FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
FOLKLORE IN UPPER MICHIGAN

FOLK MEDICINE

EDWARD R. WILMERS
Interviewed
by
Arbutus Bleise
on
July 2, 1973
Edward Willmers  
July 2, 1973

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INTerview BeTWEEN:
INTerviewee: Edward R. Willmers
INTerviewer: Arbutus Bleise
SUBJECT: Folk Medicine

B: I am Arbutus Bleise and I would like to interview my father. His name is Mr. Willmers and will you tell us how long you have lived in this area?

W: I've lived in this area ever since I was born in Osceola Township, and I worked around this area and the C&H Mining Co., and individuals as a carpenter, and a farmer all the while. I received the farm from my dad. I left in 1955, and left for lower Michigan.

B: I thought maybe we'd like to discuss some of the home type remedies that were used for illness. You were telling me how your mom helped you with colds. Will you tell me about that?

W: The old time remedy for children was, brought them in the house set them in front of the baking oven, with not too high of a heat and wipe their feet bottoms with just ordinary lard, and just heated that and heated the feet bottom in front of the oven, when the lard was melted and the feet turned reddish color she took us out of there, stocking footed us and sent us to bed. The cold was gone during the night.

B: O.K. Then you also told me of using tar sometimes for colds. What did you do there? How did you use that?

W: Pine tar was one of the remedies that grown up people, and the teenagers used but not for small children. The older people used to mix tar with different things that would dilute the tar taste, they would swallow it just as they would cover it up with something else and sometimes sweetened it with other mixtures and use this tar. Other people had taken this tar and put a little liquor in it and stir it, and had it standing in a bottle and they also used that for colds. I don't remember of hardly any other remedy in those days used for colds.

B: You even said that sometimes to take that t&t taste away they would even use viilia or what we call yougart, didn't you?

W: Yougart was wrapped around the drop of tar that was dropped on top and this was covered with this yougart and this was also used to swallow the way it was.
B: I understand sometimes they would use wines for colds, now how would they fix that? Or what kind of wine would they use?

W: Wine, when my family was small we used to take dandelion wine, heated in a metal bowl on the stove, give it to the children to drink as it was, not too hot but warm enough and hot enough so they could drink it and send them to bed and the cold was gone in the morning.

B: It was interesting to me what they did for pneumonia too. Can you go through that and tell us how they cured that?

W: In European countries they used to treat ailments with stale beer in an open container and take bread slices and soak the bread and put them on the person's chest and wrap them with a cloth and this would draw the fever from the lungs, and make it much easier for the person to breathe.

B: You were telling about some of the things they did for headaches.

W: Headache remedy, the best remedy for children for a headache was raw potatoes soaked in vinegar and wrapped in a towel of cloth, several folds so the potatoes itself didn't make connection with the skin of the head and just a few hours after the fever and headache was gone, was drawn out by this means. Then I was when I was older it understood for a longer period of headache whatever caused it I don't know but turpentine was applied, pure turpentine that's sold in the drug store was applied on the forehead of a person that had a headache for several days and in just a matter of hours the headache was gone.

B: Another thing that was interesting to me was when you told me how your mother would take and remove a speck of dirt from someone's eye. Could you tell what she did?

W: This was taught to her in the European countries. She was sort of a nurses aid or part nurse in her country and during the time she was in the United States here some men at the Company works, Osceola Mining Company men used to come to her recommended by somebody at the company to come to her for the eye that was suffering from some dirt or steel. She would lay the person down and go around his eyeball with her tongue underneath the lid and felt the dirt or whatever it was that was causing the trouble. She felt it with her tongue. If it came out with her tongue it came out. If it was steel she used to pass a magnet and the magnet used to draw the steel crumbs out of the eye. For inside hair growth she had instruments that would take care of those inward hairs that grew from the lid inward instead of outward.

B: Years ago some people even rolled the eye didn't they?

W: Yes. B: By turning the lid back somehow---

W: They used to take a smooth stick and take a hold of the eyelid and press this stick and turn this lid forward to find out if there was anything stuck, also on the lid she used this method.
The older people for

and then this cup used to be placed on this cut surface and
then it was evacuated by putting the other end into the mouth
drawing outward and that would cause the suction in the cup. It
had a mouth piece that was fastened so when they took their lips
away from the opening this mouth piece was fixed so that it closed
the opening acting as a valve but the suction continuously was
there until the cup let go itself or the person experienced with
this kind of work knew when to take the cup off the body.

B: Did they have many spots like this done at a time?

W: Some people had a high a 30 cuppings. The amount of blood some-
times to me, it seemed very much but the party that had this done
felt much better and they were good for a long time after. Some
people had high blood pressure so bad that, I remember that, they
had seen colored snakes even in the hay because this high blood
pressure affected their eyes. But when this cupping was done it
cured their high blood pressure and gave them good sight.

B: How long did this generally last? Say a year or did they it
done every six months?

W: Lot of it lasted according to what kind of food they were eating.
Some food will build blood pressure quicker and with some food it
will take more time before the blood pressure becomes the same as
was.

B: How about those people? Were they special people? It wasn't like
you or I could do this cupping. It had to be someone that ---

W: This person that did the cupping in the first place had to be used
to seeing blood. In the second place they had to be people that
knew what they were doing with this cupping. They applyed a remedy
after the cupping, which I don't know what it was, on the cut area
but it did dry and heal. There was no blood after the cup was
taken off, seeping through. They could put on their clothes and it
was well taken care of.

B: Is the only thing they used for high blood pressure those days?

W: They used for high blood pressure and a lot of men had it done.
He was an experienced man. This was learned in Europe. A little
tool, a certain vain under the tongue and this was triggered and
when the trigger was full it made a certain punch into the vain
and it bleed from underneath the tongue from that vain. a certain
amount of blood. I don't know, I'm not experienced, how much they did take out it was done to my dad.

B: How did they take care of cuts and things like that those days

W: Cuts were rinsed. Most people had ordinary salt that was in a bottle and it wasn't even closed it was just an open bottle of salt water, they used to wash the cuts with the salt water and some of them that didn't do that, the common medicine those days was to drop a little iodine on the cuts.

B: You were talking about the wide plantain leaf too. What did they use that for?

W: That there was used in many cases for strains, swollen parts in the foot or anywhere. They'd take these leaves, they'd use them in swelling and bad bruises and draw out the fever. The way they found this out, a snake biting a frog. The frog jumped on the plant and it drew the poisoning out of the frog and the frog kept on going. That was the first indication that the plant was good for drawing.

B: Where would you find the plant?

W: In the yard, among the small growth in the yard

B: It's just a weed?

W: It's a weed, it's very low, the leaves lie flat on the ground, with big, big veins and it has a rod blossom.

B: I see, and that was used for drawing out infection and...

W: That was used for drawing out most skin infections.

B: Oh! hay seed was used too wasn't it?

W: With hay seed they made a poltice. That was used by people who thought they had blood poisoning or any thing of the kind or fallen and this drew the fever and blood poisoning out.

B: Felsnaptha was often used too wasn't it? What was Felsnaptha used for?

W: Felsnaptha was used for different skin rashes. It was wonderful for those skin rashes and so forth.

B: Even when someone got in poison ivy I understand--

W: Poison ivy was a skin rash, there were other plants also that people were allergic to. These people, that were allergic often washed with this Felsnaptha. It took care of it.

B: They used bread and milk often? What did they use that for?

W: They used bread and milk for a fellon poltice. It was known as fellon poltice and this also was used for a bad bruises that continually was paining.
B: What about a mustard plaster

Mustard plasters were used for backaches. The mustard was to be put in between a flannel towel so one side of the flannel towel laid on the back and the other part of the towel had mustard wiped on it and then put on the back. The back was first treated with the white of an egg and then the plaster was put on top. It sure did draw. Mostly all of those that had that they couldn't keep it on very long and it drew away the backache.

B: If you kept it on too long what would happen then?

W: If it was kept on too long and you laid on anything with a crease like a bed sheet or blanket and it had a lot of creases you were like a star spangled banner when it was taken off.

B: So you really burned with it.

W: It really burned.

B: O.K. now I'm going to ask you about the acid condition of the stomach. What did they do for that?

W: Most of the older people, people that were troubled with gassy stomach, all they did was take a little bit of salt on a teaspoon dumped it into a glass container with a little water, just about a mouthfull it contained. They swallowed it. That was all the treatment for a gassy stomach.

B: Once in a while they used baking soda I understand.

W: Baking soda was used mostly in a younger class of people, children and so forth.

B: What did they do for sore throats?

W: When someone had a sore throat a woolen stocking was taken. It was dipped in kerosene and rung out so it wouldn't be running. It had the kerosene smell in it and the dampness and was put around the throat and pinned behind so it would not get loose.

B: It was interesting to me to hear you tell me what they did for earaches. Will you go through that again?

W: The earache as far as I know it was done, they would take a pipe. Most of the older people smoked peerless tobacco and they put this pipe bob in their mouth and blew the smoke in the ear. They did this several times in the ear and the earache was over.

B: What did they do for toothaches

W: Toothaches, they used to take and dig the bottom of the pipe and get the oil and if it was a cavity, they took a little cotton batton and put this oil on the cotton batton and pressed it into the cavity.
B: They sure had all kinds of ways of taking care of those ailments that we'd just go to the dentist or doctor for nowadays. Can you tell me a little bit about drinking acid? I know at those times these accidents happened quiet often.

W: Olden times when a child drank acid it was understood by doctors and sometimes by the parents the results of it. The results of it was the acid was powerful. The one child that took acid couldn't take much more than a mouthful, it was so bitter he didn't take any more than what they had in their mouth, they swallowed it. Where the acid lodged it burned the inside lining of the throat and the results of it was later on. Through my own experiences at a year and a half I drank the acid. At seven years old I was examined by a local doctor, not at a hospital. Just a local doctor in the kitchen. The doctor examined me and asked me questions and I told him what it was all about. I couldn't swallow anything I put into my mouth. I couldn't swallow it down, only liquid. So the doctor went back to his office and came back with a rod. This rod was pointed, the tip was pointed. The point was separate from the rod. It was threaded into the point of the rod. Then I was strapped, bridled on a round back chair from my forehead to keep my throat clear, My arms were tied down behind the chair, my knees were wrapped around the seat of the chair, my feet were tied and around the legs of the chair. The doctor said "Sit still and don't move, if this rod breaks it'll get left in your throat." This was done the first time. It felt terrible. It was done the second time. It felt terrible. He changed the point the third time. Few days later again the rod was pushed down. It was given a quarter turn for every up and down pull. The last rod was the full size of the throat. It was pushed down, by now my system got so used to it, it didn't seem to bother me and later on when I was ten years old the Dr. Romp that did this work left the office and he told my parents to watch this that when I got ten years old it may start. It did start. Dr Rowe our family doctor gave me big pills to swallow. The got left where the healing was, where it was healing in again. So he told me to take a little water and these big pills almost the size of a nickel and twice the thickness. He said they'll dissolve and burn the growth. I took six of them and I'm 74 years old and I'm still living and swallowing.

B: Did they give you some kind of an antiseptic when the were doing this drilling?

W: No.

B: Really!!

W: Just a warning. Don't move, if the rod breaks, it'll get left in your throat. It would never have broken as it wasn't that kind of material but I didn't know it. That was his warning.

B: Can you tell me something about these people so gifted in setting bones.
W: People of older age to my knowledge, none of them had any hospital experience anywhere. Out where they were working accidents had happened. These people that did the first job, broken legs, collar bones and whatever it may be. They had the nerve to tackle it and they did the best they knew how. From there they learned on and on until they were wonderful. They could place any bone. Some people were so gifted. Nobody knows where they got the gift. A bone that was fitted by a doctor and the gifted person saw that it was fitted right would break it all over again and just push it together and if it was an a man he'd walk.

That was really some gift. How about stopping blood

W: Nose bleeds, knife wounds, axe wounds, wherever the wound was and the vein was cut so bad that it bled, this gentleman that had the gift all he had to do was look at it and it would stop and they could bandage it. There was no doctor and no hospital.

B: That was wonderful. There was a Mrs. Juntunen that de salves etc. Can you tell me a little about her?

W: Mrs. Juntunen, to Hancock old people and there may be some middle aged people who and know Mrs. Juntunen. She's dead she died. But she left a wonderful gift to her daughter and it was a poltice that was made for blood poisoning. Hancock doctors and Houghton doctors often, when I was a young man, sent people up there with blood poisoning that the weren't sure whether they could cure it or not so the sent the patient to Mrs. Juntunen. Mrs. Juntunen put a poltice on there and drew the pain away and it was healed and the blood poisoning was taken care of. The salve that she made was for skin rash. It was for these people that were allerage to something, a skin rash which weep, weep a lot of water and she made a salve and it was applied on the persons body a few times and that took care of that.

B: Can you tell me something about midwives during that time?

W: There was Mrs. Granett in the Finnish and---

B: What did the midwives do?

W: Midwives they took care of the child birth when doctors weren't available. There wasn't too many and the midwives used to get the oalland help the patient in a confinement case.

B: Your mother you said was an interpeter.

W: My mother spoke three different languages and she used to act as an interpeter between the doctors and the patients. There were many different nationality people and they spoke their own different language and didn't understand one another.

B: That been very interesting.