14. Miscellaneous Items

The folk beliefs lumped together under this chapter's heading have little in common, beyond the fact that they do not easily fit into any of the previous chapters. How should one classify, for example, the hillman's strange notions about the physical characteristics correlated with honesty and dependability? There are still old-timers who will have no business dealings with a man whose beard is of a noticeably different color than his hair; I have talked with men and women, as recently as 1936, who refused to support a candidate for public office because his hair was gray and his mustache red.

Colonel A. S. Prather, who lived near Kirbyville, Missouri, in the eighties, always said "Never trust a man with ears too close to the top of his head." And Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, daughter of the Colonel, told me not long ago that she thought there must be some truth in it. Mrs. Mahnkey also quoted Uncle Jim Parnell, who placed small confidence in "a feller who rattled money in his pocket whilst he was a-tradin'." A person with very small ears is generally supposed to be stingy or "close." If a man's fingers are straight and held close together in repose, so that one cannot see the light between one finger and another, it is also a sign of stinginess or at least frugality. When a man begins to speak, and then forgets what he was about to say, many hillfolk believe that the statement he intended to make was a lie.

The common expression "never trust a feller that wears a suit" does not really represent a superstitious belief, but merely the universal prejudice against men from the cities. The back-

woods boys seldom wear suits. They buy expensive trousers sometimes but prefer leather jackets or windbreakers to matching coats. A woman in Branson, Missouri, once said to me: "Them Bull Creek boys is hell on big-legged pants. Don't keer much about coats, but *pants is their pride.*" Many a prosperous young countryman, in possession of a farm, a car, some cattle and other livestock, has never owned a suit of clothes in his life.

It is natural perhaps, in a fox-huntin' country, that a man who doesn't make friends with dogs should be regarded as a suspicious character. Related to this, no doubt, is the old idea that a beekeeper can always be relied upon, while a fellow who doesn't get along with bees is likely to be untrustworthy in financial matters. But what can we make of the old saying that "an honest man never rides a sorrel horse"? I have heard references to this sorrel-horse business in many parts of the Ozark country, over a long term of years, but even today I'm not sure just what is meant by it.

There is a very old sayin' to the effect that a thief always looks into his cup before he drinks. This is quoted in a joking way, but I once met a deputy sheriff in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, who said that he had studied the matter for many years and was almost convinced that there was something in it. "Them old fellers that figgered out such notions," he told me, "was hunters an' Indian fighters. They had sharp eyes, an' they watched ever'thing mighty close."

In a poverty-ridden region such as the Ozarks, one would expect to find a number of superstitions relating to wealth. If a gray moth called the money miller hovers over you, or a little red money spider crawls on your clothes, you are sure to become rich some day. When a honeybee buzzes about your head, it is a sign that you will get a letter with money in it, or at least good news about financial matters. Mr. Clarence Marshbanks, of Galena, Missouri, says that the children used to cry "Money 'fore the week's out!" whenever they saw a redbird; the idea

is that if you could get it all said before the bird was out of sight, there would be money coming your way by the end of the week.

A person whose initials spell a word is certain to be rich, sooner or later. A man with a wart or mole on the neck is supposed to be fortunate in money matters, according to the old rhyme:

Mole on the neck,
Money by the peck.

A woman with conspicuous hairs on her breasts will attain riches, if we are to believe the old-timers.

Ozark children are often told that if the lucky-bones taken from crawfish are buried in the earth, they'll turn into nickels in a fortnight. Many a credulous mountain boy has tried this, and one youngster said disgustedly: "God, what a lie old Granny Durgen told me!"

The man who has an eye tooth extracted should hasten to bury it in a cemetery, on an infidel's grave, because this is sure to bring money within six months. When you see a lot of bubbles on the surface of your coffee, try to drink them all before they disappear, for if you succeed it means that you are about to make a large sum of money.

On seeing a shooting star, always cry out "money-money-money" before it disappears, and you will inherit wealth. When you first glimpse the new moon, turn over a coin in your pocket without looking at the moon again, and you will be fortunate in money matters. It is always a good idea to be touching a silver coin whenever you see the moon, and it may be for this reason that rings hammered from silver coins are so popular in some sections. A girl who happens to see the new moon "cl'ar o' brush" hastens to kiss her hand three times and expects to find something worth a lot of money before the moon changes.

Like most primitive folk, the Ozark natives attach considerable importance to dreams, but their dream interpretations don't

seem to differ greatly from those current among unlettered people in other parts of the country.

To dream of muddy water means trouble, to dream of snakes presages a battle with one's enemies, to dream of money means that the dreamer will be poorer than ever before. A dream of white horses is unlucky and may mean sickness or death in the family. A dream of death is good luck if the dream comes at night and usually signifies a wedding, but to fall asleep in the daytime and dream of death is very unfortunate. A dream of childbirth is always welcome, a sign of a happy and prosperous marriage. The man who dreams repeatedly of fishes will attain great wealth. To dream of chickens is bad luck, and the vision of a black boat means an early death. A lady at Fort Smith, Arkansas, told me that she had discarded nearly all the superstitions of her childhood, but still felt that it is bad luck to dream about cattle. To dream of a hoe or a rake signifies a happy marriage. The girl who dreams always of storms and floods will marry a rich man. It is good luck to dream of pigeons or doves, and usually means that a fortunate love affair is just around the corner.

The first dream that one has in a new house, or when sleeping under a new quilt, will nearly always come true—many mountain girls are anxious to "dream out" a new quilt or coverlet. The same may be said of a dream related before breakfast, or of one dreamed on Friday and told on Saturday:

> Friday night's dream, on Saturday told,
> Will always come true, no matter how old.

An old woman at Pineville, Missouri, told me that as a little girl she dreamed of a gigantic snake coiled around her father's log house. She says this was a sign of the Civil War which broke out a few months later, in which her father and two brothers were killed. In 1865 she dreamed that the big snake was dead, upon which she knew that the War would soon be ended.

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

that the best way to stop unpleasant dreams is to stuff cloth into the key hole. But I'm not sure that she means this to be taken literally.

Some people are accustomed to place a knife under the dreamer's pillow, to prevent nightmares. I once noticed a small girl, not more than ten years old, sleeping with the handle of an enormous homemade bowie knife sticking out from under her pillow. "Maizie used to wake up a-hollerin'," the mother told me, "but since I put that there knife under the piller, we aint had no more trouble." Somnambulism is related to nightmares in the hillman's mind, and there is a widespread belief that one should never awaken a sleepwalker, as this may cause instant death. The Ozarker who sees a friend walking in his sleep just strides along beside him and tries to keep him from getting into danger, but makes no effort to wake him up.

At several places in Missouri and Arkansas one hears of "electric springs." I never saw one of these, but persons in Lanagan and Anderson, Missouri, told me that if you dip your knife in the waters of a certain spring branch north of Anderson, the steel blade becomes a magnet. A boy assured me that the blade of his clasp knife retained its magnetic properties for several months, after being immersed in the "electric water" about five minutes.

Most hillfolk believe that all water which is clear and cold is good to drink—they cannot understand that such water may carry deadly organisms. Many persons contend that any spring water, no matter how contaminated, is purified by running over a hundred feet of gravel.

It is said that a man who takes three drinks in three minutes from any Ozark spring is bound to return for another drink before he dies. In one form or another, that story is heard all over the Ozark country. But whether it is really old-time stuff, or was cooked up by the Chamber of Commerce propagandists, I have been unable to find out.

There is an odd belief that stalactites or stalagmites are

somehow deadlier than other stones, and that even a slight blow from a piece of "drip rock" is generally fatal. Carl Hovey, of Springfield, Missouri, was killed years ago by bumping his head on a stalactite and is still remembered and talked about whenever this superstition is mentioned.

The "git-your-wish" class of superstitions is rather large, but I don't think it is taken very seriously by many adults nowadays. Grown people still go through the motions, but it is only the children who really believe that their wishes will come true.

When a little girl sees a redbird she "throws a kiss an' makes a wish." If she can throw *three* kisses before the bird disappears, she is certain that her wish will be granted unless she sees the same bird again, in which case all bets are off. Some say that if one spies a cardinal in a tree he should always make a wish and then throw a stone; if the bird flies upward the wish will be granted, but if it flies downward the desire will never be satisfied.

The hillman who sees a snake trail across a dusty road often spits in the track and makes a wish; such wishes are supposed to come true, particularly if nobody is within sight of the spitter at the time.

When a plowman hears the first turtle dove in the spring, he makes a wish and turns round three times on his left heel. Then he takes off his left shoe, and if he finds a hair in the shoe which is the color of his wife's or sweetheart's hair, he feels that his wish will be realized. Several sober and generally truthful farmers have told me that they have tried this and actually found the hair; one man said it was a very long hair, coiled up as if it had been placed in the shoe deliberately.

Some hillfolk "stick a wish" on a soaring buzzard high up and far away; if the bird passes out of sight without flapping its wings, they think that the wish will be granted. "When you see a little new colt," said one of my neighbors, "always spit in your hand an' make a wish; your wish is bound to come true, 'cordin' to the old folks."

Many Ozark children believe in "stamping mules," especially gray or white mules. On seeing one of these animals the child wets his thumb, presses a little saliva into the palm of the left hand, and "stamps" it with a blow of his fist. When he has stamped twenty mules he makes a wish—it's sure to be granted. In some parts of the Ozarks, where Negroes are rare but not entirely lacking, I am told that the children "stamp niggers" the same as mules. I met children near Mena, Arkansas, who were stamping white horses too, but without much enthusiasm; they said it was necessary to stamp a hundred horses before making a wish.

An old woman near Noel, Missouri, always makes a wish when she sees a spotted horse, believing that if she refrains from looking at the animal again and tells someone about the occurrence as soon as possible, her wish will come true. "But it won't work in Oklahomy," she said with a toothless grin, "there's too many paint ponies over there."

If a hillman happens to see a star before dark he shuts his eyes for a moment, spits over his left shoulder, and makes a wish. Many an Ozarker "sticks a wish" on a falling star; if he succeeds in pronouncing the words under his breath before the star is out of sight and refrains from telling anybody the nature of the wish, he believes that it will come true. When the first star of the evening appears backwoods children make a wish, then cross their fingers and chant:

> Star light, star bright,
> First star I seen tonight,
> I wish I may, I wish I might,
> Git the wish I wish tonight!

Children at Reeds Spring, Missouri, when they see a yellow boxcar standing still, stamp their feet and make a wish. If the yellow car is moving, the charm doesn't work.

Some hillfolk say that if you make a wish at the bottom of a long steep hill and don't speak or look back until you have

reached the top, your wish is sure to be granted. It is well to make a wish, also, when one walks on strange ground for the first time. Some people make a wish whenever they see a woman wearing a man's hat.

In Taney county, Missouri, they say that the first time a woman sews on a button for a man, she should make a wish about that man's future, and such a wish invariably comes true.

It is bad luck to drop a comb, but when an Ozark woman does so she invariably puts her foot on it and makes a wish. When a girl's dress turns up accidentally, she knows that her lover is thinking of her and hastens to kiss the hem and make a wish, confident that it will be granted. If her shoestring comes untied she asks a friend to tie it, and while this is being done she makes a wish. When a child's tooth is extracted he doesn't throw it away but puts it under his pillow and sleeps on it, confident that this will cause his chief desire to be granted within a few days.

When a young girl in Springfield, Missouri, finds one of her eyelashes which has fallen out, she puts it on her thumb and makes a wish; then she blows the eyelash away and believes that her wish will come true.

If two Ozark children happen to pronounce the same word or phrase at the same time, they must not speak again until they have hooked their little fingers together, made wishes, and chanted the following:

First voice: "Needles,"
Second voice: "Pins,"
First voice: "Triplets,"
Second voice: "Twins."
First voice: "When a man marries,"
Second voice: "His troubles begin,"
First voice: "When a man dies,"
Second voice: "His troubles end."
First voice: "What goes up the chimney?"
Second voice: "Smoke!"

This done, the youngsters unhook their little fingers and go on about their business, each satisfied that his or her desire will be fulfilled. A girl in Stone county, Missouri, told me that all her schoolmates were familiar with this ceremony, and that many practiced it even after they were old enough to attend the village high schools.

A woman at West Plains, Missouri, places her right hand on the closed Bible, makes a wish, and opens the book at random. She does this three times, muttering the same wish under her breath. If the opened Bible shows the words "it came to pass" three times in succession, she is sure to get her wish. This woman tells me that she has been doing this for many years, and that perhaps 90 percent of her prayers have been granted. "Of course," she told me smiling, "a body shouldn't wish for somethin' that aint *reasonable*."

Another semi-serious ceremony occurs when the first louse is found on a boy baby's head. This is quite an occasion in some families, and the other children all gather round while the mother kills the louse by "popping" it on the family Bible. While doing this she intones a wish about the children's future profession and salutes him as lawyer, doctor, merchant, farmer, preacher or what-not. This ritual is not exactly a joke—children are not allowed to laugh at anything in which the Bible is concerned—but I do not think many adults really believe that the child's future is determined by "louse poppin'."

One sometimes hears cryptic references to one hillman "drivin' a stake" or "plantin' a bush" in another's dooryard. My first impression was that these phrases referred to what the hillfolk call "family matters," but I learned later that sometimes they are to be taken quite literally. A lawyer in McDonald county, Missouri, told me that our local rich man, in a towering rage, had exhibited a "green stake" which an enemy had driven into his front lawn at midnight. He wanted the lawyer to see that the stake driver was arrested and flung into jail. "He thought the fellow had made a *wish* on the stake, or some-

thing," the attorney chuckled. "A kind of spooky business. No sense to it at all. I just threw the stake in the fire, an' advised my client to go back home an' forget it."

In the *Taney County Republican*, a weekly newspaper published at Forsyth, Missouri, Feb. 20, 1941, appeared the following bit of gossip: "Rita Reynolds and Arnold Davis are planning on planting a tree in Alvin Huff's yard." The neighbors told me that Rita had been "goin' with" Alvin, but the two had quarreled, and now she was "goin' with" Arnold Davis instead. Some members of the Huff family were said to be considerably displeased about this item in the *Republican*. But nobody seemed willing to tell me just what was meant by it.

Some hillfolk believe that if the cicadas or "locusts" have a black *W* on their wings it is a sure sign of war. Mrs. May Kennedy McCord insists that there is something in this notion and recalls that she saw the fatal *W* on locusts' wings the year of the Spanish-American War.[1]

An old man near Bentonville, Arkansas, told me that it was no trouble to predict the result of any national election. If the Democrats are going to win, every garden is full of dog fennel; if a Republican victory is in the cards, dog fennel will be scarce, and plantain will choke every fence corner in Arkansas—which God forbid! Asked about the best method of doping out the Democratic primaries, the old chap just grinned and shook his head.

During the presidential campaign of 1928, many Ozarkers saw a strange light in the sky, doubtless the aurora borealis. Some people in Christian county, Missouri, were very much frightened; they thought the end of the world was at hand, so they held a big prayer-meeting. Clay Fulks, a professor at Commonwealth College, near Mena, Arkansas, told me that his neighbors believed that the light was a sign from God Almighty, warning the people not to vote for Al Smith.

In the early days of the New Deal, many Holy Roller preach-

[1] Springfield (Missouri) *News & Leader*, Jan. 4, 1933.

ers wandered through the backwoods of Missouri and Arkansas denouncing the "Blue Eagle" of the NRA, claiming that it was the evil sign described in the Apocalypse. The Joplin (Missouri) *Globe* (Aug. 29, 1933) discussed this matter seriously at some length, estimating that "between 20 and 25 percent of the population of the foothill region" identified the NRA symbol with the seven-headed beast of doom mentioned by St. John. In 1942 I heard one of these fellows in the courtyard at Galena, Missouri, preaching against the government sugar rationing; he placed great emphasis upon the "mark" or "stamp" which he said was predicted in the Bible. "Right over thar at Troy Stone's store," he cried, "you caint even git a little poke o' sugar without that stamp!"

Many Ozarkers feel that there is some religious or political significance connected with any unusual mark on an egg shell, and such marks are carefully studied. Old-timers in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas still talk of the "hen-egg revivals" which swept over this region in pioneer days. The story goes that some old woman found an egg with the words "Judgment is at Hand" plainly marked on the shell. Ministers of various sects came long distances to examine this egg and preached about it. The general impression prevailed that it was a "token" or omen and meant that the end of the world was soon to come. People became very religious for awhile, but after a year or so had passed and nothing happened, the excitement gradually died down, and the "hen-egg revival" was regarded as a sort of joke.

As recently as 1935 a similar excitement arose in the village of Couch, Missouri, when Mrs. Henry Bennett found an egg imprinted with the phrase "Here my Word 35." Viewing this as a religious portent, Mrs. Bennett told her neighbors about it. "A wave of excited piety overtook Couch," reports *Time*, Feb. 4, 1935. "To Mrs. Bennett's home went visitor after visitor, to emit fervent prayers. When, in a fit of devout jitters, a female preacher dropped the egg and broke it, Mrs. Bennett

succeeded in gluing enough pieces on another egg so that the words were still visible." Mrs. Bennett said that she did not know what the egg meant, but "it was sent to us for some good reason, and there is no need for the children of God to be afraid."

A woman once showed me a strange scar, something like a Chinese ideograph, on an egg shell. Later she told me privately that her husband, who was a Pentecostal preacher, had fallen into a trance at sight of the "inscription" and translated it. The message stated, he said, that Jesus Christ was going to visit the United States, run for President on the Democratic ticket, and "stump the whole State of Arkansas!"

Well, so much for superstition in the Ozark country. When I began to collect material for this book, more than twenty-five years ago, it seemed to me that these old folk beliefs were disappearing very rapidly and would soon be rejected and forgotten. I intimated as much in my first paper on the subject, published in 1927.[2] We all talked at length about scientific progress, and enlightenment, and the obvious effect of popular education. But now, I am not so sure. I am not so sure about anything, nowadays.

[2] *Journal of American Folklore,* Vol. 40 (1927), pp. 78–98.