

The ‘Charm Doctors’ of Leslie County: Oral histories of male witches, midwives, and faith healers in Leslie County, Kentucky 1878-1978

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This paper critically analyzes oral histories concerning three men who lived in the rural communities of Leslie County, Kentucky between 1878 and 1978: John B. Maggard, a gunsmith, blacksmith, farmer and faith healer; George Joseph, reported to be a prophet, a witch, and a herb doctor; and Matt Gray, a multi-generational male midwife and mountain doctor. These reports provocatively suggest that certain men of Appalachian communities functioned as ‘witch doctors’ or ‘charm doctors’ providing herbal medicine, faith healing, “magical” and midwifery services to their communities from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. In placing the accounts of these men in conversation with literature on British folkways in the United States and Cherokee medicinal lore, this study provides insight into the traditional methods and social functions of community healers in pioneer Appalachian societies prior to the entry of modern medicine and midwifery into Appalachia.

Keywords: Appalachia, witchcraft, faith healing, ethnobotany, midwifery

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