

UNCLE WES AND THE PET SNAKE

By Robert “Bob” Rogers Chaffin

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN:

Sunday, 28 July 2013, pg. C4

‘Writer’s Corner’

The 1850-1900 time-period, during and following the “War of the Lost Cause”, was a superstitious time and many people were believed to have special powers to divine water in the ground using a forked, peach tree switch, or cure “thrush” in a bay’s throat by



blowing in their mouth. The belief in “water witches” continues even today and my daddy swore by “switching for water.” The power was often thought to be passed from father to son, but generally to the seventh son of a seventh son. Only one son would receive the gift and not always even one.

At the time I was a boy growing up on the big farm in the bend of the Cumberland, some of this had subsided, but much of that nature still remained. I have many times heard Daddy tell about “Uncle Wes,” who, as was often the case in the south in that day and time, was no real relation but was a “water witch”. Daddy would recount time and again how Uncle Wes would let Daddy hold the forked peach tree switch freshly cut from the tree. As he held tightly along with Uncle Wes as the older man switched for water, he could feel the diving rod begin to turn downward with irresistible power as they crossed the subterranean stream.

Uncle Wes also had special powers with animals and was apparently a “Cow Whisperer.” He could talk a sick and “down: cow or calf into standing when no other method would work. My mother would tell of a time when a cow was down following delivering a calf and she and Daddy were making a sling attached to black and tackle to try to force the cow to stand. She said Uncle Wes came in and wanted to know what was going on. Upon learning of the problem and the plan he said, “Let me talk to that little darling for a few minutes.” Uncle Wes whispered in the cow’s ear then stood back and said, “Now stand up for old Wes. And the cow stood. While my father was a story teller and given to flights of fancy, my mother was neither superstitious nor prone to exaggeration.

Uncle Wes also kept a pet black snake in our corn crib to catch mice and rats, much to the distress of my mother. He insisted that no one bother the snake, since it was serving a useful purpose. All went well until one day when Uncle Wes was gathering an arm load of shucks and gathered the black snake with them. The snake appeared eye to eye with Uncle Wes, and Uncle Wes scattered the shucks and snake to the winds. Now I can’t say for certain what happened, but we never saw the snake again.

Other wisdom of the old Folks went like this: A son born after his father’s death was thought to have special gifts of healing and they were often asked to blow in a baby’s mouth to cure thrush. In later writings, a granddaughter recorded a story which Elizabeth liked to tell. An old woman, widely regarded by the folks in those parts as a witch, came to

Elizabeth one day to bug goose eggs for setting. Elizabeth told her she had enough only for her own use. The supposed witch said, "You had just as well let me have them for they will never hatch for you." The eggs never did hatch and the story was told and retold for generations as proof that powers to put a hex on people did exist.

All farmers planted and pruned by the phases of the moon and the signs of the Zodiac as displayed in the Old Farmers Almanac. Crops which were to bear fruit underground such as peanuts and potatoes were planted in the dark of the moon and those which were to bear fruit above the ground such as tomatoes were planted in the light of the moon. Cabbage was planted when the sign was in the head, nothing but flowers were to be planted in the sign of the bowels since only blossoms would result, trees and bushes were to be cut and girdled when the sign was in the heart to ensure they were killed and did not sprout.

If one had a wart, a bean could be split and held on the wart. The bean was then to be buried in the forks of a road at the dark of the moon and the wart would go away.

Certain bible verses when read would stop hemorrhaging and a knife laid under the bed would cut the pain of childbirth.

It was certainly a different time then and people now are much more informed about the scientific causes of ailments. We are certainly more enlightened, well, as I think it though, I suppose we are just enlightened about different subjects than those neighbors of mine on Roaring River.

Have a blessed day.

Author of the books: Pioneers, Preachers and Patriots: The Chaffins of Roaring River, Jackson Co., TN and Ridin' the Blinds.

*Read more about Robert Rogers Chaffin in the Chaffin files and read more Writer's corner stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>