

Deviant Divinity: Granny Witches of Appalachia and the History of Folk Magic

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The term “witch” conjures many images in our contemporary minds—trials in Salem, flying broomsticks, and Halloween costumes dominate our understanding of these supernatural women. However, the roots of female magic practitioners run deep in the mountains of Appalachia and have nothing to do with devilish deals or malicious intent like the East Coast stories indicate. Their practice has been referred to as many things as contemporary researchers attempt to piece together their histories: root work, granny magic, kitchen witchery, Braucherei, witchcraft. It is a rich tapestry of cultures and ancestral knowledge that were brought together through oral tradition to develop a uniquely American strain of faith healing, communal protection, and folk magic.

As immigrants from Europe began flooding the shores of the “New World,” many pushed westward for space and communities of their own away from the Puritans of New England. These English, Scottish, Irish, and German families brought with them practices from home; remedies that utilized their natural surroundings to take care of their own through illness, both physical and spiritual. However, moving across the ocean and deep into the unexplored terrain of the Appalachians presented new challenges to these healers. Their new home did not share the same flora and fauna of their old and they need to learn how to incorporate the American vegetation into their practice. They learned everything they could from their new neighbors, the native Cherokee and Choctaw who knew the land and the qualities of its resources. They also adopted practices of African descent, learning from the runaway slaves moving north who learned the native land and nature for survival in the wilderness. With the aid of those who knew the land, the granny witches became deeply knowledgeable about the land, its properties, and its signals, understanding signs of changing environments to predict things like weather and crop failure. To those who were less familiar, it certainly seemed occult how in tune they were with the world around them. It is through this multicultural exchange that this region-specific breed of herbalism was able to flourish and provide for its people for so long, away from the judgement and persecution of other interpretations of their practice.

Because of the specificity of their practice to their isolated mountain region, the community became highly skeptical and averse to the doctors, sciences, and religious extremism emerging from the cities miles away. Not only were they too far away from these mountain towns to be helpful in emergencies, but there was a lack of trust and general suspicion around the work of modern medicine in general—especially from outside their own tight knit communities. This made the granny witches the sole sources of both medical and spiritual guidance for their towns in a lot of cases, especially once local governments in the larger cities began restricting medical practice to licensed doctors. Despite their removal from the religiosity of the settlements down the mountainside, most of these practitioners were deeply connected to a form of Christian Protestantism with the core tenant of animism: that every living being on earth has the spark of

the divine within it and deserves to be treated as such. Many of these healers rejected the moniker of “witch” because of their Christian background, not wanting their spiritually rooted herbalism to be conflated with dark arts or devil worship. But their shared reverence for the living creatures of earth allowed for their mutual understanding with native inhabitants and an open line of knowledge sharing between the groups.

However, because of the distrust around them, they were also very protective of their practices and only ever passed the traditions and teachings down orally, kept within the immediate family of the practitioners. Many of the holes in the history of granny witches from the 1860s-1980s can be explained by practitioners dying before teaching their next of kin, allowing their specific and individual knowledge to die with them. However, a common misconception is that only women were ever allowed to learn this unique practice. DC based religious scholar and museum worker, Emma Cieslik, writes, “While the term “witch” is often understood today as a female magical practitioner, the term has historically been used by all genders...the term was applied to anyone deviating outside of religious lines, and, more likely than not, this included individuals who did not conform to the strict gender and sexual norms of the day.” These non-traditional identities were given the space to thrive and lead in community healing because of their attunement with the people, land, and society around them.

In our contemporary moment that couches the narrative of *Where Dead Women Go to Dance*, there is a rising movement out of the Appalachian region of herbalist practitioners reclaiming the “witchery” of their ancestors and reconnecting with the utilization of their immediate surroundings for healing and relief. Some are connected to Christian beliefs, utilizing Psalms as their spells alongside their natural remedies, while others are distancing themselves from the harmful histories that Christianity has wrought on people and regions globally that they didn’t agree with, all agree on the importance of faith in the practice as being critical to its success. Steven Spotswood’s utilization of this particular history in Kim’s revival of her best friend highlights the deep importance of care, faith, and love in the healing practices of this region, and provided a resonant jumping off point for our artists to dig into these complicated characters and beautiful relationship.

Resources:

Cieslik, E. (2023, August 15). *Appalachian folk magic: Generations of “granny witchcraft” and spiritual work*. Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

<https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/appalachian-folk-magic>

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<https://www.learnreligions.com/appalachian-folk-magic-4779929>

The Appalachian Storyteller. (2022). *Appalachia's Storyteller: Appalachian Granny Witches* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMFwA7Ii5Gg>