

The Art of Divining

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Intro. to Folk Studies

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I made a study of the art of divining in the regions in and surrounding Pulaski County, Kentucky. I became interested in the art of divining when I was a child. I saw the art performed by a neighbor and part of it has remained with me ever since that time. It also created a semi-mystical feeling within me, when I realized that I might have witnessed a part of a culture which may have lain dormant for years.

I expected as I began gathering information a somewhat consistent pattern would arise. Because of the fact that I based my studies in a particular geographic region. But on the other-hand I expected to find that each person that practices the art of divining would have individual variants that would create their own unique style.

The process that I used in collecting my information was fairly straight forward. I would ask them if they would allow me to interview them and if so, I would travel to their home and conduct the interview. But, how I found my informants was an altogether different matter. I sought the help of the older people in my family and my church to find the individuals that could provide me with the information that I needed. It was surprising how many names they came up with. Even though so many different names turned up I remained leery about interviewing them. So I only chose to interview Lucian Gastineau and Raymond Smith because of the fact I had come into contact with them before this time.

My informants were totally different from one another in almost every

aspect of the interview. They both presented me with some useful information and personal variations, but the manner in which they performed in the interview was exclusive to each of them.

Lucian Gastineau at the present time is 74 years old and afflicted with Parkinson's Disease, but the time he spent in the military revealed itself through-out my interview with him. My conversation with him was very insightful and extremely helpful. When he found out that I needed an interview he said he would be glad to help. He then went on to provide an amazing amount of information without any urging from me. He seemed to know exactly what I wanted to know and was overjoyed to retell his past experiences concerning divining.

Raymond Smith on the other- hand allowed me to interview him readily enough, but he seemed hesitant to talk when faced with the fact that the conversation was being recorded on tape. Raymond smith at this time is retired from a janitor's job and as a superintendent for Carnation. He now spends most of his time farming and hunting for squirrels and racoons. He is at most times a fun-loving individual and has a sharp wit, but on this time I could not get him to open up and talk freely.

The interviewing did not go as well as I had initially hoped. In the first interview which was with Lucian Gastineau, I was not really needed as an interviewer. He was only glad to have someone to whom he could talk with and relive his earlier experiences. My questions were irrelevant. He had most of them answered before I had even asked them. Now the second interview which was Raymond Smith was almost disastrous. I never could get him to open up and talk as if we were in a normal conversation (usually he will talk forever). My ques-

tions were possibly geared for a one word answer instead of a prolonged explanation. I really do not know.

The material that I have gathered may be classified into one principal category with it being further divided into sub-groupings. The main category involves the step-by-step process by which the act of divining is accomplished; selecting the divining rod, the proper way in which it is held, and the knowledge of how deep one must dig in order to find the water. Both of my informants agreed on the actual steps that makes up the main process, but as each individual step occurs certain aspects of it comes under the influence of personal variations. The most likely reason that the general process of divining was the same with both informants was because I concentrated my interviews in a relatively small geographic location, Pulaski County.

One of the sub-divisions involves the type of stick that is chosen for a divining rod and the reasons why. Both informants agreed that the stick should be as a fork much like that of a slingshot except more limber and it should be green. But Lucian Gastineau uses a dogwood limb because they are smoother, which allows them to twist easier. While Raymond Smith uses a peach tree limb, but he said any limb could be used if it came from a hard seed. Both Mr. Gastineau and Mr. Smith had heard of different types of divining rods such as straight sticks or brass rods but they had not used them.

Other sub-divisions on the category of divining could include the actual water-finding for others, how it was learned, stories involving divining, and the opinions of other non-diviners on the subject. These only a few of the possible categories my interviews could be divided into for analysis.

I truly believe that divining represents several aspects of folk culture and thus it is a suitable topic for this report. For one thing it has been passed down from generation to generation as seen in the interview with Lucian Gastineau when he said that he was taught to divine by his grandfather. Another aspect that constitutes this as an aspect of folk lore is that it is informally transmitted. It is learned in conversation or by doing it, not in a formal learning atmosphere. Also divining has a certain structure, but each individual that practices it introduces new variants such as different types of rods, sayings, or legends surrounding the process. Lastly divining has survived, even though it is not generally practiced in an everyday setting. But it survives in the hearts and memories of those that have did it.

The examination of this aspect of folk culture allowed me to fuel my desire for learning about the field of folk studies in general. It provided me with a lot of general information about the subject and a few delightful insights from the past that stems from each person's unique variations. But the way I approached the subject was wrong. Since I approached it as a classroom assignment, I went in with the idea that I knew something about the subject which I could use to my advantage. But in the end it hindered me. The approach I took in questioning the informants was wrong. I was trying to complete an assignment rather than dedicating my time to learn all the information and then redirect it back to the classroom. Now as I look back (What a blessing hindsight is !) I realize that all this information relates back to the intricacies of a community and the way the individual molds his life to this idea and/or the way he personalizes the

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idea to his own satisfaction.