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Mountain Mystics: magic practitioners in Appalachian witchlore

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Although Witchcraft has been traditionally thought of as mostly a feminine pursuit, Appalachian witchlore showcases many examples of breaking those gender expectations. In the tales collected by Ruth Anne Musick, Gerald Milnes, and Patrick Gainer, both genders equally demonstrate a knowledge of folk-magic practices. Following an examination of the varying tales surrounding Appalachian witchlore, similar themes emerged which can be attributed to, in part, the unique environment cultivated in the region. Commentary on gender, identity, and cultural fears as seen through the lens of the region are on display in these tales. One such example, the common fear of the outsider, is a central theme. Another cultural value of the region, a strong sense of community heightened by the helping hand of one's neighbor, is present in these tales. Witches can gain magical control through the acquisition of possessions, often through the willingness to lend a helping hand. This article explores the ways in which Appalachian beliefs of witchcraft and magic have prevailed through the years. A current trend show's Appalachian communities following American trends of holistic medicine and folk remedies. However, anecdotal evidence would suggest that the Appalachian community may never have stopped practicing folk magic of this kind.

Key-words: *witchcraft, magic, mountains, Appalachia, folklore*

The following article is a written account of an oral presentation coauthored first for the 2015 Appalachian Studies Association Conference, and then edited for a second presentation before the 2015 Transatlantic Mountain Cultures: Appalachian and Carpathian Perspectives Lecture Series hosted by The Faculty of Letters at Transylvania University of Brasov with the Romanian-US Fulbright Commission via Skype. It hopes to highlight some of the unique characteristics of Appalachian witchlore. "Witchlore," in this case, refers to narratives collected from individuals that were in some instances first person experiences, or passed down to them orally by friends and relatives.

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Three primary collections are used in the study: *Witches, Ghosts, and Signs* by Patrick Gainer; *Signs, Cures, and Witchery* by Gerald Milnes; and the archived witchlore collection as a part of the unpublished folklore estate of Ruth Ann Musick. *Witch, Ghosts, and Signs* highlights folklore of Southern Appalachia, and examines not only witchlore, but customs, superstitions, folk cures, and ghost tales as well. *Signs, Cures, and Witchery* largely focuses on the German influence on Appalachian folklore, primarily in West Virginia and the Appalachian regions of Pennsylvania. This Musick collection, as a part of a larger unpublished folklore estate, is comprised of folktales collected from various informants throughout West Virginia, especially the many immigrant communities in Marion County with the help from her students at Fairmont State College. It is currently housed at the Frank and Jane Gabor West Virginia Folklife Center on the campus of Fairmont State University.

Margaret Alice Murray in her book *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* aptly describes the ascension of Christianity in Europe as a gradual usurping of religious control. As the conversion of the ruling class took place, the national religion became Christianity. However, the people were slower to convert especially in rural less policed areas of Britain. Christianity worked to the favor of the monarchy whose right to the throne was based on religious sovereignty as they claimed to be ordained by God as the ruling family. Polytheistic religions could leave room for multiply ordained claims to the throne, a direct threat to the current monarchs. Murray's research indicates that the people still practiced their older traditions, as they were ingrained into their everyday life, and their practice of Christianity was a superficial farce that over the years deepened into first ritualistic practices then devout belief. Murray does not take this to its inevitable conclusion, largely because it was beyond the scope of her research topic, that this conversion was so slow that people carried the "old ways," both in traditions and beliefs into the New World. Knowledge of witchery, magic, and ways to counteract such magic were present in the Colonies of what would become the eastern coast of The United States of America. Of course, Christian beliefs about the evils of witchcraft came to America as well (Murray 1968, 10).

Historically, the term “witchcraft” and its association with the devil derive from primarily English influences[3]. According to Owen Davies’ book, *Popular Magic: Cunning Folk in English History,* as Christianity was gaining traction across Europe, the church was attempting to smother out older polytheistic worship by pagans and other agrarian-based practitioners (Davies 2007, 1)[4]. The religious inquisitions that started in the 16th century by the church spread quickly across Germany (Davies 2007, 167-177).

[3] "witchcraft, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Web. 8 July 2015. This word first appeared in the masculine form “Wicca” in the *Laws of Alfric* (890);

[4] See also, The Witchcraft Act of 1542.

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However, despite these efforts, for many Appalachians, magic was a constant in their day-to-day lives. The German immigrants who settled into the Appalachian regions brought with them many folk beliefs about magic and the preternatural, as well as the influences of Roman astrology and cosmology. They used the stars to determine planting cycles, divine the future, and to predict weather. During an era where medical treatment could be hard to come by, many turned to herbalism, home remedies, and folk cures to aid the ailing. In 1929, Reverend John Raymond Crosby writes in *The Living Church* that the rites of the witch are still being practiced in Pennsylvania after five generations of being in America (Murray 1962, 83).

These practices, remedies, protections, and cures were incorporated through traditions into their daily lives as well as into their Christian religious practices. For example, it was a commonly held belief that if you placed a broom over or across your front door, a witch would have to either pick-up said broom or count the bristles upon entering, thus alerting the home owner if the visitor was a witch. This type of tradition continues today, even among families of non-German heritages, believing that by keeping a broom hanging on the back of the front door, protects the home from evil. This practice actually *predates* Christianity according to the following passage from Margaret Murray's *The God of the Witches* and indicates the importance of broom ritual practices from all over the world.

The Original broom, whether for domestic or magical purposes, was a stalk of the broom plant with tuft of leaves at the end. The number of beliefs and proverbial sayings connected with the plant show that is was supposed to possess magical qualities. These qualities had to do with the giving and blasting of fertility. A broomstick marriage was not uncommon in periods when marriage laws were not very strict. It was not always considered binding by the Christians who practiced it. Jumping over the broomstick is said to have formed part of the gypsy marriage rites. On the other hand there is still the old saying in use in some parts to England, which indicates the broom plant had blasting qualities: if you sweep the house with blossomed broom in May, you sweep the head of the house away (Murray 1970, 101).

In the same book, Murray includes a description by Cotton Mather of Salem, Massachusetts, from 1692, concerning the organization of witch cults in which he claims they have been set up to mirror the Christian church. Murray points out that in reality it was the Christian church that adopted many rituals and practices in order to make a smooth transition from paganism (Murray 1970, 67).

In many narratives involving witches, such as folktales and fairytales, the witch character is generalized, giving the audience the ability to form an image in their minds and place themselves into the story. However, the witchlore collected in Appalachia often named specific members of their community or neighbors as the culprits as in the following witchlore tale from West Virginia. This story is reprinted with permission from *Traditions: A Journal of West Virginia Folk Culture and Educational Awareness*, volume 12 2010-2011: 15.

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BEWITCHED YOUTH
Collector: Ruth Ann Musick
Informant: Alma Donald, 1964
Motifs: D. 2070 bewitching

Out on Lick Run Ridge in Pendleton County lived a man by the name of Harman Propst. He and his wife, Susan, owned a little farm, and farmed the land along with their four sons.

Johnny, the oldest boy, was attending high school, which was located about twenty-five miles from home. He had to walk two miles to get the bus. On this road lived an old woman known as Milly Smith. Often when Johnny was passing by, she would come out and chat with him and invite him in to eat or drink something.

Late in the fall, Johnny became ill. He had to drop out of school and became weaker and weaker until he finally had to take to his bed. Neither the doctor nor anyone else seemed to know what was wrong with him. He began developing breasts and a liquid like white milk would form on them. His hair began coming out, and he could not stand to be alone or in darkness. He would cry and scream out that he was choking to death, and this went on for weeks. Everybody thought Johnny was going to die.

One day, his uncle from Spring Creek, Virginia, came to visit him. He told the mother about an old Negro witch doctor who lived up in the mountain of the Shenandoah, and he thought she should go to see him. It was quite a job locating him, but she finally did. She explained to him about Johnny and their worry that he would perish.

He wanted to know if anyone strange had given him anything to eat or drink. The only one she could think of that might have done this was old Milly. He wanted to see Johnny, but the boy was too ill to travel, so the man told the mother to go home and see that no one took anything away from the place for three days.

That night Johnny started to feel better. He could stand to be alone and in darkness. Around midnight, Old Milly came to borrow milk, but they didn't let her have any. She went on back home, but in the morning they found an old handkerchief in the chair where she sat. After they removed it, Johnny got better from that time on. It is said that witches must take or leave something.

Three distinct categories of "witchcraft" are evident in our research: white witchery, black witchery, and witch doctoring. White witchery refers to the practice of herbalism and midwifery and includes those known as cunning folk. These individuals practiced healing and divination, enacted protection against evil, and drew wisdom from nature to determine planting cycles and calendric matters.

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Cunning folk were healers who cured people in their community using herbs and natural remedies, a practice considered white witchery. These cunning folk were more of a threat to the Christian church than those practicing black magic because belief in the power of the common man could cast doubt on the absolute authority of the church (Davies 2007, 29-35). The church acted as mediator between the people and God; healing the sick and protection from evil influences were the purview of the clergy. White witchery presumed that "ordinary" people, who were not sanctioned by the church, had the power to perform good works in the name of God, thus undermining the clergy's place of power and authority (Davies 2007, 29-65). In the sixteenth and seventeenth century a belief was held by inquisitors and courts that any knowledge and thereby use of that knowledge obtained from the "devil"[5] regardless of intent or outcome was seen as violating the law's against witchcraft (Murray 1962, 9).

While folklore portrays examples of both male and female witches, the number of women singled out as witches vastly outnumbers men. It's important to note, however, that Appalachian witchlore, especially in Patrick Gainer and Gerald Milnes' collections, had several examples of male witches, most notoriously Uncle Johnny from Gainer's collection. These examples, though male, were called witches not warlocks and were not considered different than female witches. Often these women were actually herbalists, midwives, and healers with a rich knowledge of local flora who knew how, when, and why to apply certain natural remedies to particular illnesses. Their remedies were often intertwined with rituals and superstitions, further lending to the impression of magic. Many of these women were also known as Granny Women.

Granny Women were typically older women from whom the rest of the community often sought healing or advice for themselves, their families, or their animals. Often, these rural communities did not have access to doctors or medicine, either because of location or costs associated with receiving medical treatment. The knowledge of these women was handed down orally through the generations; these women never received any type of formalized training. While they were respected, they were often times feared as well; many people avoided them completely unless they were in need of their help. Granny Women were said not to expect or receive payment for their services, although out of either gratitude or fear, these women were often gifted with tokens of food or other offerings.

Interestingly, there are elements of contempt for these women, even by those that seek their help. Many tales accuse the alleged witch of causing the illness to begin with, in order to force victims to seek her help and provide compensation. One tale described a man who suddenly developed pimples all over his face after passing on the street a woman thought to be a witch on the street. The man's wife sent for the witch to heal him, which she did. Despite the fact that she had the power to remove the pimples, the man insisted that she had been the one to cause them in the first place.

[5] This indicates the persecutors belief that all magical knowledge was obtained through consorting and or conferences with the Devil. All non-Christian deities were, for apparent ease of argument, labeled as the devil.

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Other women that were considered to be witches were those that had been marginalized in their communities for a variety of reasons. Some women behaved in a manner that was deemed inappropriate in terms of social behavior or had unconventional ways of doing things. Most often they were simply unmarried women without families who lived alone and had to find means to support themselves.

Instances of black witchery were identified as when magic practices were used to steal, perform curses, evoke pain or death in another person, or destroy of property and livestock. For many, there was an ever-present threat of magical harm from black witchery or sympathetic magic, associated with even mundane tasks such as milking the cows or fixing supper. Sympathetic magic in these cases refer to use of an item to symbolically place curses, enact spells, or steal goods. For example, many witches were said to have the ability to take an item, such as a towel or in some cases an axe handle, and "wring" from it milk, butter, and even eggs; goods "stolen" from their neighbor's farm. Similarly, it was often said that if you give a witch an item from your house, even a drink of water, he or she could put a spell or curse on you. This is exemplified in the following story from *Traditions: A Journal of West Virginia Folk Culture and Educational Awareness* volume 12 2010-2011: 20

> TOWEL-WRINGING WITCH
> Collector: Ruth Ann Musick
> Motifs: D. 208.7.6 food stolen by magic.
> D. 208.3.3.2 Witch transfer milk from another's cows by use of a rope
>
> A new woman had just moved into a neighborhood where many farmers lived. Before she moved into the neighborhood, the farmers got a lot of milk from their cows and a lot of eggs from their chickens. The new woman had lived in the neighborhood but a few days when the farmers' cows quit giving milk and their hens quit laying eggs, but the new woman had a lot of eggs, milk, and butter to sell at market.
>
> The farmers thought all this was queer, because she had no cows or chickens. The people became suspicious of her and decided to see what was behind it. They tied some hickory branches together, walked by her house, and caught her in the act of wringing milk, butter, and eggs out of a towel. She had taken the things from the farmer's animals by her magic spell and sold them at market. Since she was a witch, the farmers took her out and burned her at the stake.

Other motifs found in the collections that fall under black witchery included a few reoccurring patterns of witch capabilities. One of the predominant powers depicted was the ability for a witch to shed her skin, and in some occasions, even take the form of an animal. Most often they shape-shifted into cats, typically black cats, but

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instances of raccoons and snakes were also found. A common thread in stories of shape-shifting witches is an injury to an animal which was later found in a person suspected of turning into said animal. Below is an example of this type of witchlore taken from *Traditions: A Journal of West Virginia Folk Culture and Educational Awareness* volume 12 2010-2011: 16.

> THE WITCH CAT
> Collector: Ruth Ann Musick
> Informant: Wayman Price, 1964
> Motifs: D. 142.0.1 Transformation of woman to cat
>
> In the mid-1800's, a wheat mill owner was left a widower. He married a second wife, whom he knew little about, except that she was young and beautiful. She arrived one stormy night in a small boat, and it was love at first sight for him. She soon got the reputation of being a witch. Although she helped the sick, her medicines were made from spiders, snakes, toads, and so on.
>
> The man did not believe this and defended her, but luck seemed to be against him. His prosperous business dwindled to almost nothing. His mill, on the river, was often broken into at night and left in shambles, but he could not catch the intruder.
>
> Finally, he told his wife one night that he was leaving for the store for some time, but decided to stop at the mill hoping to catch the intruders. Later, about fifty cats came in furiously fighting and made for him. He grabbed an axe, swung it and cut off the leader's leg. He went home to tell his wife, and found her lying on the floor with one arm cut off at the wrist. She turned into a cat and vanished.
>
> Outside, there was a rush of water flowing towards the house. He tried to get to the mill to unlock the dam and save it. When he got to the dam, the water reached him, tore the dam away, and killed him.

Another power associated with Appalachian witchlore, was the witch's ability to pass through the keyhole of a locked door. The means in which this was accomplished was not discernible in all the material surveyed. However, an article on Indiana witchlore in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Dr. Ruth Ann Musick recounts tales that describe a witch turning into a small snake and slithering through the keyhole; thus providing one possible explanation. (Musick 1952, 60-64).

Finally, witch doctoring was the practice of protection against evil by an individual that was believed to be chosen by God and called upon to "cure" people who had been bespelled by a witch; these individuals characteristically used the power of the Christian God through the Bible to work their magic. The rituals employed by the witch doctor varied; but routinely the curse breaking redirected the

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curse back to the witch who cast it, sometimes in a way that identified the culprit. It is to be noted that witch doctors were customarily paid for their services.

In regards to healing practices, one interesting practice found was bloodstopping. Bloodstopping involved the witch doctor stating a verse from the bible, upon which the blood stops flowing out of a wound. Interestingly, bloodstopping can only be conducted by a witch doctor of the opposite sex of the wounded. The witch doctors in Milnes and Gainer's collections have a tendency to be men, but many women knew and used the cures of a witch doctor as well. This practice has continued and evolved with technological advances; in contemporary culture, witch doctors can conduct bloodstopping over the telephone.

Appalachian witchlore has some very unique qualities that set it apart from typical witchlore, for instance naming specific community members or neighbors as witches. It also shares many universally recognizable characteristics of traditional witchlore, such as the ability to transform into an animal. It is possible to trace many of the practices Appalachians still engage in today back to the middle ages. This study of three witchlore collections has merely brushed the surface; a more extensive analysis and comparative study of regional and international witchlore is necessary to thoroughly understand and analyze the witchlore form Appalachia.

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