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Recommended Citation

Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, "Interview with Andrew Parsley (FA 593)" (2011). *Folklife Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 516.

https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/516

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Transcribed Interview with Andrew Parsley on Folk Medicine and His History

Rachel Parsley: Tell me a little about your history and your past?

Andrew Parsley: Well, my name is Andrew Parsley. I grew up on a family farm in South Central Kentucky in Edmonson County. We now live on a family farm in Warren County. I graduated from College High Hall. I went to Western Kentucky University, and while I was going to school I was employed as a seasonal at Mammoth Cave National Park. Seasonal grew into a permanent position. Spent from 1972-1982 with the park service. Then moved to Farmer's Home Administration, and stayed there 11 years. In 1993 my wife and I opened up Andrew Parsley and Associates, a full service real-estate appraisals operation. I was a history major with a minor in government.

RP: How do you define the term folk medicine?

AP: In a book I helped write it says today's science is yesterday's folk medicine, because the reality is many things are found in nature: herbal remedies, seeds, leaves. They are packaged and sold in drugstores today, but the reality is they are occurring in what we would call Mother Nature. We find them in the woods and in the water.

RP: In the Mammoth Cave area were doctors well-known throughout the community; were there a lot of them?

AP: One of the stimulations for folk medicine was that there were not a lot of doctors around. But when my parents and grandparents were young there were almost no doctors. Doctors were far and few between and if they were available they were usually very far away from the most rural areas. With regards to folk medicine it was used in regards to necessity. Since they had no access to doctors, they had to look to nature for relief from the different ailments they had. You hear things that are quaint from people and they seem to be more superstitious, or they seem to be rooted in some scientific fact, but for the most part those that are carried on are the ones that have been successful. Because the ones that didn't work, I'm sure no one wanted to remember and they've forgotten. Folk medicine played a large role in people's lives back then and a necessity, and many people may not know but things found in nature continue to have a terribly important role in their lives today.

RP: So how would you say folk medicine fits into your life?

AP: When I was a young man, some of the things we were always doing were around. For instance if you were stung by a wasp or a bee one of the cures typically used, in those days someone was always chewing or smoking tobacco. In those practices if you made a poultice of the tobacco and put it where the bee sting is, it has a tendency to draw the poison out and make the pain go away. If we had a pain under the skin and we were trying to bring it out, or a sore

place, one thing my Mother would do would be to take a piece of bacon or fatty meat. By the way chicken, fat is very good, and you rub that on the affected area and whatever was the problem would be drawn to the surface. Even though today in drugstores we buy epsom salts and the reality is that it is a naturally occurring mineral. So, when I was a young man if you had sprained your ankle it would be very normal for you to soak it in epsom salts. Epsom salts could have been taken internally too, if you had any issue with constipation. Anyone who has ever taken epsom salts knows that it will help you recover your regularity. It is something you can use both internally and externally. Those were things that were closest to me. What I found as I was working in the folk medicine area was there were a lot of cures that while I was a park ranger at Mammoth Cave, was there were more things that were related to older people. In other words, I was about in my mid-20's when I was there. But if you were 75 you were obviously more interested in something to do with arthritis, maybe insomnia, or rheumatism. I would not have paid particular attention to those unless I was probably in that age category and if I had of been then I would have.

RP: When did you begin to show an interest in the study of folk medicine?

AP: Again I think any student, any person who was brought up in a rural community, you would notice things around you that had some curative effect like I mentioned earlier: a teabag on a bee sting, a poultice made from tobacco to draw poison, a piece of fat meat. These are things I knew the significance of and I lived with them, and I saw them employed, again like with epsom salts. As I am involved at Mammoth Cave in 1975, there was a group of people that came together for a class project really, it was folk studies. We were under the guidance and leadership of Dr. Lynwood Montell, who was a professor at Western Kentucky University. As a project, without knowing how successful we would be, we would try to gather up as many folk remedies as we could. Incorporated into this was some editing, some photography, all of us were responsible for interviewing several people. I can't remember, seems like I interviewed 4 or 5 people. I would say probably at that time their average age was about 80 years old. What we were trying to gain from them was their folk remedies and their actual experiences from them. The significance of that is that we knew these people were very temporary because of their age. As we gathered data we realized that it was valuable, that it had a lot of merit. It was worthy of preserving. At the conclusion of the initial part of the project after gathering it, the group decided we would try to publish it in book form, which we did in 1975. At that point in time, for about 2 or 3 years, we marketed together. I had more if an association with Mammoth Cave which was the chief place it was being marketed. There was little less interest from them on the selling of it. In an agreement with them I bought out their interest. It is for sale in several National Park locations by the Eastern National Park and Monument Association. So what became something that was a part of my youth and through my life became a project. I've always had an interest in folk medicine, the things it could do and has done. And I'm very proud of the project because those people now, with the exception of maybe one, have all passed away. If it had not been for our operation, much of this information would have probably been lost.

RP: Was there someone that specifically got you interested with the folk medicine practices?

AP: It was something my Mother has used, her parents would have used them, and so I was familiar with it on their use of simple issues of like bee stings. In the olden days if you would have had a snake bite, many of the cures plus doctors would not have been available like today. You recall, I told you about fat meat drawing poison. Fat meat is terrific about drawing things from your body that aren't good. That would have been some necessity they would have used. So my parents, my grandparents, and then again Dr. Montell, who was an exceptional fellow with a great interest in folk studies in every variety and of course folk medicine. He was an inspiration to us to be more involved. I credit a lot of different people.

RP: What were some of your findings in your folk medicine research?

AP: Strangely enough and I mentioned earlier today's science is yesterday's folk medicine. One of the things found in the book for a skin disorder or condition, the book will tell you to gather stump water and wash your face with it properly 2 or 3 times a day. Now, that sounds ridiculous for a lot of young people today, but if you really know from a scientific basis what stump water really is. It's a mild form of carbolic acid. So if you went to the doctor and he prescribed a mild form of carbolic acid and do a skin wash, that wouldn't seem exceptional or ridiculous at all, and it would work. They didn't have a scientific name; they just called it stump water. So, a lot of the things that are here, you will find there has been a sort of an outburst of interest in herbal remedies, and particularly the health food area, and I hate to count the things you see in the stores at the mall that will incorporate in them a ginseng root or a yellow root. They have them from everything to curing impotency to high blood pressure. A lot of people realize some merit and this is actually something that is marketed on a daily basis to a whole bunch of people. There is still a lot of active use for these folk remedies today.

RP: As far as the stump water and the names that go along with some of the remedy ingredients, do you think people nowadays would be able to recognize what those would perform?

AP: Well, that's a good question and what I think you would find is if you would have mentioned stump water, or ivy leaves, or rosehip bush to all those people I interviewed they could have instantly told you what it was and where you could find it. Today, whereas they had very few doctors then and very few pharmacies then, we are kind of in a pattern or habit where we go see our doctors is the wise thing to do. But because that association of a clinical health setting, we don't go out in the woods and look for things we go to the doctor and let him prescribe us things. We don't go get our own stump water; we go to him and get a mild form of carbolic acid. I think that we have, as science has made advances, we've come to rely on doctors. As far as our knowledge on the woods, we've kind of dumbed ourselves down a little bit. A lot of people if I mentioned rabbit tobacco, they wouldn't have any idea of what I'm talking about; again all those people I interviewed, they all knew what rabbit tobacco was. It was in fact mild form of a narcotic, and if you had asthma it would help your lungs relax if you smoked this or had some of it blown in your face.

RP: So, why did you specifically decide to focus on the Mammoth Cave Area and their remedies?

AP: Well, of course that's where I grew up and that's where I lived, and that's what was familiar to me and of course Mammoth Cave is an interesting place to find cures. You know I'm sure if I would have lived in Florida I would have been looking for aloe leaves for sunburn, and there would have been that much difference in geography. But since I was from here, things here interested me, they were available, easy to look at and easy to understand. I guess most of the focus of what we know of the people in this area has to do with things found in this area. Of course, we travel a bit more these days. In those days it was not uncommon for the people in that area to live their whole life in one place and never leave. Today we would go to Florida on a vacation, and we can participate in some of their folk cures like the aloe plant I was talking about, that they use routinely down there for sunburn. In fact it's in a lot of cosmetics now; it will smooth your skin and soften your skin. We use oils you get from various things to keep mosquitoes and gnats away from you. Those would have been bigger there than maybe they are here. My interest was of course in Mammoth Cave because that's around where I was working and living. It's where my background was.

RP: And do you think that some of the ingredients that you used in some of the medicines were similar to those in different areas or were they just native to the Mammoth Cave region?

AP: I think many of these things will occur throughout a large geographical area. For instance, if there was something that had to do with a persimmon, you now persimmons I believe would naturally occur in Florida and all the way up the eastern seaboard into Kentucky, so I'm sure that even though we are dealing with a bit of a geographical distance that there was some common for things that were used. For example, something you would use for asthma here would be something you would use in Florida too. But there would have probably been some things that were distinctly different that you wouldn't find here, and in Florida and farther north that they wouldn't find that we have here.

RP: What was your purpose for undergoing this project, did you hope your findings would be used?

AP: Of course it was a class, and all of us were hoping for a good grade and three semester hours. But the reality is I think most of us had an idea from the very beginning that we were doing something better than ourselves, or some temporary form of gratification. We recognized these people were old and we recognized they were temporary, and we also recognized as the project went on if they were not preserved in some form, many of them would have been lost. As I look back, it seems in many ways a heaven sent project. I'm sure some of your peers have maybe watched the *Medicine Man* with Sean Connery. There are a lot of people that I have talked to that were familiar with folk medicine and herbal remedies that believe if we truly understand nature completely, and everything that is available to us and everything it can do, that basically there is a cure for everything. In the movie, I think he found some berries in the top of a tree that had the capacity to cure cancer. We are looking daily, and you know that may be

where the cure for cancer comes from, some obscure root or plant. As I read the paper and articles on the internet, I notice today they are doing research on snake venoms, and octopus secretions, and trying to find out how they impact people with heart disease (to prevent it to cure it), people with diabetes and other things. I think real science is looking at things in nature. Probably because of what's happened and our research capacity now, there is literally no telling what we will find that we haven't found yet. One of the things I can talk about is the curare, at one point in time it was just a poison used by Native Americans in South America to dip their darts in to paralyze their prey. They wouldn't be able to run off and that is how they would feed themselves. Today we recognize the narcotic use of that, and I think it's used in all kinds of surgeries where people have to be paralyzed but they can't necessarily be put to sleep. I believe, but I'm not certain that it has a wide use in eye surgery. There are a lot of things that we have found and we do know, and we have a lot of folksy names for them now. Daily I think we are finding new things and giving them scientific names and they don't sound so folk "remedy-ish" as compared to when you would talk about stump water and things like that.

RP: So you believe that some of the modern day prescription drugs are very similar to these remedies these people used?

AP: Well I don't think a lot of them are, but some of them are. Who knows where medical research will take us. I do know things we use on a daily routine basis, things we get comfort from. Back to the epsom salts, if we sprain an ankle today or have an injury, doctors are going to prescribe us soaking that in warm water with epsom salts. Some things we don't seem to ever outgrow, you can call it science or you can call it folk medicine, but the result is the same; we get relief from something that is naturally occurring. Now we've become so advanced, we engineer things in laboratories that maybe Mother Nature wouldn't have had something to do with. And you won't find things that have been chemically engineered exactly like that in nature. You may have found an alternative. We are doing things that might have been impossible to find in nature with things like bio-engineering now. A lot of things I think that we have, and again like the focus I said there is currently in nature, like the snake venoms. Without doing research of any kind, I think there are things there specifically with heart disease and diabetes I think they are working with genetic ailments. They obviously think there is merit in the research or they wouldn't still be doing it.

RP: Going back to when you would interview these people, would they show you the processes of actually performing the remedy or did you ever see it used?

AP: We would almost always see it used, and in every case they would relate a story of somebody, either a cousin or a nephew they had used it on that stood out in their mind. It had a real place in their mind, not only that it was there but also the application of it. One thing that's kind of interesting, today people are more media savvy and they aren't scared by things like tape recorders or video cameras, then I remembered vividly I went in armed with a notebook and a tape recorder as I was interviewing these people. I would lay it down, and find that there was an instant freeze. They were absolutely uncomfortable with tape recorders. The way that I found through trial and error, almost through to the last one, when I interviewed them I would basically

have to absorb what they were telling me without pencil or paper in a conversational type setting. I would have to take a break and immediately I would run to my car and make some notes. I would have to take several breaks, because I knew I couldn't take a tape recorder in because they would have instant amnesia. I found you had to do it one-on-one conversationally and you had to relate it more or less as "if you all got a cold what would you do?" Then they would be able to talk without reservation. All of us were getting different cures for different things. Sometime they weren't necessarily cures but they were things that would give them relief. For instance rabbit tobacco is a plant and that's the reference they would use for it. With having asthma, you had to have relief from it, so you had to look around for something. In those days you might have used a little corn whiskey to cause some relaxation. But I've had more than one person tell me that this rabbit tobacco, they would either smoke it or have someone blow it into their face. It is a mild narcotic and it would help the lung to relax, and they would be able to breathe easier. These people relied on these; again the doctor was hours away, over bad roads in the wintertime. There wasn't any EMT service; you couldn't call an ambulance to come right away. Most of the time they had to rely on what they knew or what people around them in their circle would know.

RP: Whenever they would list of the ingredients, would they say where you could find them or were they just things they remembered off the top of their head? Or were they growing out in their backyard?

AP: A lot of times people would keep their pharmacy close to you, and they did too. They would live with the woods out back, the creek close by, and all of these were things they could lay their hands on fairly easily: willow leaves, sulfur, and ginseng root. These were things that were usually close by; they wouldn't have to take a trip more than just walking in the woods. And these people typically would have some on hand. They would keep enough for what they thought was necessary; of course there was a shelf life with these things just like there was. They would have a little on hand and they would know where to get more. They would let them grow until it was a time for harvest, because usually when something like that is picked it starts to break down pretty quickly. They knew where they could get supplies or when what they had was no longer useful. I think it's true they kept their warehouse sort of stockpiled.

RP: What are some folk remedies you remember growing up in your area?

AP: I think I've mentioned some of them earlier, but one of the things I'm familiar with was of course the fat meat which is a very good thing to draw poison of any type. If you had a thorn that had become inflamed or a briar you were trying to bring to the surface, this was an excellent remedy for that. If you had a wasp or a bee sting, there are two schools of thought in the old way of looking at it, you could use a teabag if you had one; get it moist and make a poultice out of it. You could also take tobacco, and in those cases it was usually handy like pipe tobacco, or cigarette tobacco, or chewing tobacco and make a poultice of it and put it to the skin. From experience, this would give you some relief and make the swelling go down much better than if you just ignored it.

RP: When you say poultice, what is that exactly?

AP: Let's call it if you take the tobacco and get it good and moist, and of course would use saliva and mix it up, and then press it against it. It was like a salve or an ointment, but they would typically call it a poultice because it would mix things together and stick it on there and hold it on there. Most children definitely back then, if you had a stuffy nose or a sinus condition, you would get a little camphor and rub it under your nose and it had a tendency to open up your sinuses. It was things that I would use and people would use on me. I'm sure we've rubbed Vic's salve on you, or put something like camphor under your nose to help open up your sinuses at some point in your past. The difference today is I think a lot of those things are options that you can employ. Then, back before the turn of the century, they were absolute medical necessities. It was all they had.

RP: Through your research, are your findings of remedies something you would hope your children would continue to use, and do you think they would be in practice today?

AP: Well I hope so. You know would they know where to get a rosehip bush and a ginseng root, and they did. Many of you younger people do not; you go to an herbal store. Much of folk medicine, like I mentioned to you in a different time, we've kind of dumbed down a little bit now. The tendencies you have to run to a doctor, and if you needed to buy something you would have to go to a store. You wouldn't know how to go out in the woods and be able to articulate what a ginseng plant is, pull it up, get the root, grind it up and then use it for whatever you would want to use it for. There is a distinction between the knowledge people had then and what they have now. Of course, we have many more doctors available now and that's a good thing, but I think in the process we've lost some of our knowledge. I hope there will continue to be resurgence, as I say I think you will see people are going to start, because it's the right time, looking back in nature to find more cures. I remember again what I told you about them experimenting all the time. Modern research can go in different areas now, whereas folk medicine would have been largely ignored if it hadn't been found in a test tube probably 20 or 30 years ago. Now, we're looking in nature in a different mindset. "Let's find those things that are there that will help us cure diabetes, heart disease, mental illnesses, or insomnia."

RP: Going back to your research, during your interviews what were some of the most fascinating recipes that you came across for remedies?

AP: Of course they're all fascinating, but let me pull a couple here. Here is one for coughs: Mix three teaspoons of hickory bark, three teaspoons of cherry bark, sugar and one cup of water. Make into a syrup by boiling all ingredients down until thick. Use as necessary. Today most people will tell you if you'll put something sweet in there that activates our salivary glands and there is relief in something that is sugar-oriented. I'll drop down and find another one here: Mix one cup of the leaves of a mullein flower with one quart of water. Boil and strain. Dosage: Drink two cups a day. That was for a cough. Headache: One half-pint of corn whiskey; one inch piece of camphor. Dosage: Drink a little as needed. That would probably cure a headache one way or another. Hives: Put the leaves of three cups wild mint in one cup of water. Steep

mixture and drink all of it after a tea is formed. Impotency: Make a tea from ginseng roots by boiling them in water and allowing them to steep for a time. Strain the mixture. Dosage: Drink whenever necessary. Here is one that's quaint and I think it gets largely psychosomatic: Chew and swallow twenty to twenty-five seeds a day. It doesn't specify what seeds; I expect this is more of a cure for the mind than it is of any particular chemistry. Here's one for insomnia: Break off the roots from a sassafras bush. Wash them off and put in a small vessel. Cover with water. Boil until you get all the strength boiled out of it. Drain into cup or mug. Sweeten to taste. Dosage: Drink whenever needed. I do want to read one more as it relates to asthma: For night attacks, make a thin pillow, about one-half inch thick; fill with dried life everlasting (rabbit tobacco). For day attacks, dried life everlasting combined as a smoking ingredient or brewed as a tea. Dosage: Sleep on pillow; smoke it or drink it. Again, it is a mild narcotic, and we know what the effect of it is now. Another one for asthma is: Cut a sweet gum sprout the length of the child who has asthma and hide it in the rafters of the house. When the youngster outgrows the length of the stick, asthma will no longer bother the child. Obviously this was something to empower the mind to cope with it, but you thought something was being done. Here is also another interesting one about asthma: Dry and crush leaves from Jimson weed and smoke it in a pipe: or for a child, blow the smoke into its lungs. Now Jimson weed is a poison, but a mild use of it will act as a mild narcotic, and again it would make your lungs relax so that you could be able to breathe. Really interesting things and some of my favorites I guess. I like all of them so it's hard to pick out too many favorites.

RP: So these people really did believe that these were their cures for some of their ailments?

AP: This is what they had. They used what they had, really they didn't have any other choice; it was medicine by necessity. Some of it I'm sure was working with their brain, like the stick hid in the attic you know. I guess people were compelled to do something, and the something led to trying different things, and as they tried different things some of it was useful and they retained them; the others that were ridiculous they tended not to use or not think about too much. Again, some of them are rooted in real science, like today we can tell you that Jimson weed or life everlasting is a mild form of a narcotic with a mild effect. It would be equal to someone telling you today to take a couple of advil. That doesn't sound ridiculous at all to you, but they didn't have advil back then. So if you tell someone to blow a little Jimson weed in your face, you're going to feel a little better. You're going to get relief, it's just a different thing.

RP: So you think it's just endless out there, all the herbs and the plants out there that can be used for folk medicine?

AP: I tend to subscribe for the learned fellow, and I can't remember precisely who it is to give credit to, but I think if we were wise enough to understand everything in nature and its capacity, and how it can be used; and we don't spend too much time studying that anymore; I think we would find a cure for almost everything that afflicts us. These people lived and survived in harsh circumstances using the things they found in nature. Science is doing a lot today, and I have a tendency to believe that 20 years from now people will still be looking at nature for potential cures and things to if not cure than to offer some relief from the symptoms of things that afflict us today. I think there are endless possibilities in nature, and I think the only thing that prevents us from finding more of them is the fact we aren't looking hard enough.

RP: Do you have any ending remarks you wished to add about folk medicine?

AP: Only that I'm pleased with this interview and I'm pleased with your choice of topics. I hope you find as time goes on that a lot of people are interested in folk medicine and herbal cures. Whereas my generation preserved what I think is a precious gift that would have been lost, maybe it falls to your generation to make the next big preservation of information or discovery of new things to make all of our lives better.

RP: Well thank you so much.

AP: You're welcome.