

Little Rock Christian Academy

The People of the Ozarks: Superstitions and Traditions in the Ozark Mountains

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Preface

Webster dictionary defines superstition as “a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation” (“superstition”). While this may be the way the world sees superstition, the people of the Ozark mountains see it as something completely different. The mountainous region running through Missouri and Arkansas called the Ozarks is an old community full of traditions and superstitions. For them, the belief in superstitions is not just a “false conception of causation,” but rather a way of life. Many people living in the Ozarks practice traditions on a daily basis due to superstitions that have been passed down for generations. In this research paper, I will walk through common superstitions in the Ozarks as well as the history behind these beliefs and the influence of the Native Americans once living in the Ozarks.

Common Superstitions

Many superstitions are passed from person to person with no one really knowing the origins of the practice. They seem to be common knowledge that everyone participates in simply because it's always been done that way. To give insight into the backgrounds of these beliefs, I am going to look into the origins of commonly known superstitions in the Ozarks.

One of the most well known superstitions that is known almost all over the world is the phrase “knock on wood.” This phrase is said when someone does not want to “jinx” themselves so they supposedly knock on any wooden object to prevent this from happening. This saying dates back to a pagan belief that spirits and deities live in trees and wood. By knocking on wood, pagans believed you would prevent the spirits inside from hearing your statement and thus they would be unable to thwart your plans (Crowfoot). The belief behind this has faded over the

years, becoming a common superstition practiced by millions. Another superstition that haunts the American South is the idea that finding a penny is good luck. This superstition dates back even further than knocking on wood, going as far back as the ancient Greek civilization. It was believed that any material good found was a gift from the gods and would in turn bring good fortune and wealth (Kaitlyn). This idea has been carried for centuries and made its way over to the Ozark mountains where picking up pennies is now a common practice.

Perhaps one of the most specific superstitions commonly believed today is the belief that breaking a mirror will bring seven years of bad luck. Supposedly, this came from the ancient idea that a mirror was a doorway into one's soul and by breaking it, the subject would, in turn, sever their soul from their body. This idea stemmed from the Romans who “tagged the broken mirror as a sign of seven years of bad luck. The length of the prescribed misfortune came from the ancient Roman belief that it took seven years for life to renew itself” (“Broken Mirror”). Another superstition that migrated from England and is now practiced widely is that of wishing on an eyelash. No one knows the specific origins of this superstition, however it is known that legend states that if someone wishes on an eyelash and blows the eyelash away, their wish will come true. It will not work, however, if one pulls out the eyelash specifically to wish upon (Dove). All of these superstitions are commonly known in the Ozarks and are still believed to be true today.

Seasons and Holidays

Around the 1960s, the Ozarks were a prominent and peaceful land. Many of the dwellers knew every person in their small town and knew exactly what to expect from each day. As accounted in *A Journal of the Seasons on an Ozark Farm*, author Leonard Hall takes readers through the every day of living in the Ozarks in the mid-1900's. He tells readers that the Ozark

people spend nearly every waking moment outside. Whether this is simply walking to the barn to check on their farm animals or waking up at dawn to go fishing in the summer, these people were so enveloped in nature, to live without it would not be a life worth living. The activities the people of the Ozarks would participate in would always be outside in nature no matter the weather or season.

The seasons have a cyclical nature, especially in Missouri and Arkansas. These two states experience every season, ranging from wet and fertile springs, hot and humid summers, and gentle, colorful autumns, to snowy days and ice storms in the winter. Though the seasons sometimes seem to last forever they are always changing, and with them the people change as well. In spring, a typical day would consist of waking up at dawn to tend to the cattle and their calves. Being a cattleman seems like easy work, however it is a truly grueling profession that requires constant monitoring and consideration, lest illnesses and problems arise. Many farmers are also skilled in the art of midwifery as they often deliver their animals' offspring themselves, either not having time to call a vet or not having the money to spend on one. Calves are not the only thing being reborn around springtime, as the earth is entering a phase of renewal as well. Wildflowers abound in the months of April and May, springing up from the cold and into the warm spring wind. Many crops are either meant to be planted or harvested around spring also. Lettuces and carrots are always sweeter if harvested around February and March, the cold taking away their bitterness and adding a crisp sweet flavor. While these plants are being taken out of the ground, many vegetables and melons are going in the ground around March and April, after the last frost of the year.

This lifestyle of farming and constant connection with the outdoors reveals the superficiality of the modern-day. People tend to forget where their food comes from with all of the technological advances used today (Hall 42). When was the last time you actually walked through the woods for no reason other than to admire nature? We seem to always have someplace to be or something to do, however, many would be amazed by what can be learned just by sitting back and observing the natural order of the world. There is no better time to take this step back from technology than in the springtime. This time of rebirth and renewal shows the cycle of nature through every bud on a tree and every baby bird chirping for the first time. Spring is a beauty to behold as the promise of life seems to magnify every other season to come.

Around the end of May and the beginning of June the days grow longer and hotter, making it evident that Summer has arrived. In summer the crops start to bloom, ripening with every summer shower and beam of sunshine. Along with this change of weather comes a change of heart for many, as the summer solstice approaches, being a renowned holiday shrouded in mystery and superstition. Not many people still participate in the summer solstice in the Ozarks, however, those who do stick to the traditions that have been passed on for centuries. For instance, one of these traditions is jumping over a solstice bonfire. This is said to bring good luck and fortune in the coming year. This bonfire signified the strength of the sun and was thought to banish evil energies or demons who could also be warded against by wearing garlands of flowers (“Summer Solstice”). If you collect the ashes from the solstice fire, it is said sprinkling them in the garden will fertilize and nourish the ground, producing healthy, delicious crops.

After Summer Solstice, the season continues on with the heat coming and going, finally arriving at the harvest in the months of August and September. With this start of the harvest

comes Lughnasadh, or the Gaelic festival signifying the beginning of the harvest season. This holiday is usually celebrated with feasts and is one of the longest, happiest holidays of the year (Haggerty). Often one would bake their first loaf of bread with the fresh crop of wheat and leave it as an offering to the gods, presenting them with the best of what they have in return for a blessed year to come. Not many people in the Ozarks still celebrate this holiday as it is rather a small one, typically only lasting one or two days, being celebrated by indulging in every kind of food. After Lughnasadh comes changing leaves and cool weather. The days start to turn golden to match the hue of the ever-changing leaves. It is said if one catches a falling leaf on the first day of autumn it can prevent sickness and disease for the rest of the year (Marris 1).

As the days begin to shorten, people grow restless as the season of fear rolls around. Halloween, or Samhain, is perhaps one of the funnest holidays for children all around the globe; however, this holiday did not originate as a joyous one. Developing in the British Isles, Halloween was a time when people would feast, believing that the veil between the world of the living and the dead was thinnest on this night, prompting people to bribe the spirits with treats to appease them. This creepy night traveled all the way into the Ozarks and is now a renowned holiday full of candy, fake blood, and pumpkins. Despite the fun and almost hypnotic allure of Halloween, this holiday has, perhaps, the most superstitions revolving around it. The black cat is a well known superstition in the Ozarks, as it is said if a black cat crosses your path around this time, you will have bad luck for the rest of the year. It is also said that if one sees a black cat on halloween, a witch is nearby (Barlie). This stems from the thought that black cats are “demonic animals” that harbor evil and badwill everywhere they go (Melina). Another staple of Halloween is carving pumpkins. As with most traditions, this practice has meaning behind it. Originally

made with turnips, people would carve scary faces into them in hopes to scare away spirits; as “turnips were hard to come by in the United States,” people eventually began using pumpkins instead (Melina). Another superstition that migrated to the US about Halloween was the need to dress up on this day. People would dress up to fool the spirits into thinking you were someone else and thus, evade their wrath. This tradition has become widespread around the world and is now a part of almost every culture however the people in the Ozarks take this very seriously, as one can never be too careful. It is around this time that people begin to think about the winter to come.

Perhaps one of the most well known superstitions in the United States about winter stems from the Ozarks: the prediction of the persimmon seed. It is believed that if one cuts open a persimmon seed in the fall, the shape on the inside of the seed can predict what kind of winter is coming. A seed in the shape of a knife indicates an icy winter, if the shape resembles a fork a mild winter is to come, and if the seed looks like a spoon the winter will be filled with snow (Boeckmann). With the cold weather comes the smell of pine and sound of singing, welcoming what is arguably the most prominent holiday: Christmas. This season of good tidings and joy is the happiest holiday of all. People bring out their best clothes and decorate their houses in celebration of Christ's birth. Many exchange gifts around this time to indicate goodwill and to honor the wisemen in the Old Testament of the Bible. Also in reference with the Bible, it is an old Ozark superstition that, every year on Christmas eve, some animals are given the power of speech. If you go into the woods and listen, you may hear the sound of animals praying to God (Randolph 250). One boy in the early 1900s in Arkansas is said to obsessively watch his cattle to witness this feat, however apparently when a human is watching the animals, the “spell” is

broken, thus he was disappointed every year (Randolph 251). As Christmas ends, so begins the New Year. Many New Year superstitions stem from the Ozarks, one of which being the consumption of blackeyed peas. "I have known country folk who rode a long way to get these peas for a New Year's dinner, even though they did not care particularly for black-eyed peas, and seldom ate them at any other time," writes Vance Randolph, as it is well known that eating black eyed peas on New Years brings luck for the coming year. This action can be countered, however, as it is very *bad* luck to hang up a calendar early or before the new year has begun. It is also said that the first person to visit you on January 1st could predict the year to come, if the person is happy, you will have a good year, while if the person is upset you will have a bad one (Kaitlyn). If the visitor is completely unexpected, this signifies you will have many visitors that year (Randolph 256).

Native American influence on Superstitions

For thousands, if not millions of years Native Americans have made their homes in the American continents. They dwelt all over the United States, with multiple tribes residing in the modern day Ozarks. The number of American Indian tribes that inhabited the Ozarks is still unknown, as many tribes moved around frequently, especially after the early establishment of American Colonies and the wars that followed. This movement of tribal location spread the culture of the Native Americans, mixing tribal traditions across states and causing many settling Europeans to adopt some of the traditions of the American Indian people. This history has significantly influenced the Ozark people and has carried over several of the Native American practices and superstitions into the current day.

One of the most prominent areas of this traditional method of living is in agriculture. Many agricultural practices are still used today due to practicality but also in part to the superstitions behind the practices. One of these farming methods is the “three sisters” method. This is a gardening practice using squash, corn, and beans where the plants would rely on each other to provide nutrients and grow. “Beans climb the maize and add nitrogen to the soil; squash blocks sunlight, retarding weeds and keeping soil from parching” (Tenenbaum). Another botanical practice that has been passed down from the native americans to the current people of the Ozarks is the use of Plantain. Plantain is a common weed found in almost any yard in the American South. It is perhaps the most useful weed as it contains dozens of healing and medicinal properties. The original Native Americans in the Ozarks used it for food and medicine, applying or eating plantain leaves reduced pain and contained multiple vitamins (Tenebaum). Now, people dry the leaves and make teas or flour to ease aches and pains. This plant can also be used to remove splinters, reduce inflammation, ease gout, reduce joint pain, staunch bleeding, create a natural bandaid and much more (Culpepper). While Plantain was originally brought over by the Europeans, it quickly became a staple in Native american life and still lives on in the Ozarks today as a prevalent folk remedy (Nolan & Schneider) . The use of plants was not the only thing the American Indians passed on to the people of the Ozarks.

Another area of practice that was adapted from Native American traditions and myths is pottery techniques. Native Americans would typically use slabs of clay or a coil method to create their pottery. While most of the pottery they created was for practical use, they would often decorate and paint their pots to honor the gods they served (Jackson). In the modern day pottery community, slab and coil pots are still very common, however the superstition that the

decorations of pottery honors the gods has been somewhat reduced, being used for practicality only.

The Ozarks have a rich history involving many different American Indian tribes that greatly influenced the European settlers, passing some traditions on for centuries to come. Though the majority of the Native American people were unjustly killed and thinned out due to the Indian wars and the Battle of Tippecanoe that took place in the late 19th century, their unique religion and way of life is attempting to be preserved in reserves across the US (Flixico). There, they can continue to live in tradition and in the community their ancestors grew up in however their past and influence in the Ozarks will never be forgotten.

Conclusion

While every community has its own superstitions, the Ozarks are renowned for it. Being superstitious is not a rarity for them, it's a way of life. The Ozarks have been heavily influenced by Native American history as well as some pagan holidays and traditions brought to the United States through European colonization. This provides the area with a unique array of superstitions and beliefs that is now ingrained in the culture. Many modern day superstitions have reached out of the Ozarks and now are known all across America. While many people may not know the origins to their beliefs, the people of the Ozarks stay true to their ancestors and pass on superstitions, creating a legacy that will continue for generations.

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