Interview with Bertha Skaggs (FA 593)

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Transcribed Interview with Bertha Skaggs on Folk Medicine and Her History

Rachel Parsley: Tell me just a little about yourself and your history.

Bertha Skaggs: I was born in Meridian, Mississippi and moved to Bardstown, KY when I was about 5 years old, and if you’ll notice I learned to talk before I moved to Kentucky and I kept that long southern drawl. When my father passed away, we moved where my mother’s people lived in Edmonson County, originally in the Mammoth Cave National area until the government made them move you know for the National Park. They moved to the outskirts of Barren County, and then mother became a telephone operator in Edmonson County. The reason she took the job was the switchboard was in our home and it was during the war, World War II, and she was a teacher before she married and began having children. At this time teachers were not allowed to be married and having children, while teaching school at the same time. It was just after World War II. Anyways, she raised 5 children, a widow, and held down a job. So we had to work at a young age growing up.

RP: So, where did you go to school?

BS: I went to a catholic school in Sunfish, KY, and went to the public school there also. I attended Western.

RP: And what did you study?

BS: Well we just studied the three R’s.

RP: And what are those?

BS: (She giggles) Reading, Riting, Rithmetic.

RP: That’s perfect, yes.

RP: And then how did you come here to live in Edmonson County?

BS: Well mother came to take over the switchboard and that was in our home. And I married real young; I won’t tell you how young I married. He was a returning soldier from World War II.

RP: So you all got married and lived here?

BS: We eloped.

RP: And then you all had your children and you settled here in this home?

BS: We moved to where I live now, we first bought a little shack or something another to live in. And I told my husband if he didn’t find me a real home then I would be going back home. Then we found this place and bought it, and there is where I’ve lived ever since.
Rachel Parsley  Interview with Bertha Skaggs  November 30, 2011

RP: How would you define the term folk medicine?

BS: Well it was just a way of life, it was traditional. It was what we had when we didn’t have a medical doctor near. Mother had a little knowledge of what medicines worked, because her grandfather was a M.D., and he knew what worked.

RP: When did you start noticing things you would consider folk medicine? Who introduced you to them?

BS: My mother and my grandmother.

RP: What specifically did they do as a folk medicine remedy that you remember?

BS: Well that kept sassafras root at all time they would boil for tea. They canned wild blackberries, so we could have the blackberry juice. The mullein was a plant for health remedies. Mother and my grandmother knew just what to find out in the yard and around fencerows...

RP: To help with some ailments.

BS: Now coal oil, kerosene was used a lot if you stepped on a nail or broken glass. They got the kerosene oil out and you soaked your foot or hand in regular kerosene. Just a lot of things around they knew how to use.

RP: Now, kerosene, what did that do if you stepped on a nail?

BS: For some reason it killed out the infection, out the rust. It mostly washed out the wound.

RP: Growing up did you use a lot of doctor services? Did you have a lot of doctors around that you were able to call?

BS: Not growing up. We had the switchboard, and we could get in touch with the one doctor we had in the county. For us it was easier to find a medical doctor. There was an asphalt company in the county, and the company had their own doctor, so we were fortunate to have two doctors around in the county.

RP: If there wasn’t a doctor available, did your mom or grandmother know how to take care of you?

BS: They took care of us the best they could with what they had. I know one time at school, somebody got the itch and it was called the seven-year itch. I mean it was awful. I didn’t get it, but momma bought some sulfur and pure lard, where they had butchered their own hogs and salt was in the meat for it. If you wanted to kill the little parasite that got under the skin, you use sulfur and grease or sulfur and lard, and it will sure kill it out. That’s what they used.

RP: To kill that disease?
BS: Mmmhmm (nods)

RP: What are the some of the folk remedies that you use that come to mind?

BS: Every spring we ate poke salad greens, cooked right so they wouldn’t be poisoned. We cooked wild greens that we knew: dandelion, lamb’s ear, and wild lettuce. We would have, I would always have three or four messes of poke salad. It worked as a laxative.

RP: So it cleaned you out?

BS: Yes, it cleaned us out, everybody that ate it. And we tried to see that everybody ate their portion of it.

RP: So that was just well known thing that people did?

BS: Yes it was. And sassafras tea, there was a mineral or vitamin is sassafras tea that was good for people to drink.

RP: What if you had gotten stung or had a burn what would you do?

BS: A burn? I still use this remedy. Cut an “arsch” potato in half and scrape it just as fast as you can and make a poultice, and when the potato scrapings turned black scrape more and put on it. I use that today.

RP: And that takes the burn away?

BS: Mmmhmm. And I keep an aloe plant. I don’t have one right now, but I keep one for burns also.

RP: What about if you ate some poisonous berries, what would you do then?

BS: That’s something I learned early, which ones to leave alone and which ones were poison. It would have been an accident if I’d of gotten hold of a poison berry. But I’ve always heard to induce vomiting.

RP: Do you still use these folk remedies with your family today?

BS: I would with a burn or a rash on the body, I would use folk remedies you know before we could get to a doctor and all.

RP: How did you know where to go and find the ingredients you would use?

BS: Just common knowledge, you use common knowledge with a lot of things; you have to all your life and you need to learn at an early age. Someone should be around to teach.
RP: So you grew up with your mother and grandmother showing you?

BS: And neighbors and teachers that I had and their knowledge. And you listen to people you can trust and understand.

RP: So people that you know who had done it before and it had worked for them?

BS: Mmmmm. (nods) I like handed down lore.

RP: It’s the best kind.

BS: Well, it’s about the only kind. It improves with scientific research and this and that, but it’s good to have knowledge of some of this yet.

RP: It’s always where you start at isn’t it?

BS: Mmmmm. (nods)

RP: Do you prefer using folk medicine remedies over taken medicines given by the doctor?

BS: Well the blackberry juice, yes, for a sick stomach. Yes I would. And for the burn, yes I would. And for a rash of some kind. I recently had a severe reaction to medicine and it was severe, and before I could get to the doctor I had a box of soda and I dampened it and made a poultice and rubbed it on my body until morning when I could get to the doctor.

RP: Before you could get to the doctor? And that worked for you, it gave you some relief?

BS: It helped but it didn’t cure it, because it was severe. It was a medicine reaction, a dye in my system. It was serious.

RP: It’s good that you knew what to do for that to offset it.

BS: Too ease it until I could get medical help.

RP: Do you have any things you would like to add, or questions, or stories that you can remember?

BS: Well I told the one about the sulfur and the grease.

RP: What about a chicken, if you would cut them?

BS: Oh a snake bite, raw chicken a fresh one if you have poultry, and for some reason that draws poison. Of course, an ice pack for a bite and for a bee sting or wasp sting always keeps a plug of tobacco to chew to make a poultice and put that on it. You can’t always get to a doctor quick enough, you need to ward off the pain.
RP: So you grew up with a knowledge of plants?

BS: I always liked the knowledge of this type of thing, and I studied plants in college myself. If you wanted to brush your teeth real quick, you break off a piece of sassafras if you’re out in the woods and chew on it and it cleans your teeth. There’s a gum, sweet gum, that can do the same thing and you’ll have your own toothbrush out in the wilderness if you’re fishing, walking, or this and that.

RP: That’s something to know, I’ve never heard of that.

BS: But always learn what’s nonpoisonous...

RP: Before you put that in your mouth...
BS: Yes. And it pays if you’re fishing or hunting and this or that to know some of this. If you’re on a lake fishing in the middle of the day and you’re stung by a wasp and a hornet, you should know a few things to help you.

RP: Do you have any other stories or things you remember?

BS: Well not right off.

RP: But you have a history with doing folk presentations don’t you? This isn’t your first time?

BS: No, this is not my first I can tell you. I think there’s some in the archives at Western. I have a book of things I’ve kept of things like this at conventions, homemakers, and Land between the Lakes, and schools. I’m very familiar with these types of things. I’ve always enjoyed doing things like this for children, or students, and this or that.

RP: Well, that’s all the questions I have right now, so thank you very much.

BS: You’re welcome and I’ve enjoyed it.