



9. Pregnancy and Childbirth

The superstitions connected with pregnancy and childbirth are very numerous, kept alive and promulgated by the backwoods midwives who are known as granny-women. Many hillmen will not allow a physician to attend their wives in childbirth, believing that a granny-woman is better. It is surprising, too, how many women do not want a physician at this time. "Doc Holton's all right, in case o' sickness," the mother of seven children said to me, "but I sure don't want no man-person a-conjurin' round when I'm havin' a baby!" Male yarb doctors and power doctors have many remedies for "female troubles," and some of them try to produce abortions, but they generally leave obstetrics to the granny-women. When a granny-woman gets into difficulties she seldom consults with a yarb doctor or a power doctor, but calls in a regular physician.

Large families are common among the old-timers, and some hillfolk believe that a girl will have the same number of children that her mother had, if she allows nature to take its course. When a woman has her first baby, the granny-woman looks very carefully for any lumps or enlargements in the umbilical cord, since the number of these lumps is supposed to indicate the number of children the woman will bear. There is a general notion among these people that more babies are born in August than in any other month, and when a woman's first child is born in August it is a sign that she will have many more children.

It is said that if a child is conceived in the winter the mother will be subject to chills, and if it is conceived in the summer she will have "hot flashes" and fevers. Some pregnant women sew

little pebbles into their garments, or wear pebbles strung around the waist in little cloth sacks; there is something secret about this, something not to be discussed, but it is supposed to prevent future pregnancies.

If a woman does not wish to become pregnant, she is very careful about letting people place babies on her bed. Here is an item from the Springfield (Missouri) *News & Leader*, Dec. 10, 1933: "At a party in Springfield not long ago, a woman started to lay her baby down on the bed. The hostess didn't want a baby right away, so she asked the guest to *lay the baby on a chair*. . . . And if a bride is very anxious to have a baby, her friends may all take their babies to her house and lay them on her bed. It's regarded as a sure sign of the coming stork."

A male visitor should always leave a cabin by the same door he entered; if he fails to do this, it may mean that there'll be an increase in the host's family. Many mountain people take this very seriously, and some women make certain that a visitor *does go* out the same way he came in. There are a lot of bawdy stories on the subject, of course.

Every mountaineer's wife knows that if a baby's diaper is left in her house by some visiting mother, she herself will very shortly become pregnant. I've heard some good stories about that one, too.

Mistletoe is used somehow by women who wish to have children, and some say that it can be administered by the husband, without the wife's knowledge or consent. If a woman cannot conceive, the power doctor may take nine little switches and tie a knot in each. Then he burns them and makes the woman eat the ashes.

A tea made of tansy leaves is a well-known abortifacient. Mrs. May Kennedy McCord says: "Girls used to soak tansy leaves in buttermilk to whiten their skins, but I remember very plainly that when they went to Grandma Melton's to get the tansy . . . they were very particular to tell her what it was for! Camomile tea was another suspicious *character sp'ilin'*

tea.”¹ Mrs. McCord returns to this subject in the *News*, Aug. 16, 1941, where she remarks: “And I recall that no woman ever drank cedar-berry tea without being ‘talked about.’ Men might take it for chills, but never women!” Pennyroyal leaves are also supposed to bring about abortions, and so is a tea made from the roots of the cotton plant, though the latter is usually mixed with tansy for the best results. Large doses of turpentine are believed to cause abortions. Any drug used for this purpose should be taken in one of the *odd* months—January, March, May, July, September, or November.

I have known middle-aged women who, at certain times or seasons, mixed pennyroyal leaves with the tobacco which they smoked in their pipes. They were rather secretive about this, implying that it had to do with some female disorder, but I was never able to get any definite information on the subject.

A tea made of black snakeroot (*Cimicifuga*) is also used as a medicine for “female troubles”—which usually means amenorrhea. Squawroot (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*) is highly recommended for “the diseases of women.” The blossoms of red clover, dried and powdered, are supposed to “relieve irregularity.” A tea brewed from horehound and raspberry leaves is recommended to young girls who complain of a scanty or painful flow, although some yarb doctors think that a strong infusion of red-stemmed smartweed is better in such cases.

Some women in Washington county, Arkansas, are loud in praise of Devil’s-shoestring as a remedy for menorrhagia; I am not familiar with this plant, but the name is sometimes applied to goat’s-rue, a weed which the Choctaw Indians use in poisoning fish.

Blackhaw bark, according to the old folks, makes a tea that is useful in all sorts of “female complaints.” It is good for scanty, irregular, or painful menstruation. Women going through the change of life consume large quantities of blackhaw bark, and

¹ Springfield (Missouri) *News*, Dec. 3, 1940.

this use of the stuff is so well known that there is a whole cycle of allegedly funny stories about it.

Mountain girls are not overfond of bathing at any time, but they are taught *never* to bathe or even wash their hair while they are menstruating. There is an almost universal belief among the hillfolk that to do so causes coughs and colds, leads to pulmonary tuberculosis, or may even induce a paralytic stroke. Pregnant women bathe very seldom, and never in cold water. In some clans it is believed that death is the penalty for an expectant mother who crosses a running stream, and there are tales of women going to great lengths to avoid this danger.

A pregnant woman may go about her household tasks as usual, but she should never try to "put up" fruit—the stuff will spoil every time. She can attend to her chickens, milk cows, work in her garden, and do other farm chores, but she must on no account jump over the endgate of a wagon, or stoop under a horse's neck—if she does, she is certain to miscarry. "That ought to be good news to the gals who *want* to get rid of their babies," I said to the old woman who told me this. "Hit don't work that-a-way, an' you know it," she answered. "You aint serious-minded, Vance, an' it aint no use to tell you 'bout them things."

It is common knowledge that in certain neurotic families the husband falls ill when the wife becomes pregnant. One man told me that his wife had six children, and that during each pregnancy he vomited every morning, and so on. The midwife confirmed his story, as did a local physician who was familiar with the case. This man's wife was much pleased, thinking that her husband's suffering indicated the depth of his affection for her and somehow made her pregnancy easier. "My man he allus does my pukin' for me," she told the neighbors proudly. Such a situation is not rare enough to cause much comment and is referred to as a sort of joke on the husband.

Not many hillfolk practice any sort of magic to determine

the sex of an unborn child, although some granny-women teach that parents may "fetch a boy" by sticking a knife in the mattress, while a woman who wants a girl can get results by placing a skillet under the bed.

There is a rather common idea that the sex of a child is somehow determined by which parent is the more powerful sexually; if the father is most passionate, the children will be mostly girls, while if the mother is more sensual than the father, there will be many boys in the family.

Some peckerwood folk in central Arkansas believe that if a husband sits on his roof for seven hours, near the chimney, his next child will be a boy. I have known several men to try this, but only one stuck it out for the full seven hours. He took a hammer up with him, and when anybody that he knew came along the road, he pretended to be fixing the roof. The next child *was* a boy, too.

Granny-women say that when a pregnant woman's burden seems to be "carried high" the child is likely to be a female, but an unborn babe that is "carried low" is nearly always a boy. A woman who is "big in front" early in her pregnancy expects a boy baby, while one who grows "big in the back" will give birth to a girl.

When a pregnant woman has a craving for some particular article of food, every effort is made to satisfy it, because otherwise the child is very likely to be "marked." I have seen birth-marks which were supposed to resemble strawberries, cherries, sweet potatoes, prunes, eels, and even hams—all of which owed their existence to the mother's unsatisfied craving for these things. Even if the child has no external marks, his mind is likely to be affected, and he is sure to be "a plumb glutton" for the particular food that could not be obtained for his mother.

Children are also said to be marked by some sudden fright or unpleasant experience of the mother, and I have myself seen a pop-eyed, big-mouthed idiot whose condition is ascribed to

the fact that his mother stepped on a toad several months before his birth. In another case, a large red mark on a baby's cheek was caused by the mother seeing a man shot down at her side, when the discharge of the gun threw some of the blood and brains into her face. Another woman in my neighborhood saw two large snakes fighting or copulating, and when her babe was born some months later it had two writhing serpents in place of a head, according to local testimony. I recall a young farmer who had been worsted in a drunken fight and appeared in the village all covered with blood and dirt. Instantly everybody sprang to prevent the injured man's pregnant wife from seeing him, and one old man shrilled out: "Git Emmy away, folks—she'll mark that 'ar young-un shore!"

The editor of a newspaper at Pineville, Missouri, told me that during the Civil War some bushwhackers killed a man near that place; they cut off one of his ears and threw it into his wife's lap as she sat on her little front porch. The woman was pregnant at the time, and when her child was born one of his ears "warn't nothin' but a wart." The people in Pineville regarded this as a classic case of "marking"—a positive proof that prenatal influence is a fact.

Mr. J. A. Wasson, of Nixa, Missouri, in the *Springfield News*, Sept. 16, 1941, tells of Uncle Wesley McCullah, who was killed by a bullet which incidentally knocked out two of his front teeth. Shortly afterward McCullah's widow gave birth to a baby girl, "born with two teeth the same as her father lost."

"Babies are certainly marked by their mothers during pregnancy," writes Miss Annie K. Wilson, of Magnolia, Arkansas, "a red spot on my finger attesting to that fact, for didn't Mother dress a cut on my father's knee and get blood on her finger?"²

A pregnant woman must not look at a dead body, since this is likely to mark the baby and might cause it to be born dead;

² *Arcadian Life* (April, 1937), p. 27.

women in the early months of pregnancy sometimes attend funerals but always take care not to look directly at the corpse, even if it is that of a near relative.

In Lawrence county, Missouri, a woman gave birth to a female child who was said to be "marked for a cat"—the mother having been startled by an unexpected encounter with a trapped wildcat in the fourth month of her pregnancy. This baby looked all right except that its body was unusually hairy, but it never learned to talk or to walk erect. It mewed and growled like a cat, ate like a cat, and slept curled up on a pillow behind the stove. When the cat girl reached the age of thirteen she began to have "wild spells" at regular intervals, like an animal in heat. So the family built a stout cage inside the house, and shut her up while the "spell" lasted—a neighbor said that "you could hear her a-hollerin' an' a-yowlin' half a mile off." I am told that this cat woman was still living near Aurora, Missouri, in 1941, and she must have been more than fifty years old at that time. In recent years, however, she has been very quiet. She sleeps most of the time and does not have to be caged any longer. I asked a physician who knows that neighborhood about the cat woman. "I have never seen this case," he answered, "but I have heard about her for many years. I don't doubt that they have got an idiot in that house, who walks on all fours, and is unable to talk. Doubtless she eats like an animal and behaves like one in other ways. You can see such creatures in any asylum. But all this stuff about her being 'marked' by a cat—that's just backwoods superstition. If the mother of that idiot had been scared by a wolf instead of a wildcat, the child would have been called a 'wolf girl,' and these farmers would imagine that the noises she makes sound exactly like a wolf growling."

Otto Ernest Rayburn, of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, tells of a woman who was frightened by cattle during her pregnancy, and the child had a strange cowlike face, "with two small growths protruding from the head like horns." Not only that,

but the creature "emitted low, rumbling sounds like the bellowing of a bull!"

I am told that there are numerous secret things to be done and other equally secret things to be avoided during pregnancy, in order to make the delivery as easy as possible. For example, it is very bad luck to make a cap or any kind of headgear for a baby before the baby is born—to do this nearly always makes the "birthin'" a difficult one. In fact, it is dangerous even to *talk* about the head or headgear of a baby before it is born; above all, it is bad luck to tell anybody *not* to make a cap under such conditions. If some ignorant outsider does give an expectant mother a child's cap she burns it instantly, sometimes right before the donor's eyes.

A woman at Paris, Arkansas, told me that a plant called spikenard was the best thing to make childbirth easy, adding that a woman who had plenty of spikenard didn't need no granny-woman; she bought the dried herb from a traveling yarb doctor and didn't know whether it grew wild near Paris or not. "If you caint git spikenard," she said, "the next best thing is sweet flag" (*Acorus calamus*), which is common in many parts of the Ozark country. People near Paris tell me that spikenard is also known as wild licorice; it may be *Aralia racemosa*, but I'm not sure about this.

An oil made from pigs' feet is often given internally in the belief that it somehow facilitates the bearing of healthy children.

I have met two granny-women who carry old silver coins that were once stolen from a church. It is said that to put one of these coins into a feather bed protects the person who sleeps on the bed from cramps and venereal infections, but above all it is used to ease the pains of childbirth.

There are some old people who always make sure that an empty hornets' nest is hanging in the loft of the cabin where a woman is to be confined. I have heard of granny-women who refused to deliver a child until they saw the hornets' nest for

themselves but have never met one who would admit this. It is a fact, however, that there are few really old cabins in which one cannot find a hornets' nest suspended under the eaves, or attached to one of the rafters.

Near Pineville, Missouri, I once sat with a neighbor out in a woodlot, while his wife was giving birth to a child in the house. This man had a regular physician in attendance, but one of the neighborhood granny-women had arrived ahead of the doctor. The patient screamed several times, and then the granny-woman came out to the wood pile and picked up the ax, which she carried into the house. I was horrified at this, but the husband sat unmoved, so I said nothing. After it was all over I asked the doctor privately how on earth the old woman had made use of a five-pound double-bitted ax in her obstetrical practice. The doctor laughed and replied that she just put it under the bed. "A common superstition," he said. "It's supposed to make a difficult birth easier, and she saw that this was going to be a pretty bad one."

Later on I learned that this ax-under-the-bed business is practiced in all parts of the Ozark country. An old granny near Sulphur Springs, Arkansas, told me that an ax used for this purpose must be razor-sharp, since a dull ax may do more harm than good. It appears that some families—I found several near Sylamore, Arkansas—place a sharp plowpoint under the bed, instead of an ax.

In cases of difficult childbirth, many hillfolk burn corncobs on the doorstep, or even under the bed. There is an old story to the effect that red cobs are much more effective than white cobs, but this is not taken seriously. There is some connection, however, in the hillman's mind, between corncobs and child-bearing. I once knew a fellow who was outraged because his wife gathered a great many red cobs and burned them in the fireplace at night; he thought that she did this because she was unwilling to have any more children.

Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, says

that some granny-women, when things begin to go wrong, snatch up all the blankets in the house, dip 'em in hot water, and hang them up around the woman's bed.

Many of the old midwives still administer gunpowder and water to women in labor, believing that it stimulates the muscular contractions which expel the child.

Dr. J. H. Young, Galena, Missouri, told me of an old-time healer who proposed to "quill" a woman who was having a very difficult delivery. Dr. Young had no idea what "quillin" meant, but he found out that the old "doc" intended to fill a turkey quill with snuff and blow it in the woman's face. The theory is that the snuff makes the woman sneeze, and the baby is born instanter.

Granny-women in many parts of the Ozark country used to give a tea made of blackberry root to a woman in childbirth; this was supposed to expedite matters but was regarded as much less drastic than the use of the quill.

After the babe is delivered, some hillfolk burn a handful of chicken feathers under the bed, as this is supposed to stop hemorrhage. If the woman has a really bad "bleedin'" they kill a chicken and fasten the warm lining of its gizzard over the affected part, usually burning a few feathers at the same time. Needless to say, one never sweeps under the bed of a woman in childbirth, or she would surely die. So the ashes of corncobs, chicken feathers or anything else that is burned must lie there until the woman is up and about.

When a babe is "born blue" the granny-woman makes "skillet-bark tea" from the soot off'n the bottom of a kettle or frying pan. She feeds a few drops of this to the child every ten minutes or so over a long period of time, perhaps as much as twenty-four hours.

Many granny-women are accustomed to give every newborn babe quantities of onion tea, then wrap it in a blanket and wait till it "breaks out with the hives." If the reddish rash does not appear, they fear that the child will not live long.

A very common idea is that the afterbirth must be buried just outside the house, at the corner of the chimney. Some women say that the particular spot is not important, but they all agree that the afterbirth should be buried; if it is burned or thrown into water, the mother will not make a proper recovery.³

There are several strange notions about babes born prematurely. The grannies all insist that while seven-month babies are not uncommon, eight-month babies are almost unknown. Or, as one old woman put it, seven-month babes often live, while eight-month babes are nearly all born dead, or die a few hours after birth. I once asked Dr. Oakley St. John, of Pineville, Missouri, whether seven-months babies ever lived to grow up. "Yes," he said solemnly, "if the parents of a seven-months baby are newly married, the baby generally lives. But when a woman who has been married more than eight months has a seven-months baby, it nearly always dies." An old backwoods midwife who was in the office scowled darkly. The granny-women regard this as a serious question, and they do not like to hear people joking about it.

Nothing can convince some of these women that premature babies ever have fingernails. When a baby is born less than nine months after its parents have been married, the old gossips always look for the nails. "Caint fool me," said one old woman. "Them young-uns planted their corn 'bout six weeks 'fore they built their fences. I *seen* fingernails on that baby!"

Many old-timers believe that women never suffer "after-pains" following the birth of a first baby, but very often have them after subsequent births. So if a woman does experience these pains after the birth of her first child, her reputation is more or less damaged, no matter what the midwives and the

³ The same thing is true of amputated limbs, although here the belief is that the owner will return after death in a mutilated condition and be forced to search for the lost member through all eternity.

doctors say. Everybody thinks she must have given birth to a baby some time previously and kept it secret.

There is a very general notion that a woman loses a tooth every time she has a child. Some say that this goes for abortions or miscarriages as well, so that every pregnancy involves the loss of a tooth, no matter what happens to the fetus.

Multiple births are regarded with something like horror in many localities. "It aint fitten for a woman to shell out younguns in litters that-a-way, like a brute beast!" said one of our old neighbors at Pineville, Missouri. Twins are always associated with tragedy and misfortune. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, Mincy, Missouri, recalls that the wife of a notorious Bald Knobber named Matthews gave birth to twins shortly before her husband was hanged at Ozark, Missouri, in 1889. There was a good deal of talk about this at the time, and it is still remembered and discussed in Matthews' old neighborhood.

If a child is born with a caul or "veil" the membrane is carefully dried and given to the child after it reaches maturity, otherwise the youngster is condemned to a life of perpetual misfortune. The series of calamities which befell one of my neighbors is accounted for by the fact that she was born with a veil, which the granny-woman in attendance very properly hung on a bush to dry; this woman forgot to bring it to the house, however, and a great storm blew the thing away into the hills. In case the afterbirth or the veil falls into the hands of an enemy of the family, the child will be more or less in this person's power always and may be forced into all sorts of evil deeds through no fault of its own. Another important thing to be remembered is that the band which protects the navel of an infant must be turned over three times before it is washed or burned; some people regard this as a safeguard against witchcraft, while others think that it simply prevents the child from having back-ache later in life.

Many old-timers believe that sexual unions between human beings and domestic animals are sometimes fruitful. Stories

of women giving birth to litters of puppies, mares bringing forth colts with human heads, and a great variety of similar phenomena are related and generally believed. I have never been able to locate a hillman who has actually seen any of these monstrosities—"the folks allus puts 'em out o' the way," as one old man told me.

Hillfolk will seldom admit that their children were born crippled or defective, since this might somehow discredit the family. They always say that a defective child was injured shortly after birth, or that its condition is due to smallpox, measles, or scarlet fever. I remember a little boy with a crippled foot—the sort of thing that the doctors say is always congenital. The child's father insisted to me that the boy was perfectly normal until the age of two, when he was sick for a long time and "the fever fell in his leg." Another member of the family told me privately that the child had been crippled from birth, because somebody had "throwed a spell" upon the mother.

The place where a birth occurs is of no great importance in Ozark folklore, although some say that a babe is lucky to be born in a covered wagon, or under a wagon sheet. It is generally thought best, however, that the mother's head should be toward the north. Misfortune would certainly be the portion of a child should the moonlight fall upon the bed at the time of its birth, and even an adult who sleeps much in the moonlight is likely to go blind or crazy, or both.

Most of the old-timers believe that a woman should never be bathed "all over," or her bedding completely changed, for nine days after the child is born. Some say that the palms of a child's hands should not be washed until the child is three days old—to do so washes away the infant's luck, particularly in financial matters. It is always best to bathe a new baby's head with stump water; if ordinary water is used, the child is likely to be prematurely bald when it grows up.

Mrs. May Stafford Hilburn says that it is customary to "wrap a newborn boy baby in his father's shirt, to bring the child good

luck. A baby girl is given her mother's petticoat as swaddling clothes, for the same reason." ⁴

Backwoods people sometimes carry a baby boy out into the dooryard when he is very small and show him the outside of the house—it is said that this will prevent him from running away from home later on. Many granny-women think it is a good thing to carry any newborn babe three times around the cabin; some say it protects the infant against sore eyes, others that it wards off colic.

In some clans, when a baby boy is born, a sister of the babe's father comes to the house, looks at the child, and then burns the first hat she finds. No matter whose it is, nor how valuable, she just picks up a hat and throws it into the fireplace. Many people laugh at this and pretend to take it lightly, but it is never omitted in certain families. I know of one case where there was some doubt about the child's paternity, and the husband's family were by no means friendly to the young mother, but despite all this one of the sisters came and burned the hat; she did it silently and grudgingly and most ungraciously, but she did it. This practice is never discussed with outsiders, but it is sufficiently known that a series of funny stories has grown up about hats being burned by mistake, strangers' hats missing, doctors leaving their hats at home, and so on.

Medical men say there's nothing to it, but thousands of old women in the Ozark country are firmly convinced that cats must be kept away from new babies; they believe that if a cat gets a chance, it will sit on the baby's chest and suck its breath until the child is suffocated.

When a very young baby cries and seems in pain, the mother looks to see if the wind is in the northeast; if it is, she doesn't worry, since all babies are supposed to be irritable when the wind is in the northeast.

There are numerous old sayin's about the influence of the day of a child's birth upon its character and prospects. Some

⁴ *Missouri Magazine* (September, 1933), p. 21.

of these are recorded in a rhyme contributed by Mrs. Marie Wilbur, Pineville, Missouri.

Monday's child is fair of face,
 Tuesday's child is full of grace,
 Wednesday's child has far to go,
 Thursday's child is full of woe.
 Friday's child is loving and giving,
 Saturday's child must work for a living.
 A child that's born on the Sabbath day
 Is blithe and bonnie and rich and gay.

Here is a variant from an old manuscript book belonging to Miss Miriam Lynch, Notch, Missouri.

Sunday—never to want,
 Monday—fair in face,
 Tuesday—full of grace,
 Wednesday—woeful and sad,
 Thursday—a long ways to go,
 Friday—loving and giving,
 Saturday—work hard for a living.

A baby born on New Year's will be lucky always, no matter what day of the week it happens to be. A child born at the time of the new moon will be exceptionally strong and muscular.

Children born on Friday the thirteenth will always be unlucky, but a part of this evil may be avoided by falsifying the record; if such a child ever does have any good fortune, it will be after the death of the last person who knows the true date.

Some granny-women claim that a baby born between June 23 and July 23 will be a "natural born failure" all its life, clumsy and unlucky at everything it tries to do. I have known two women, living in widely separated parts of the Ozarks, who took extraordinary precautions to prevent their children being born at this unlucky season. Mr. Booth Campbell, of Cane Hill, Arkansas, told me that the old-timers in his neighborhood always claimed March 21 as the unluckiest birthday in the month, and one of the most unfavorable days in the whole year.

There are several methods of predicting what a child's future life is to be. One of the commonest is to offer a boy baby a bottle, a Bible, and a coin. If he grasps the bottle first, he will be a drunkard; if the Bible, a preacher, or at least a religious man; while if he chooses the coin, he will engage in some mercantile pursuit.

If there are seven sons in a family, and no daughters, the seventh son is clearly intended to be a physician. The seventh son of a seventh son is a physician in spite of himself, endowed with healing powers which cannot be denied. Even if such a man does not study or practice medicine, he is very often called "Doc" or "Doctor" by common consent. However, small-time gamblers are often called "Doc" too, just as every backwoods auctioneer becomes a "Colonel."

If there are ten sons in a family, and no daughters, the tenth son must be a preacher. "God meant it to be that-a-way," an old woman once told me. "He knows how many preachers we need in this world." She would not go so far as to say, however, that it is a mistake to call men who are *not* tenth sons into the ministry.

Many hillfolk believe that a third son is more intelligent than his brothers and should therefore be encouraged to "git more book-l'arnin'." Others contend that, other things being equal, the fourth child has the brains of the whole family. It is often said too that a child who is small for his age is unusually bright, while a boy who is large for his age is generally slow or even dull-witted.

One often hears that babies with long hair grow very slowly, since their strength all goes into the hair. Some hillfolk believe that an infant with very long hair, or any other characteristic which makes it appear older than its real age, will not live long. It is very unfortunate for a baby to see his reflection in a mirror; some say that this will cause the child to have bad luck all his life, others think that he will never live to reach maturity.

A boy baby who bites his nails very young will not grow tall

and is likely to be in poor health most of his life. It is a bad sign for a child to talk before he walks. Many old folks say that if a baby walks before he crawls, there is not much chance of his getting very far in life; some think that such a baby will become insane, or at least very eccentric, when he grows up. A small child who sticks his head into a gnat ball (a swarm of gnats or other small flying insects) will be unlucky and in poor health for seven years.

It is good luck for a new baby to wear another baby's clothes; but once worn, these must never be returned to the child for whom they were first intended. Never tickle a baby under the chin, as this may make him stammer. I have seen backwoods mothers give children water in a thimble; this is believed to help in their teething and produce strong, pleasant voices in later life.

Some old people say that if you take the first louse ever found on the baby's head and crack it on a bell, the child will be a good singer. Nancy Clemens, of Springfield, Missouri, tells me that she once knew a girl who talked a great deal; the girl's parents said, half seriously, that it was because when she was a baby an old woman found a louse on her head and cracked it on a cowbell.

A blister on a boy's tongue is a sure sign that he will be a liar when he grows up, but a blister on a girl's tongue has no such significance. Little girls are told that if they can touch their elbows with a blister on their tongues, they'll turn into boys. It is very bad luck for a little boy to eat birds' eggs; some of the old-timers think that a boy who does so will never mature sexually or will be somehow abnormal in that regard. Small children of either sex are warned against sitting on rocks, or stone steps, since the old folks say it will make 'em hardhearted. A little boy who persists in wearing a string of beads always comes to a bad end and is very likely to be hanged.

Mrs. Isabel Spradley, Van Buren, Arkansas, tells me that the natural or accidental death of a child's pet kitten is a fine thing

for the child, according to the old-timers in her neighborhood. But it is very bad luck for anybody to kill a child's cat intentionally.

Never call a baby "angel," because babies called by that name do not live long. When an infant smiles in its sleep, it may mean that the child is talking to the angels, and this is a bad omen.

Ozark women have some peculiar notions about the proper feeding of nursing mothers. Some women eat great quantities of raw onions, while others drink sorghum-and-water by the gallon, to insure good rich milk for the baby. I know one woman who never touched tobacco ordinarily, but while she was nursing her babe she chewed snuff and "long green" incessantly; she said that this was supposed to purify her milk.

Many Ozark mothers can hardly be induced to wean their children. The doctors say that eight or nine months is long enough for a woman to nurse a child, but thousands of back-country mothers nurse their babes for eighteen months, or even longer. Dr. J. H. Young, Galena, Missouri, tells me that some of his patients don't wean their babes until they are two or even three years of age. I myself have seen children at least five years old run to the mother who was nursing a younger child and beg for "jest a taste, Maw!" The chief reason for all this, I take it, is the belief that a woman who is nursing a child can't become pregnant. I have heard a great many funny stories about this matter of backwoods reluctance to wean children.

One of the more innocent of these tales refers to a sixteen-year-old boy who had never used tobacco. One day he suddenly asked his father for a chew, and the man expressed some surprise. "Well," said the boy, "Maw's been eatin' onions again, an' I got to have somethin' to take the taste out o' my mouth!"

Many backwoods women say that they are not afraid of any infectious disease so long as they are nursing babes. This applies particularly to measles and scarlet fever; women with babes at their breasts walk fearlessly into houses where people

are sick with these diseases, when they would hesitate to do so if their babes were weaned. Some even claim that a nursing mother is temporarily immune to venereal disease, but I do not know how widely this latter idea is accepted.

When a mother is finally persuaded to wean her child, the general opinion is that it should be done in Aquarius, when the sign is in the legs. Others say that either the thighs or the knees are favorable places for the weaning sign. One woman told me that any sign below the heart will do, but that it is absolutely impossible to wean a child when the sign is above the heart, adding that she had seen it tried with most distressing results. May Stafford Hilburn says that "an Ozark mother weans her baby by the sign. If it should be in the head he will be stubborn and refuse food. If it is in the heart he will cry himself sick, and give her much worry. Neither will she disregard the sign if it is in the stomach, for then strange foods will upset his digestion. If she waits until the sign is 'going down' he sleeps like a log, and no bad effects are noticed." ⁵

Even after the child is weaned, there are still some difficulties about feeding. I have seen a woman sitting at a table, with the whole family present, also several strangers who had been invited to dinner. Sitting there with the babe on her lap, she chewed up bits of meat and other food, removed it from her own mouth, and fed it to the child with a little wooden spoon. This performance may be good for the child, but it's pretty tough on the spectators.

⁵ *Missouri Magazine* (September, 1933), p. 20.

