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# The 'Charm Doctors' of Leslie County: Oral histories of male witches, midwives, and faith healers in Leslie County, Kentucky 1878-1978

Matthew R. SPARKS[1]

*This paper critically analyzes oral histories concerning three men who lived in the rural communities of Leslie County, Kentucky between 1878 and 1978: John B. Maggard, a gunsmith, blacksmith, farmer and faith healer; George Joseph, reported to be a prophet, a witch, and a herb doctor; and Matt Gray, a multi-generational male midwife and mountain doctor. These reports provocatively suggest that certain men of Appalachian communities functioned as 'witch doctors' or 'charm doctors' providing herbal medicine, faith healing, "magical" and midwifery services to their communities from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. In placing the accounts of these men in conversation with literature on British folkways in the United States and Cherokee medicinal lore, this study provides insight into the traditional methods and social functions of community healers in pioneer Appalachian societies prior to the entry of modern medicine and midwifery into Appalachia.*

Key-words: *Appalachia, witchcraft, faith healing, ethnobotany, midwifery*

## 1. Introduction

The 'charm' doctor'[2], a localized practitioner of "magic", purveyor of healing herbs, and transmitter of occult knowledge in the historically isolated Appalachian mountain communities is a figure of unique historical and anthropological significance. A composite social role with antecedents in the British/Western European, Native American and African American ethnomedical traditions that converged in the Appalachian region, the 'charm doctor' functioned in the quasi-shamanic position of *folk practitioner* in early Appalachian societies, acting as a mediator between the community and the unseen world to affect supernatural

[1] Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Department of Middle East Studies, mrs290@georgetown.edu
[2] Thomas, D. and Thomas, L. (1920). *Kentucky Superstitions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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outcomes.[3] This research traces the development and evolution of the role and analysis of the figure of the Appalachian 'charm doctor' over a 100 year period in the context of Leslie County, Kentucky using local oral history and ethnographic sources. The accounts of the lives and exploits of John B. Maggard, George Joseph, and Matt Gray, three 'charm doctors' who lived in the rural communities of Leslie County, Kentucky between 1878 and 1978, provide rare insight into the syncretic fabric of life in the communities in south-central Appalachia. By contextualizing these accounts, a provocative new picture of Appalachian pioneer communities emerges in which the medical necessity of bridging the gap between the visible and invisible worlds was explicitly acknowledged, formalized, and engendered in the character of the 'charm doctor.'

## 2. Antecedents: "Backcountry Magic," Cherokee medicine and African American slave medicine in 18th century Appalachia

The genealogy of the 'charm doctors' of Appalachia can be traced through two folkways which converged in the southeastern Appalachian Mountains in the 18th century: the peoples of the English-Scottish "Borderlands" and Northern Ireland who immigrated in four waves between 1717-1775[4], and the complex system of holistic medicine used by the Cherokee nation, one of the largest tribes of Native American peoples inhabiting the southeastern Appalachian region. According to historian David Fischer, the folkways of the ethnically mixed but culturally homogenous Scottish "border" region and their "Scots-Irish" settler kin possessed certain unique features that distinguished them from their contemporary Anglo-European co-settlers of 18th century North America[5]. Relevant to this study are two features that the "borderers" and the "Scots-Irish" settlers carried with them to the backcountry: their concept of gender roles, and their strong beliefs in magic and witchcraft. Fischer characterizes the societal conception of gender among these so-called "backcountry" settlers of the Appalachian backcountry as being more egalitarian in terms of the gendered division of labor and familial hierarchy than those of other Anglo-European settler communities of the Americas. Fischer notes that familial organization among the "backcountry" settlers was based on collateral

[3] Krippner, S. and B. Colodzin. (1981). "Folk Healing and Herbal Medicine: An Overview." Pp. 13–29 in *Folk Medicine and Herbal Healing*, edited by G. G. Meyer, K. Blum, and J. G. Cull. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

[4] Fischer, D. (1989). *Albion's seed*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, pp.606-608.

[5] Ibid. pp. 621-622

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rather than lineal descent regarding all members of the clan (irrespective of age or sex) as equals, while typical household labor was not rigidly defined according gender roles as in other British folkways (although it generally followed established patriarchal patterns)[6]. Secondly, Fischer notes that a strong belief in magic and specifically witchcraft was prevalent throughout much of the settlers of the backcountry, who relied heavily on the charms of "witchmasters", local specialists called upon to undo the black magic of "witches," and other ills believed to be of a supernatural origin.[7] So strong were these beliefs in witchcraft among the backcountry dwellers, Fischer observes, that magic folk beliefs encompassed nearly every aspect of backcountry life, including diet, habits, clothing, and speech.[8]

The early Anglo-European settlers of the Appalachian backcountry, however, were not the only inhabitants of the region. The Cherokee nation inhabited the southeastern United States long before the arrival of the Europeans, having long developed their own complex system of medicine, theory of disease, and a class of individuals known as "medicine men" who functioned as the Cherokee nation's own healers, priests, and keepers of occult knowledge.[9] A detailed discussion of the Cherokee system of medicine is beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is important to note several of the defining characteristics of the Cherokee medicinal system, including: a detailed theory of the spiritual origins of bodily diseases; diagnostic procedures; a complex pharmacopeia of medicinal herbs to be used in conjunction with numerous sacred incantations; a system of dream analysis; a healing ritual carried out by the "medicine man;" and the transmission of healing knowledge and practice over time via induction into the Cherokee priesthood.[10] Thanks to the work of early anthropologists such as John Payne, we have some insight into the sacred processes of initiation into the Cherokee priesthood:

> Candidates for priesthood typically were chosen before birth from preselected families with a history of initiation into the priesthood. At birth, the male child would receive a consecrating concoction that began a process of becoming a priest. The child would remain in the view of the active priest

[6] Ibid. pp. 662-680

[7] Ibid. p. 708

[8] Ibid. p. 708

[9] Mooney, J. (1890). Cherokee Theory and Practice of Medicine. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 3(8), p.44.

[10] Frazier, S., Goad, S. and Wolyniak, M. (2013). The Science and Philosophy of Cherokee Indian Medicine: A Natural Alternative to Western Solutions. *Hampden-Sydney College Journal of Sciences*, [online] II. Available at: http://blogs.hsc.edu/sciencejournal/files/2013/03/Frazier1.pdf [Accessed 16 Jun. 2019].

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> in the tribe in order to ensure his purity by keeping him from eating certain foods and helping him to understand his role by practicing fasting. At the age of 9 or 10, the child would follow the priest to a mountaintop, drink the purifying drink, and maintain focus on the sun for the duration of the day. The following day, the priest would take his pupils to an undisclosed part of the mountain to teach them the secret powers of the Divining Crystal and the accompanying prayers and rituals…[11]

Once initiated, the vows of secrecy taken by the initiate were to be strictly observed and the secret knowledge to be transmitted only to those who had received the proper training, lest he forfeit his healing abilities and risk attracting supernatural misfortune.[12] As will be demonstrated in the analysis to follow, several elements of the Cherokee medicinal system were incorporated into the healing practices of the Appalachian 'charm doctors.' Notably, the vast herbal lore of the Cherokee, the role of incantations in the healing ritual, and the secrecy surrounding the reception and transmission of the healing knowledge.

A final component of the Appalachian faith healing tradition, African-American Slave Medicine, is worth mentioning here. The ethnobotanical lore and healing practices of African American slaves in the American south has gained new attention in the past decade, having been thoroughly explored by Herbert C. Covey in his *African American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Non-Herbal Treatments*. Although there is a regrettable dearth of sources on the histories of ethnomedicine among the slaves of Southeastern Kentucky and Central Appalachia, the similarities between types of *materia medica* utilized and the shamanic characteristics of the faith healer and the Appalachian 'charm doctor' are worthy of further analysis. For the present study, and future explorations of Appalachian faith healing, the African American ethnomedical tradition should nevertheless be considered as a unique strand of American ethnomedicine which may have informed the syncretic folk healing traditions of Appalachia.[13]

What would emerge from the intercourse between the Anglo-European and the Cherokee folk-healing traditions as the two groups encountered each other in the 18th century, however, would be a syncretic form of faith healing. One which

[11] Ibid. (Paraphrased from Payne, J., Butrick, D., Anderson, W., Brown, J. and Rogers, A. (2010). *The Payne-Butrick Papers*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, pp.31-32 by Frazier, Goad, and Wolyniak).

[12] Ibid.

[13] Covey, H. (2008). *African American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Non-Herbal Treatments*. Plymouth, UK: Roman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

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blended the metaphysical worldview of the backcountry borderers with the social, medicinal, and ritual traditions of the Cherokee nation. Although the precise mechanisms by which this syncretic tradition of the 'charm doctor' evolved is the province of future anthropologists and historians, we can examine the trace elements of each tradition present within the oral historical tradition that would emerge in Appalachia in the 19th century.

## 2.1. The emergence of a syncretic folk-healing tradition in 19th Century Appalachia

### *2.1.1. Appalachian witchcraft in Leslie County*

"There was said to be much witchcraft practiced in Leslie County during the pioneer days" Mary Brewer records in her "Rugged Trail to Appalachia."[14] Indeed, if our accounts are taken to be accurate representations, it does seem that many of the citizens of Leslie County in the early to mid 19th century were quite convinced of the existence of witchcraft. As in the 16th century Scottish borderlands[15], witches it seemed could be essentially blamed for any mischief that would befall the citizens of the rural mountain communities of Leslie County. Many of these reports involve incidents regarding typical subsistence farming or agrarian practices of the day, such as churning butter and caring for livestock. However, much as in the Scottish Borderlands, witches were also blamed for causing disease, crop failure, and general misfortune in mountain communities. There are two recorded instances of folklore in Leslie County concerning the subject of witchcraft, namely of how a person "becomes" a witch:

> John Nantz said Saul Burkhardt told him how to make a witch. He said he was up on top of the mountain when the sun went a' peeping up… and he said that when the sun peeps up you curse the lord and swear allegiance to the devil for the rest of ye days, and he said there was the awfulest storm a' come ever was and said they was three, no two drops of blood fell in something or another, they called it a pewter basin, and said theys another storm come and he got scared went runnin' off the hill[16] and if he had stayed

[14] Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, p.115.

[15] Maxwell-Stuart, P. (2005). *An Abundance of Witches: The Great Scottish Witch Hunt*. Stroud: Tempus.

[16] Humorously, Dora Fields notes that after this incident, the man "John Nantz" became one of the "finest preachers" in all of Laurel County, Kentucky.

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> till that last drop he'd a wrote his name down in that—with that blood, and he'd a been a witch. – Dora Fields [17]

Other variants of this operation (recorded in *Kentucky Superstitions)* involve shooting at the sun before "cursing the lord and blessing the devil." This action was said to bring on a raging storm, that if the invoker was able to remain standing upright throughout, would result in his becoming a witch.[18]

A second version of becoming a witch is recorded in Sadie Wells Stidham's *Leslie County Kentucky 1878-1978: A Folk History of Facts and Fiction*:

> Another way was to get up in the morning before sunrise and go toward the east until he came to a black stump. He was not to speak or say a word to anyone until he returned home. The trip to the stump and back was to be repeated for seven mornings. The seventh morning the devil would meet him at the stump. He then cursed the lord and swore allegiance to the devil. After that he became a witch.[19]

Though apocryphal, these accounts help to contextualize the 'charm doctors' within the very real beliefs of the mountain people in the existence and power of witches which we will explore further in this study.

### *2.1.2. Herb doctors*

The figure of the itinerant herb doctor was another common feature of the Appalachian hills prior to, and after the introduction of modern medicine. Though trained physicians living in Leslie County such as Dr. Garrett Begley[20] were contemporaries with some of the individuals discussed in this study, for the most common ailments, the herbal remedies of the mountains were still the first line of defense. Herb doctors were the purveyors of this knowledge and many of them were held in high regard by the community. As described by Sadie Stidham:

[17] Fields, Dora, interview by Sadie W. Stidham. April 30, 1979, Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.
[18] Stidham, S. (1978). *Trails Into Cutshin Country: A History of the Pioneers of Leslie County, Kentucky*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press Inc. pg. 119
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid. pg. 149

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> The herb doctor usually made two trips each year. He traveled on foot and carried his medicine in a bag. He carried a smaller bag of trinkets to sell to the women. In the trinket bag he carried sewing items such as needles, thread, thimbles, buttons, and other small items. In the medicine bag, he had castor oil, salts, black draught, turpentine, quinine, catarrhal tonic, liniment, salve, Japanese oil, cough syrup, and Indian root pills.[21]

Some herb doctors, such as George Joseph, were also known to prepare their own herbal mixtures from the locally available flora, most, if not all of which were a part of the Cherokee pharmacopeia.[22] White Oak bark (*Quercus alba)*, "Burr-vine" (most likely *Galium aparine*), Spruce Pine (*Pinus glabra),* and Mullein (*Verbascum)* were used to cure fevers and colds, as were poultices made from turpentine. Quinine was also used to treat high grade fevers. Teas made from the Pennyrile flower (*Hedeoma pulegioides)*, Dandelion (*Taraxacum*), Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum)*, Birch (*Betula)*, and Mayapple roots (*Podophyllum peltatum)* were also used to treat a variety of mild conditions, including headaches, stomach problems, and even the measles. Breathing problems were also believed to be treatable by inhaling the smoke of dried Black Cherry bark (*Prunus serotina)*, "Life-Everlasting" (*Helichrysum stoechas*) and Calamus (*Acorus calamus)* leaves[23].

As we will see from the examples of George Joseph and Matt Gray, all of these traditional Cherokee medicinal plants were utilized by the 'charm doctors' of Appalachia to treat virtually every form of illness known to the early pioneers of the Appalachian backcountry. In this sense, the role of the herb doctors, or more specifically, their knowledge of the medicinal herbs of the region, was a medical necessity in many of the early Appalachian mountain communities.

### *2.1.3. "Granny Women" midwives*

The ancient practice of birth assistance and midwifery has played a critical role in all societies. The medicalization of birth, and by extension midwifery in modern times is ripe ground for comparative sociological and anthropological analyses, and

[21] Ibid. pg. 149

[22] Matt Gray, who could be considered a more recent embodiment of this herbal tradition, recalls a vast amount of herbal remedies that he has used to treat various diseases and deliver children, which we will examine later in this study.

[23] Stidham, S. (1978). *Trails Into Cutshin Country: A History of the Pioneers of Leslie County, Kentucky*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press Inc pp. 146-147. NB: Common names of the plants of Appalachia are used in this study. Where possible, the scientific names of these plants have been added in parenthesis.

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Appalachia, specifically Leslie County, provides a fascinating case study. Before the arrival of the Frontier Nursing Service and their famed mounted nurses and midwives, nearly all children in the region were been delivered by "Granny Women." The Granny Women midwives of the Appalachian mountains were essentially elders of the community who had little to no professional training, but were practically experienced in the art of midwifery and knowledgeable in the medicinal herbs of the mountains to ensure an easy delivery. In addition to the use of quinine for pain, gunpowder was reportedly used to quicken the labor pains, while other soothing herbs were used to calm the newborn. The only tool often used by "Granny Women" was a knife to cut the umbilical cord. When the expectant mother began to feel her initial labor pains, she would send her husband to bring the granny woman to the homeplace. After the delivery of the child, it was not uncommon for the granny women to remain at the home for a few days to help with the household chores. Granny women were often paid with whatever the family could afford in money, labor or agricultural produce. Sadie Stidham records Mrs. Joe Shell's memories of her mother, Sarah Morgan's experiences in working as a "Granny woman":

> When someone came for her to go to deliver a baby, she went in her wagon. It was hard for her to get on and off a horse or mule. She took clothes and sometimes food with her. She delivered the baby and stayed with the family as long as she was needed. She gave teas in case of a miscarriage. She used gunpowder to start the miseries (pains). She said whiskey or hot ginger tea always made the delivery easier. She always gave catnip tea to the newborn baby. She was paid six dollars when she stayed for several days. She never lost a baby and folks always loved and respected her. Most people called her "Aunt Sarah."[24]

Fascinatingly, as we will see in the case of Matt Gray, not all granny women were women! Male birth assistants or midwives, though not as common as their female counterparts, did in fact perform these duties in areas Leslie County.

With the establishment of the Frontier Nursing Service in Leslie County in 1925, modern medicine, healthcare practices, and midwifery now became widely accessible to hitherto inaccessible areas. According to local historian Mary Brewer, between 1927 and 1930 six FNS outposts had been set up across the 1200 square miles of Leslie County, providing medical care to even the most isolated of

[24] Ibid. p. 148

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mountain communities.[25] The opening of local clinics and the increased mobility of the FNS trained courier nurses and midwives made the "Herb Doctors" and "Granny Women" midwives mostly obsolete relics of a more primitive time. Nevertheless, the memories of the faith healers, herb doctors, witches, and "Granny-Women" of the old days have survived up to the present day in the oral histories and written records of Leslie Countians.[26] These recollections offer penetrating insights into the metaphysical worldview, medicinal practices, spiritual beliefs, and societal roles of the early pioneer families of Leslie County, and shed light onto the oft-neglected role that men played as faith healers, witches, herb doctors, and midwives in traditional Appalachian culture.

We will now proceed to our analysis of the reports of three men of Leslie County who most saliently embody the archetype of the 'charm doctor' in the region.

## 3. The 'Charm Doctors' of Leslie County

In this section of the study, we will examine oral histories concerning three men, George Joseph, John. B. Maggard, and Matt Gray who can broadly be described as functioning within the spectrum of the role of 'charm doctor' in Leslie County within the span of a century (1878-1978). Through these accounts, I argue that we can trace the development of this role in Appalachian societies from the 19th to the 20th century.

### 3.1. "Witchy" George Joseph

> "I've read about Uncle George, everyone wants to know something about him and he's bound to be a witch, don't you think he coulda been a witch?! My mother told the awfulest stories ever was about him, that was her uncle!"--Dora Fields[27]

[25] Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, pg. 35

[26] The Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project housed at the University of Kentucky's Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History is an invaluable resource for oral and life histories of Leslie County prior to the arrival of the Frontier Nursing Service. The number of accounts referenced in this study which describe the life and practices of the families of Leslie County before the modernization of medical care via FNS are referred as necessary in the footnotes.

[27] Fields, Dora, interview by Sadie W. Stidham. April 30, 1979, Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

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Among those who remember him, George Joseph was a legendary, but very real figure in the folk histories of Leslie County. George was the son of Clemmy Joseph who settled in Leslie County after leaving Wise County, Virginia in 1869.[28] Although the origins of the Joseph family are uncertain various, members of the Joseph family have claimed that the family was of Jewish "Assyrian", Irish, or Austrian-German descent.[29] The fifth son of a family of eight children, George married three times in his long life and sired ten children of his own.[30] George lived in an area of Leslie County known as Wooton's Creek and was widely regarded as a kind, if eccentric man, with powerful healing abilities and the possession of a "sixth sense."[31] In his old age, George became something of a vagabond, wandering from place to place and frequently spending the night with relatives and friends.[32] Two sources described George as being strongly religious, praying for many hours a day.[33] George was said to be able to prophesy and foretell future events, as well as speak to and control the behavior of animals, curse the bullets of hunters to make them miss their targets, and remove growths, warts, boils, and tumors.[34] He was also said to be able to magically transform into an animal.[35] Several sources recall that whenever George was getting ready "to cast a spell" he would lay down in front of a fireplace with his head towards the fire so that the fire would "bake" the top of his head. When his head became hot – he was then ready to cast a spell.[36] According to one source, one time while doing this preparation, he even fell into the fire and had to be rescued.[37] Another source claims in addition to washing with hot water on hot days, George also had the habit of "tempering himself" by breaking the ice of the creek and washing with the freezing river water on winter

[28] Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, pg. 104

[29] A lengthy examination of the members of the Joseph family and their origins can be found in Mary T. Brewer's *The Rugged Trail to Appalachia*.

[30] Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, pg. 105 George was first married to Polly Lewis their children were Elisha, Samuel, and Ollie. His second marriage was to Mary Polly Miniard, their two children were William and Alfred. His third marriage was to Rebecca Boggs York, and their children were Silas, Levi, Clemmy, Reason, Elihu, Laura, and Eliza.

[31] Ibid. Pg. 106

[32] Sizemore, Mallie, interview by Diane Lewis. February 18, 1979, Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

[33] Dean, Tena Baker, Interview by Matthew Sparks. December 16th 2018. Corroborated in Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, pg. 106

[34] Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, pg. 106

[35] Ibid.

[36] Versions of this story can be found in *Rugged trail to Appalachia*, *Trails into Cutshin Country*, and the above cited interview with Dora fields.

[37] Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, pg. 106

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days.[38] George's peculiar habits, coupled with his long white beard, piercing eyes, and alleged occult powers are said to have cemented his reputation as a witch among his contemporaries in Leslie County.[39] George was equally well-known for his mischievous sense of humor and powers as an herb doctor. A report of his procedures in herbal healing was relayed to me personally by a relative of George's, Tena Baker-Dean:

> He would make that black salve and if someone was really sick he would go in the woods and gather herbs, different roots of trees, and he kept catnip. Some of the roots were yellow root, sassafras, he would drain a maple tree and use it in the medicine too. He also would take and get elm tree bark for his medicine making He would fix a tea-like drink, always said a few words that you could not understand and have them drink it. Mommy said you could not understand what he was saying and he wouldn't let nobody know. He told her one time that things of that nature was a gift not to be taken lightly and people could do more harm than good. He would stay in the front room until morning the person that was sick was always well. – Tena Baker-Dean[40]

There are too many stories I have collected concerning George Joseph to be reproduced in their entirety, however I will reproduce two of the most famous of his alleged exploits in this section.

### 3.2. Bewitching the Butter

> That old man George Joseph, yeah, well he went around a lot to people he was really old and he didn't really have a home of his own I don't reckon much he just went to different places and stayed, he would come to my daddys and mothers and stay all night. People told he had witched people and all. And he came to my mother's once and daddys, and he asked my mother to let him churn, she said she didn't have any milk, he said well it don't take milk for me to make a big bowl of butter! But she didn't let him churn, he said he could make a bowl of butter churning water, but mother

[38] Stidham, S. (1978). *Trails Into Cutshin Country: A History of the Pioneers of Leslie County, Kentucky*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press Inc pg. 121

[39] Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, pg. 106

[40] Dean, Tena Baker, Interview by Matthew Sparks. December 16th 2018.

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> didn't let him churn. One of the neighbors said they did, but they sure wouldn't eat the butter! They were afraid to eat it! – Mallie Sizemore[41]

### 3.3. The cow on the top of the barn

> I spoke with an Aunt today and she said that some people thought him to be a witch because he would tell them things and they would happen. My grandma said that he was a very religious man and was a preacher. She said he was a good person. He told a man once, that was going to sell a cow that was not a good cow to someone and he said you can't do wrong and get by with it. They talked a little while and George told him you want sell that cow tomorrow. The man got up the next morning the people that was going to buy it was there they went to the barn and the cow was on top of the barn on the roof. George came along and said I told you, you cannot do wrong and get by with it. Needless to say he didn't sell the cow and George told him the cow will be down shortly. Sure enough that evening it was in the field. – Tena Baker Dean[42]

Although these are but two of many tales concerning George Joseph I haven chosen to reproduce here, they serve to illustrate the complex character of the herb doctor, witch, and prophet embodied in George that characterize the shamanistic qualities of this Appalachian folk healing tradition. It is also worth mentioning that the reports I can find on his death are equally as fascinating and mysterious as his life. Two sources of mine claim that George "castrated himself" in order to prevent having any more children (this being what led to his death).[43] Another source claims that "He had a knot there [in his mouth] and cut that out—and they said what he couldn't get out he took his fingers and gouged it out – and that was what killed him"[44] Although we may never know the true circumstances surrounding George Joseph's remarkable life and death, his legacy still survives in the form of a rich collection of folktales concerning his exploits, his descendants and extended family – some of whom still live in Leslie County.

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[41] Sizemore, Mallie, interview by Diane Lewis. February 18, 1979, Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

[42] Dean, Tena Baker, Interview by Matthew Sparks. December 16th 2018.

[43] Dean, Tena Baker, Interview by Matthew Sparks. December 16th 2018., corroborated by Lews, Ulene, Interview by Matthew Sparks. December 23rd 2018.

[44] Fields, Dora, interview by Sadie W. Stidham. April 30, 1979, Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

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### 3.4. John B. Maggard: Gunsmith and Faith Healer

John B. Maggard was born on the 10th of October 1796, in Virginia, the eldest son of Samuel Maggard whose family was believed to have originated in northern Germany.[45] His family would eventually move to the "head of the Cumberland" in Kentucky, where he would meet Sarah Adams, the woman he would marry on the 12th of August 1818.[46] John and Sarah built a log house near Samuel's home in what is now Letcher County, Kentucky, where they would live for 39 years, and have 12 children.[47] On the 23rd of October, 1947, John's family relocated to what is now Cutshin Creek of Leslie County, Kentucky and built a new log cabin homestead.[48] John was renowned throughout Leslie County as a gunsmith[49], farmer, blacksmith and a faith healer.[50]

John was, according to some sources, one of the first men in Leslie County to demonstrate the use of a peculiar faith healing ability that was known to be practiced by many throughout the region. This gift, considered sacred by practitioners, was said to concern the removal of warts, cancers and other malignant growths, as well as to stop bleeding. According to my sources, the healing ritual was simple, involving the "laying on of hands" and the reading of two biblical scriptures aloud.[51] For the removal of malignant growths, I Corinthians 12:9 was read, while Ezekiel 16:6 (replacing the 'thee' of the verse with the injured party's name) was used to stop blood.[52] John's gift was said to have healed many people in Leslie County while he was alive, as is attested by a letter found in his bible from a niece seeking his services:

> May 31, 1864
> Mr. John Maggard,
> Dear Unkie, after my best respecks, I can inform you that my sister Susannah Creech has a canser on the left side or edge of her tongue about the size of a five cent piece, red around the edge and of a yellow mattered color in the

[45] Brewer, M. (1978). *Rugged trail to Appalachia*. Viper, KY: Graphic Arts Press, pg. 113
[46] Ibid. pg. 113
[47] Ibid. pg. 114
[48] Ibid. pg. 114
[49] According to Ulene Lewis, John's trademark silver-inlaid guns were marked with the initials J.B.M. Allegedly John's silver was found somewhere "in the hills of Leslie County, one of his great grandsons (Reuben Maggard) owned of one of these guns.
[50] Ibid. pg. 114
[51] Ibid. pp. 114-115
[52] Ibid. pg. 115

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middle and I have herd that you cold take them away and I want you to try your skill on this so no more, but remains,
Yours till death,
Martha Maggard[53]

According to the traditions of Leslie County, this gift was secretive and known only to a few people, though it could be passed on to three people within the family.[54] Two of John Maggard's great grandsons Reuben Maggard and Jody Melton, were also purported to have inherited and practiced this gift throughout their lives[55]. Interestingly, John was a contemporary of George Joseph, and further reports attest that John was often called upon to cancel the effects of spells cast by George.[56] Like George, there is much mystery surrounding the life of John B. Maggard (including the precise date of his death) left to be explored. Nevertheless, he too lives on through oral histories of his skill as a healer, and his descendants. He was buried alongside his wife Sarah at the Brewer Family Cemetery in Leslie County, Kentucky, where their graves can still be visited.[57]

### 3.5. Matt Gray: Male midwife and Herb doctor

Matt Gray, unlike our past two subjects, lived well into the 20th century. The information presented here is entirely from his own words, preserved via an interview with Dale Deaton in 1978 as a part of the Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project. Matt Gray was trained to be a mountain doctor by both of his parents, who also functioned as mountain doctors. According to Matt, his father's family was primarily of English ancestry and his mother's family was of Cherokee descent[58].

During the interview, Matt speaks at length about his experiences with delivering babies, and his knowledge of medicinal herbs.

Gray first explains how he uses a tea made of boiled black gum tree bark or red pepper leaves to "raise misery" or induce labor in an expectant mother. Gray then describes in detail how he delivers a baby at home, using only homemade instruments and articles sterilized with olive oil, rubbing alcohol and peroxide.

[53] Ibid. pg. 114
[54] Another account of this tradition can be found in *Trails into Cutshin Country*.
[55] Ibid. pg. 114
[56] Ibid. pg. 115
[57] Lewis, Ulene. Interview by Matthew Sparks. December 23, 2018.
[58] Gray, Matt, interview by Dale Deaton. July 21, 1978, Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries.

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After waiting until the labor pains become 4-5 minutes apart, Gray describes how he prepares the mother by placing her on a pillow and sterilizing his hands. He then proceeds to deliver the child when the baby's head comes into sight:

> Why, you can work around the back of that baby's head and get it out that way. You can trip this baby's head by that... After I take a hold of this baby and I get it out here till I can get to it, then if this afterbirth hangs, I catch her leg up in under my arms like this. Get under her legs here, but take your elbow, get up in above the pit of her stomach. And if she ain't got no pains, tell her to heave with you and you give down. Then you take this afterbirth from there and you lay a hold to this baby. If you never done this, I'll tell you what to do. Count you one, two, three. There's knots on a – any kid's navel cord after birth. Well, you close that there with a cord. Doctors use your tweezers and pinchers, but, I don't. Close that there with a cord, take sharp sterilized scissors and clip that off. Lay the afterbirth back out of the way, wash this baby in baby soap or you can go get oil. This here olive oil is the best thing you ever washed a baby in your life. – Matt Gray[59]

Matt then describes the preparation of the newborn's navel using a sterilized cloth (and if needed, a silver dollar), mentioning that he doesn't need to "stitch" the mother after her birth: …you don't have to stitch a woman unless you want to. A woman's made to grow up. Wounds is put on a human to grow up and get well.[60]

When asked what he uses to treat excessive bleeding or hemorrhage, Matt describes a treatment of "Squaw Weed, Sarsaparilla, and Rattle Weed" (*Packera aurea, Smilax ornata,* and *Astragalus canadensis)* boiled down and made into a tea for the mother.

A veritable Appalachian pharmacopeia, Matt continues to describe a variety of natural treatments[61] for a plethora of common ailments, including:

**Natural Pregnancy Test**: Yellow Dogwood (most likely *Cornus florida*) tea (will induce purging in the mother if she is pregnant)
**Fever:** Three inches of dried rattlesnake steeped in water
**Hives:** Deer's Tongue (*Liatris odoratissima*)
**Measles:** Tea made of boiled sheep dung
**Shingles:** Blood of a black animal (cat or chicken) applied to shingles

[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid. scientific names have been identified where possible.

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**Cold:** Burr Vine (most likely *Galium aparine)*, Blue & Yellow Top Stickweed (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia)* Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius)*
**Pneumonia:** Dried Rattlesnake
**Constipation:** Elm root (*Ulmus americana*)
**Headache:** Mustard green poultice (*Brassica juncea*)
**Colic:** Blow Tobacco in a spoon of breast milk, give to the infant
**Upset stomach:** Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*)

In addition to these formulas, Matt Grey also prescribes turpentine applied topically to the navel, or a weed known as "Worm Truck" (possibly Swamp Milkweed, *Asclepias incarnata*) as a cure for worms.

A treasure trove of herbal lore, especially relating to pregnancy, this is merely a fraction of the knowledge Matt shares during his interview, which ends with similarly spirited discussion about local politics in Leslie county.

As a heritage mountain doctor and midwife who practiced well into the 20th century, Matt Gray offers a unique anthropological case study alongside the historical accounts of George Joseph and John Maggard from which to examine the social role of the 'charm doctor' in Appalachian society in a broad sociohistorical perspective – a subject to which we now turn.

## 4. Conclusions

The oral histories of George Joseph, John Maggard, and Matt Gray, provide strong evidence for the existence of a unique Appalachian folk practitioner, the "charm doctor" and a syncretic Appalachian ethnomedical tradition in Leslie County, Kentucky. Furthermore, from these accounts we are able to trace the development of this ethnomedical tradition from the mid 19th to the late 20th century. This paper attempts to contextualize the development of this tradition with the confluence of Western European and Scottish "borderlands" magical beliefs and Cherokee medical traditions; a parallel development to the emergence of African-American slave medicine from Native American and West African antecedents.

Though these oral histories imply there is much more historical and anthropological work to be done on this subject, these accounts are particularly revelatory in the insights they offer into the reality of medical theory and practice in pre-modern Appalachia; before the modernization of medicine and midwifery in the region (and even after), medical care was characterized by a decidedly spiritual or holistic element, a heavy emphasis on herbal or naturopathic cures, and was

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chiefly the domain of a specialized class of men (and some women) considered by the community to possess the gift (and knowledge) of healing.

In contemporary Appalachia, the role of the *folk practitioner* or 'charm doctor' is one that has been retired from much of the sociological landscape of the region. Nevertheless, oral histories of faith healers, 'charm doctors,' and other folk healing practices remain relevant subjects of analysis in discussions related to cultural identity, history, and healing. In lieu of the current opioid epidemic which remains at crisis levels, it is certain that the necessity for localized communal healing on a level beyond the purely physical is needed more than ever, and must be found somewhere outside of the solutions provided by big pharma. Without regressing into the realm of pseudoscience, might we as Appalachians benefit from looking to how our communities addressed healing at the individual and communalistic levels? In recognizing the importance of not only preventative, but natural medicine, and a re-personalization of the patient-healer relationship, reflecting on these and other such accounts of the 'charm doctors' of Appalachian yesteryear might help to diagnose, and perhaps even to treat, several of Appalachia's modern ailments.

Beyond healing, oral histories of these and other such 'charm doctors' continue to offer contemporary lessons, emphasizing our region's historical role as a zone of cultural exchange, syncretism, and as a site of new forms of knowledge production and transmission. These echoes of the past, still living in the memories of many citizens of Leslie County today, can, and must inform our regional, cultural, and economic metamorphosis as Appalachia continues to redefine itself for a post-coal future.

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