mixes a little religious hokum with his teas and plasters. People who visited Hollister, Missouri, in the spring of 1934 will not soon forget the "prayin' corn doctor," a bewhiskered old herbalist who specialized in corns and bunions and prayed loudly over his remedies. As late as 1940 there was one of these fellows in Taney county, Missouri, a long-haired chap with beaded moccasins and a deerskin vest. He carried many little bags of dried herbs, each marked with a mysterious sign supposed to be Cherokee picture writing. This medicine man treated all ailments and agreed to cure anything for six dollars in cash. He asked every patient "You be-

lieve in God, don't you?" and they all answered that they did. Muttering strange words as he opened each little sack of medicine, he put several kinds of dried leaves into a pint of water for each patient. The leaves were so finely divided that they were not easily identified, but I tasted the tea made from them, and I think it was mostly senna and gentian.

A woman in McDonald county, Missouri, had some sort of kidney trouble—her body was enormously swollen. The M.D. said there was no hope for her, but the family called in an illiterate healer from the backwoods. This yarb doctor glanced at the patient and said that he *could* reduce the swelling in a few minutes, but this might endanger the patient's life, so he had best do the job gradually. He muttered some gibberish and applied a green poultice of his own making. He told me privately that this poultice was made of turnip tops, which he had "blessed with the power of Christ Jesus." The woman died two or three days later. "You orter have called me sooner," said the yarb doctor.

Perhaps the most famous yarb doctor ever known in the Ozarks was Omar Palmer, who lived in the village of Hurley, Missouri. I went to see Palmer once, and the cars in front of his office sported tags from five different states. He had a larger practice, and made more money, than any of the licensed M.D.'s in the neighborhood. The Missouri State Board of Health had him arrested once for practicing medicine without a license, but at the last moment his patients refused to testify. The yarb doctor walked out of court a free man and was greeted with loud cheers from the assembled yokelry. Somebody even shot off some firecrackers, ordinarily reserved for Christmas and the Fourth of July. Palmer kept five or six men and women busy, collecting roots and herbs in the woods near Hurley. He sold his various teas in pint bottles. Unwilling to use alcohol to preserve the stuff, Palmer could not prevent its spoiling in a few days, so that the customer had to return to Hurley for another bottle.

Sassafras tea, made from the bark of sassafras roots in the

spring, is supposed to thin or purify the blood. It has the color of tawny port, and a very fine flavor—though too much boiling makes it bitter. Some people put small quantities of May apple, wild cherry, and goldenseal into their sassafras tea, but most of the old folks take it neat. Sassafras is used not only in the backwoods but more or less all over the country. I have seen men selling little bundles of sassafras roots in the streets of Kansas City, St. Louis, Springfield, and Joplin, Missouri, and also in Fort Smith and Little Rock, Arkansas. The old-timers use only the fresh red roots—the smaller and redder the better. The fellows who sell the stuff split larger whitish roots up to look like young ones, but the big roots don't make the best tea.

The drugstores sell dried sassafras bark the year round, and some people buy this stuff in the winter, but the hillfolk claim that only the fresh roots have any value as medicine. Many of them say that sassafras is no good until Groundhog Day—February 14.

Many Ozark people make a tea from the bark of the spicebush (*Benzoin aestivale*) in March and April. They drink this just as they do sassafras tea and regard it as a tonic and blood thinner. It tastes quite as good as sassafras, I think. Some old folks say that in pioneer days the spicebush was used to season game—it softened the wild taste of venison and bear meat. Spicebush twigs are still used as a mat beneath a possum, when the Ozark housewife bakes the animal in a covered pan or a Dutch oven.

Choctaw-root or dogbane (*Apocynum*) is also made into a tea, mildly laxative, which is said to “thin the blood an' tone up the system.” I have never tasted this but have met men who say that it is better than either sassafras or spicebush. Some yarb doctors fortify their choctaw-root with wild-cherry bark and “anvil dust,” whatever that may be.

A strong tea of red-clover blossoms is highly regarded in some quarters as a blood purifier and general tonic. It is used in the treatment of whooping cough, too, but if the whooping

cough is really bad nothing will help it but mare's milk. Many a father has been routed out in the night to ride to some farm where a mare has lately foaled.

Bloodroot or red puccoon (*Sanguinaria*) is also supposed to be a great blood remedy, apparently because it has blood-red sap. By the same token a leaf shaped like a kidney, or a liver, or an ovary, or what not is supposed to designate a remedy for disorders of the organ which it resembles. The yarb doctors are all familiar with this principle, but they don't seem to take it very seriously or follow it consistently.

Some hillfolk in southern Missouri gather the roots of the big purple coneflower (*Brauneria*) and brew a tea which is given to sick persons apparently regardless of what ails them. I know a man who was confined to his bed with a broken leg, and the doctor was no sooner out of sight than the womenfolks began to dose the patient with this "niggerhead" tea. "It made him sweat wonderful," an old woman told me later, "an' sweatin's good for a big man layin' in bed that-a-way!"

Many of the old-time druggists make up *bitters* by putting wild cherries, together with the inner bark of the wild-cherry tree, into whiskey. This is a fine spring tonic, and some prefer it to sassafras tea. It is good for almost any ailment, in a pinch, and even families who are notoriously dry keep a quart of bitters in case of sudden sickness. A mixture of whiskey and rock candy is popular too but is not so highly recommended as the famous wild-cherry bitters.

Children in Arkansas are sometimes encouraged to chew the gummy resin melted out of pine wood before the fireplace; I have seen children chewing this stuff by the hour, just as city children chew gum. The parents think that the turpentine in this resin keeps the children free of worms. A tea made from peach leaves is also a common remedy for worms, while some favor a mess made by stewing vermifuge seeds in molasses. Horsemint tea is supposed to be a sure cure for rectal worms

in children. A decoction of pumpkin seeds is used to expel tapeworms, and it seems to be effective, too.

Boneset tea is a favorite remedy for chills, fever, and ague. A tea made of elderberry roots is good, too. Some people have great confidence in blade-fodder tea, especially if the fodder has been kept in a dry place. Seneca-root or rattlesnake weed (*Senega*) is said to make a mighty fine chills-and-fever medicine. The unfermented juice of the little wild possum grapes is supposed to cure malaria. Uncle Jack Short of Galena, Missouri, says that he used to drink gallons of peach-bark tea every fall for his "ager"; also a tea made by boiling sheep manure, with a little spicewood added to kill the unpleasant taste. Fanny D. Bergen observes that "in central Missouri one is recommended to take for ague a whole pepper-corn every morning for seven consecutive mornings."¹ The plant known as fever-root (*Corallorhiza odontorhiza*) is also used to reduce fevers and is a mild sedative as well. A gentleman in Cyclone, Missouri, tells me that his family made a "chill remedy" that was in great demand; the exact formula was kept secret, he says, but the main ingredient was crushed burdock seeds.

A good strong tea of saffron, taken often and in large doses, is said to be a sure cure for the "yaller janders." Another jaundice remedy is made by cooking fishworms in lard and rolling the result into big evil-smelling pills.

Nanny tea, consisting of sheep manure and hot water, with a little sugar, is a very powerful medicine for measles; it is believed to make the patient "break out" at once, which the yarb doctors say is desirable. Spicewood tea, made by boiling the tender green twigs of the spicewood or feverbush (*Benzoin aestivale*), is another famous remedy for measles.

Mrs. Coral Almy Wilson, of Zinc, Arkansas, tells me that her neighbors treat rheumatism with an infusion of wahoo (*Euonymus*) bark. In other parts of the Ozarks the yarb doc-

¹ *Journal of American Folklore*, V (1892), 21.

tors administer pokeroot (*Phytolacca*) tea for rheumatism, while people in eastern Oklahoma seem to think that celery leaves are about as good as anything. Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, Springfield, Missouri, claims that a mixture of sulphur and homemade sorghum molasses *does* cure rheumatism, no matter what the doctors say. The so-called rheumatiz root (*Dioscorea*) is much favored in some sections. A man near Marionville, Missouri, used to eat pokeberries, generally supposed to be poisonous, in the belief that they might help his rheumatic joints. A tea made by boiling cockleburs in water is another remedy for rheumatism.

Water drunk from a gourd is somehow cleansed of all impurities, according to the old-timers, and is regarded by some as a specific for rheumatism. I knew a lawyer in Pineville, Missouri, who always kept a gourd in his office, hidden behind the water cooler; he said that a man who was inclined to be rheumatic should not drink from cups or glasses.

Stiff joints are treated with a grease made by hanging a bottle of dead fishworms up in the sun—a horrible stinking mess it is, too. The grease from skunks or civet cats, mixed with peppermint leaves, is highly praised by some hillfolk as a lubricant for rheumatic joints. It is said that the fat of a male wildcat is best of all. Big black ants are dried and powdered and mixed with lard; this is rubbed on the legs of babies who are slow in learning to walk, or who seem weak in the legs.

Sometimes a severe pain in the ear is relieved with a vinegar poultice—just soak a piece of light-bread in hot vinegar and hold it against the ear until it cools. Some yarb doctors treat earache simply by blowing tobacco smoke into the ear; if this doesn't give relief, they blow the smoke into a cup of warm water with a reed or pipestem and put a few drops of this smoke water into the ear at intervals. Others prefer to pour sweet oil, or skunk oil, or goose grease strained through silk into their ears. Some use human urine in the same way, although it is claimed that mule's urine is better. An infusion of sheep

manure, called nanny tea or sheep-dumplin' tea, is also much in favor as a remedy for earache. If the pain is caused by a bug getting into the ear, however, one has only to squirt water into the *other* ear, and the insect will be washed out immediately.

Fresh urine is the best lotion for chapped hands, sore feet, and chilblains. I once knew a lady south of Joplin, Missouri, who thought that the practice of rubbing urine on one's feet was disgusting; she contended that a nice salve made of hog bristles cut very fine and mixed with skunk oil was more efficacious, anyhow.

A mess of peach roots, ground up and mixed with lard, is said to cure the seven-year itch. Some people prefer a salve made of hopvine leaves. Bloodroot or red puccoon, pounded up fine and steeped in vinegar, is another very popular itch medicine. Some claim to cure the itch by taking sulphur and molasses internally, but most yarb doctors scoff at this. Others treat itch with a paste made of gunpowder and wood ashes mixed with sweet cream, applied at frequent intervals. In Pineville, Missouri, my old neighbors asked the druggist for "a dime's worth of acker fortis an' a nickel's worth of quicksilver," by which they meant nitric acid and mercury, to make some kind of itch medicine. Otto Ernest Rayburn, of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, says that boiled pokeroot used to be a famous remedy for itch, but "it burned like fire, and the cure was probably worse than the ailment." A strong ooze of pokeberry root, a man from Madison county, Arkansas, assures me, "will make you think hell aint a mile away, but it sure does cure the eetch."

The skin disease called tetter is treated with spunk water or stump water—simply rain water which happens to be retained in a hollow stump. Bloodroot is good for tetter also, and there is another herb known as tetter weed, but this latter I have not been able to identify. The yarb doctors all insist that tetter weed is not identical with bloodroot (*Sanguinaria*) which is called tetterwort in some parts of the United States. The root of the bull nettle is used in the treatment of skin diseases, according

to Otto Ernest Rayburn, of Eureka Springs, Arkansas. I have seen skin eruptions treated with mud supplied by crushing dirt-dobbers' nests and adding water—mud from these nests is credited with some astringent virtue not found in ordinary earth. A poultice of pokeberry leaves is said to cure ivy poisoning. Some people say that a big dose of sulphur and molasses, with a pinch of saltpeter, will render a person immune to poison ivy for several weeks.

Many hillfolk treat ringworm by daubing it with the juice of a green walnut; this smarts a bit but really does seem to arrest the ringworm in some cases. Another way of curing ringworm is to burn a bit of flannel on a flatiron, so as to leave a tiny drop of dark-colored oil; this oil is applied directly to the ringworm, care being taken not to get any of it on the surrounding tissue.

I have heard of Ozark yarb doctors who claim that they can cure epileptic fits, but I have never met one of these gentlemen. The old folks say, however, that a poultice of colts-tongue leaves, applied to the sufferer's forehead, often affords a measure of relief. "Mirandy" Bauersfeld tells of an Ozark granny who chewed up *fitweed* leaves and then thrust them into the patient's mouth, but I have not been able to find any plant called fitweed.² A tea made of fresh parsley is supposed to be beneficial in epilepsy, and some yarb doctors prescribe it for hysteria and other nervous diseases. It is often said that parsley will stop an epileptic fit, but only in the light of the moon. I talked with one epileptic boy about this, but he said that he seldom had a seizure in the light of the moon, whether he drank parsley water or not. A human bone, pulverized, is sometimes given internally for epilepsy—just a pinch of the powder stirred into a hot toddy, or a cup of coffee.

Old sores, syphilitic lesions, and skin cancers are sometimes treated with powder made from the bones of a person long dead. In order to obtain this material the hillfolk dig into Indian

² *Breezes from Persimmon Holler*, p. 129.

graves and Bluff Dweller burials under the ledges. The hillman always tells strangers that he's digging for arrowheads and the like, which can be sold to tourists; but I have seen these old bones broken into small pieces with a hammer and ground up to be used as medicine.

Some people named Carney, living near Cape Fair, Missouri, have for several generations been treating skin diseases. They claim to have cured many cancers. The treatment is simply a poultice of crushed, boiled sheep sorrel. Some say it must be boiled in a copper kettle. This stuff is applied freely to the sores and cures a lot of them, but it is terribly painful. I asked Dr. J. H. Young of Galena, Missouri, about this, and he said that the oxalic acid in sheep sorrel was effective, if the patient could stand it. Of course, he added, the sores that the Carneys had cured were not really cancers.

Judge Gerrit Snip, Lamar, Missouri, in 1919, announced publicly that he had healed a cancer on his hand with an infusion of "sheep shower"—probably the same as sheep sorrel. He said it hurt like hell but cured the cancer.

To prevent hives, one has only to put several buckshot into a glass of water and drink a spoonful of the water every two hours; some people say that there must be exactly nine buckshot in the glass, no more and no less, but others think that this numerical idea savors of superstition. If one does get hives despite all attempts at prophylaxis, maple-leaf tea is the best remedy; the hard maple or sugar tree is better than the ordinary kind. Some hillfolk soak cloths in the tea and apply them to the skin, others get equally good results by taking large doses of the stuff internally.

Nearly every hillman has heard of the strange disease called *bold* hives or *boll* hives, supposed to be invariably fatal. Ozark M.D.'s tell me that there is no such thing, but they have all been called in great haste to treat the mythical disease. "When I get there," said Dr. J. H. Young, "I generally find a case of ordinary hives, and they always get well." Babies are supposed to be es-

pecially susceptible to *bold* hives, but adults sometimes have 'em too, according to the old settlers.

The fat found on rabbits' kidneys in the fall is said to be a specific for sexual debility; I have known several old men who obtained large quantities of this fat from rabbit trappers and claimed great things for it. A tea made from black snakeroot (*Cimicifuga*) is another powerful aphrodisiac, according to the wise men of the mountains, but it seems to upset the stomach if large doses are taken, and is best mixed with whiskey. There is a widespread belief that a man who "loses his manhood" is doomed to die before the year is out; a gentleman ninety-three years old told me that he used to believe this himself but had finally been forced to the conclusion that "there aint nothing to it."

Ginseng or sang root is supposed to prolong life and to strengthen the sexual powers in aging men. There are probably a few old fellows in the Ozarks who still use it, and there are reports of secret sang patches here and there. But wild ginseng is almost extinct now, and it sells for between ten dollars and fifteen dollars per pound. Not many hillfolk can be induced to eat anything that they can sell for that much money. There are some people down at Compton, Arkansas, who have been growing the stuff in sang arbors since old "Frost" Petree started the practice about 1900, but the domestic roots do not bring the high prices paid for wild sang. The plants don't bear seeds until they are three years old, and the seeds won't sprout until two years after they are picked. Roots less than five years old are hardly big enough to market—some of the four-pronged wild roots are said to be twenty or thirty years old. The whole project of sang raising is too slow for the hillman's taste.

Most yarb-doctors gather their own yarbs, but there are many root diggers and herbalists in the Ozarks who collect such stuff for the market. Much of this material is sold or bartered to country storekeepers, who ship it to a famous root-and-herb broker in St. Louis. This man operates a business founded by

his father some ninety years ago and sends out a yearly price-list of nearly one hundred roots, herbs, and barks that he will buy.

People near Walnut Shade, Missouri, still tell the story of how an amateur root buyer named Cummins went broke through buying counterfeit sang. Lou Beardon, who lived on Bear Creek, discovered that two-year-old pokeroots, properly dried, look very much like ginseng, and it is said Cummins bought nearly a hundred dollars' worth of this so-called *bogue sang* before he learned to distinguish the two.

Roots for the market must be dug in the fall—dig 'em in the growin' season and they shrink away to nothing. Bark is best gathered in late winter and early spring. Leaves and herbs should be collected while the plants are blooming. Flowers are picked when they first open, seeds are gathered as soon as they are ripe. All of these things must be dried slowly in the shade and not shipped until they are perfectly dry, otherwise they will become moldy and lose their value as medicine. I have known several backwoods wanderers who lived by gathering roots and herbs; it seemed to me that they worked harder than most farmers, and I don't think many of them earned more than fifty cents a day. Some of the herbs gathered in the Ozarks are ultimately sold to legitimate drug houses, while others are no longer prescribed by regular physicians but are used in various patent medicines and also by the medicine-show quacks who still flourish in many parts of the United States.

The yarb doctors are not very well provided with sedatives or soporifics. They sometimes try to quiet the nerves of alcoholic patients by rubbing the head with a paste of sunflower seeds; I let a woman at Rogers, Arkansas, smear some of this stuff on my head once, but it didn't seem to do much good. A thick sassafras-bark shampoo is sometimes used in similar cases and has the added advantage that it kills headlice as well as soothing jangled nerves.

A tea made from the roots of the butterfly weed (*Asclepias*)

is supposed to be good for nervousness and restlessness. A pillow stuffed with dried hopvines relieves pain and puts the patient to sleep. Mistletoe leaves are made into a remedy for dizziness and head noises. Catnip tea is a common sedative, taken warm just before going to bed. Lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium*) roots are boiled in milk to make some sort of "nerve medicine." An infusion of fresh alfalfa, taken in large doses, is said to quiet the nerves and produce sleep. Mr. Lewis Kelley, Cyclone, Missouri, tells me that his neighbors used a tea made of skullcap root (*Scutellaria*) for nervousness, and it was more effective than the "nervine" sold at the drugstore. For persistent insomnia, one has only to put a handful of Jimson-weed (*Datura*) leaves into each shoe and set the shoes under the bed with the toes pointing toward the nearest wall. A few Jimson-weed leaves, placed in the crown of a hat, are believed to protect the wearer from apoplexy or sunstroke. A tea made from Jimson weed is used in the treatment of nervousness, hysteria, and delirium, but without much success so far as I can see.

The shell of a black walnut is supposed to represent the human skull, and the meat is said to resemble the brain, therefore people who show signs of mental aberration are encouraged to eat walnuts. I know of one case in which an entire family devoted most of the winter to cracking walnuts for a feeble-minded boy. They kept it up for years, and I believe the poor fellow ate literally bushels of walnut goodies.

A few years ago I visited an aged couple in northwest Arkansas, and noticed a lump of brown resin-like stuff, about as big as a baseball, on the fireboard. "What is that?" I asked. The old man grinned. "That's gum opium," said he, "it's been settin' there since the fall of 1904. They tell me it's agin the law to sell opium now, but you could buy it at any drugstore in them days. Whenever I don't feel right peart, or Maw either, we just scrape off a little o' that stuff and it fixes us right up." From what I have heard elsewhere it seems that a great many pioneers took opium or laudanum freely, and always carried

it with them, or kept it in their cabins. One might think that they would have all become dope fiends, but the old-time doctors say that there was very little drug addiction in those days.

I am told that the early settlers raised hemp, great fields of it, and used the fibers to make rope and coarse cloth. They never thought of smoking it, but it was genuine hemp all right (*Cannabis sativa*), the same plant that is called marijuana nowadays. Many people believe that fried fish and sweet milk, taken into the human stomach at the same meal, combine to form a deadly poison and several persons have told me that hemp tea is the only known antidote for this fish-and-milk poisoning.

Some otherwise intelligent and progressive mountain people patronize the yarb doctor rather than the regular m.d. because of their fear of surgery. This is understandable when one remembers that in the early days, with little attempt at aseptic conditions, often without any anesthetic, even minor operations were horrible indeed and very often fatal.

Another thing which prejudices the hillfolk against the m.d. is the fact that so many modern drugs are administered hypodermically. In the old days, the hypodermic needle was used chiefly for injecting opiates. Very often the doctor was not called until the patient was desperately ill. When he arrived to find some poor devil dying in great pain, the physician just sighed and gave the sufferer a big shot of morphine. Thus the pioneers came to regard the needle as a kind of death warrant, and to this day the backwoodsman is afraid of hypodermic medication. Even children in the schools, who make very little fuss over being vaccinated against smallpox, often raise a terrific disturbance when the doctor tries to give them a "shot" of antityphoid serum.

There is a widespread belief that physiological phenomena are somehow connected with the increase and decrease of the moon, but the various healers have such divergent ideas of this that no general principles are apparent to me. The matter is often mentioned by the yarb doctors in talking with their pa-

tients, and I have heard some of these conversations, but can make little of them. On the whole, it seems that yarb medicines for internal use are best taken in the "dark" of the moon, when the moon is waning, since most of them are supposed to *stop* some deleterious process, or to *arrest* some injurious growth.

There are also the signs of the zodiac to be taken into account. A great number of people believe that stomach trouble is most likely to be acquired or aggravated when the moon is in Cancer, diseases of the throat during the sign Taurus, venereal infections in Scorpio, and so on. The treatment of disease is tied up with these constellations also, and many people, if forced to undergo a surgical operation, are careful to postpone it until an appropriate sign is indicated on the calendar.

In discussing this matter of operations, May Stafford Hilburn says that all operations are best performed "when the sign is going into the feet or legs," unless the operation is to be performed upon the feet or legs. "We *know*," she writes, "that if an abdominal operation is to take place, and the sign is in the bowels, we can look for trouble."³

Dr. J. H. Young, of Galena, Missouri, told me that he had a patient all ready to go to the hospital once, when the man's relatives suddenly discovered that the sign wasn't right for his operation and said it must be postponed for about a week. Young warned them that the patient might be dead before the week was out, if they didn't let the surgeon operate. They still refused, so Dr. Young withdrew from the case and washed his hands of the whole business. The patient survived, and all his kin are still great believers in "operatin' by the sign."

Dr. Glenn Jones, dentist at Crane, Missouri, told me that many of his patients waited until the sign was right before having teeth extracted, even when they were in considerable pain. Hillfolk generally agree that a tooth should never be pulled when the sign is in the head—to do this is to risk a serious hemorrhage. Most people think that extractions go best in

³ *Missouri Magazine* (September, 1938), p. 20.

Aquarius or Pisces, but there is no certainty about this. The old-timers say that it is better to pull a tooth in the morning than in the afternoon, no matter what constellation the moon's in.

Some hillfolk imagine that if a pain or disturbance in any part of the body coincides with the sign as shown for that date in the almanac, there is no cause for alarm. I once found a neighbor writhing on the floor with a terrific cramp in his abdomen. It occurred to me that the fellow probably had a hot appendix, and I urged him to call a doctor at once. He asked me to fetch him a calendar from the kitchen, and when he saw the picture of Virgo he relaxed with a sigh of relief. "The sign's in the guts," he gasped, "I'll be all right in the mornin'"—and sure enough he was completely recovered five hours later. I have often known men to complain of sharp pains here and there, which they explained by saying "the sign's in the ——," naming the part of the body which seemed to be affected. Had the sign been elsewhere on that particular day, these pains would have been taken much more seriously.

An old friend showed me a bottle of medicine prescribed for him by a very competent M.D. named Wade, who used to practice in Christian county, Missouri. "Take a dose of that stuff every day," Dr. Wade had told him, "and keep it up *till snakes crawl*." Wade prescribed this medicine in late February, and no snake was seen thereabouts that year until March 24. Instead of saying so many days or weeks, this physician used a real backwoods expression, which pleased the patient much more than an arbitrary date. He felt that his recovery was somehow tied up with the orderly processes of Nature, rather than governed by some man-made rule in a medical book. When a neighbor boy came running in, on March 24, shouting that some woodcutters had found a snake, my friend put away the medicine. He was a well man.

Most of the backwoods healers do little harm, and even the worst of yarb doctors seldom poison anybody. They kill their

patients indirectly sometimes, simply by preventing them from getting proper medical or surgical treatment. One of my neighbors suffered a ruptured appendix, whereupon the local yarb doctor assured him that there was no need of an operation and applied a poultice of hot boiled potatoes. The man died, of course—not because of the poultice, but because the yarb doctor's bad counsel prevented him from calling in a surgeon. Most of the damage done by yarb doctors and granny-women is of this negative type.

Occasionally, however, one encounters a bit of medical practice that seems ill-advised, not to say hazardous. A physician in southwest Missouri tells me that a young woman in his neighborhood had some sort of colitis—painful and depressing, but not dangerous. Along came a granny-woman who induced this patient to swallow a half-tumblerful of turkey shot, and she died a few days later. It appears that people in this vicinity often take small doses of fine shot for “bowel trouble,” without any apparent damage. “But it certainly doesn't do 'em any good,” said the doctor grimly.

Another case is that of a hillman who had what was called “locked bowels.” The doctor from a neighboring town said that he would probably die anyhow but recommended that he be taken to a hospital at once. Instead of doing this, the patient's brother, in the presence of the whole family, knocked the patient unconscious by striking the back of his head with a small sack of salt. The young physician, who had not been long in the Ozarks, thought that the patient was being murdered before his eyes and left the house immediately. But the man's people were trying desperately to save him, working on the theory that unconsciousness allows the internal organs to relax and might thus dispose of the obstruction. After knocking the patient cold, they “cupped” him with fruit jars of boiling water—poured the water out and clapped the empty jars against his abdomen. The poor fellow died, as the doctor had predicted. The father of the dead man said sadly: “Too bad we couldn't save Jim. I've

saw several fellers with locked bowels cured that-a-way." It is said that the physician asked the county officers to place manslaughter charges against the bereaved family, but nothing was ever done about it.

Sometimes when an infant does not grow and function properly, the granny-women decide that the child is "liver-growed"—meaning that the liver has somehow become attached to the body wall. In such cases a stout old woman grasps the baby's left hand and right foot and twists them together behind its back, then does the same with the right hand and left foot. She has to pull pretty hard sometimes, and the child hollers some-thin' turrible, but it's the only treatment for a liver-growed baby. The more difficult it is to bring the hands and feet together in this fashion, the more certain it appears that the child is really liver-growed. This is a rather alarming thing to witness, but physicians tell me that it does not seem to do any particular harm.

Another dubious item, to my mind, is the idea that if a small boy has a fit, the parents should strip him instantly and make him walk home stark naked. Such treatment may be harmless in warm weather, but it surely must be a bad thing to force a little naked screaming child to walk through the snow in the dead of winter. But there is no doubt that it is still practiced, in some sections, by parents who are firmly convinced that it is the proper scientific procedure.

Many yarb doctors insist, when a bullet wound goes clear through an arm or leg, on trying to pull a silk handkerchief through the wound. The connection between bullet wounds and silk handkerchiefs is common enough to have passed into the language, and there are several stories and backwoods wise-cracks about it. A boy who once lived in my home was insulted and enraged when a girl sent him a fine silk handkerchief as a Christmas present. "She'd orter sent it to Bob Taylor, that's allus a-kickin' up dust round there," he said grimly, "'cause Bob's the one that's goin' to need it!"

A farmer in McDonald county, Missouri, had a persistent headache which the yarb doctors failed to relieve. Finally one of them told him that his only hope was to have a thin silver plate set under the scalp at the back of his head. The yarb doctor remarked that he *could* do the job himself but advised the patient to have some "town doctor" attend to it. "It'll cost ye four or five dollars—maybe six," said the yarb doctor, "but it's worth the money." The patient was so charmed with the idea of having a silver plate in his head that he rushed into the office of Dr. Oakley St. John, at Pineville, Missouri, demanding that the operation be performed immediately. It was with some difficulty that St. John persuaded him that a silver plate was not indicated in his case.

Physicians in the Ozark towns have remarked upon the practice of giving turpentine as a worm medicine. Turpentine is still administered by many yarb doctors and granny-women, large doses being given to small children. The stuff may eliminate the worms, but it seems to be bad for the child's kidneys. A lot of little children in the Ozarks die of nephritis, and the M.D.'s say that nephritis is caused or aggravated by this indiscriminate dosing with turpentine.

