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## Carville: Remembering Leprosy in America

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*Carville: Remembering Leprosy in America* (review)

Chris Goertzen

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the midwife or the seventh son), 100 on “ailments” (which, in addition to illnesses, include problems such as drunkenness, bad breath, contraception, cuts, hunger, and so forth), 117 on “healing agents” (from cayenne and horehound to dead man’s hand and toads and frogs), 8 on “ideas” (amulet, doctrine of signatures, and so forth), and 5 on “cultural traditions” outside the Anglo-American mainstream that the book is about (African, Celtic, Mexican, Native American, and Shaker, each very briefly treated). Most entries are between a page and a page and a half long, while a few are as short as half a page. A handful are as long as three or four pages.

A Scottish botanist, Hatfield writes clearly, balances ideas well, and documents copiously, using parenthetical notes that refer to full bibliographic entries given at the end of every article. Rather than repeating the full citation, putting them at the end of the volume would have saved considerable space; half a dozen central reference works receive full citations roughly a hundred times each. Perusing the individual essays can be useful, and just thumbing through the book is rewarding, too. One might think of looking up “ginger” or “ginseng,” “eczema” or “epilepsy,” but it is hard to imagine deliberately seeking out “dew” or “freckles” (a blight for which remedies were apparently sought repeatedly). I looked carefully at the entry for the humble potato, treated in two pages of prose followed by a page of references (spanning pp. 276–9). The potato has been employed—raw, cooked, peeled, carried as an amulet (I intend to take this up), in a sock, or even cut into pieces and thrown away—to treat over fifty ailments, from appendicitis, asthma, and back pain to ulcers, warts, and wounds. Since the entry is organized in part geographically, some of these ailments appear repeatedly within it. All uses are referenced, but, with this large a number of uses cited in so little space, there is no room to explore beyond manner of use (poultice, in a tea, and so forth). One can get some idea of how important a given remedy was for a given ailment by going to the corresponding entry: the ailment “rheumatism” is mentioned more often in the article on the potato than the reverse. Cross-checking

also reveals plenty of the sorts of errors that will always dog encyclopedists: “eczema” appears in the article on the potato, but “potato” does not come up in the “eczema” article, despite a reference to that article in the “potato” entry. Nevertheless, this is a valiant first effort at bringing together a considerable body of information. Even though the individual entries are short, Hatfield’s catholic approach to selecting topics for articles and the thoroughness with which the entries are documented will make this a helpful source for those researching British and British-derived American folk medicine.

**Carville: Remembering Leprosy in America.**

By Marcia Gaudet. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. Pp. xvii + 221, foreword, preface, 16 photographs, one map, two appendices, endnotes, bibliography, index.)

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From 1894 to 1999, Carville, Louisiana, was the site of the only in-patient facility in the contiguous United States for treating Hansen’s disease, historically known as leprosy. Because of the high incidence of Hansen’s disease in southern Louisiana, locating the facility in a former plantation between New Orleans and Baton Rouge made sense. The patients there, in quarantine until the 1960s, constituted a community that was rich in narratives and traditions resulting from the intersection of their common malady with the usual benchmarks of life. In all, they narrate “a story of survival and a quest for dignity” (p. 4).

The first chapter of Marcia Gaudet’s *Carville: Remembering Leprosy in America* introduces the history of the disease, both in scientific terms and in the popular consciousness, and presents Carville as a treatment center and a community. Chapter 2, “An Exile in My Own Country: The Unspeakable Trauma of Entering Carville,” relates memories of the emotional devastation accompanying diagnosis and then analyzes both how the patients chose to voice those memories in personal narratives and how they

managed to reconstruct viable identities in their new situation and new home. Much of the documentation comes from detailed and eloquent biographies published by three patients and from interviews conducted by Gaudet. Throughout the book, she sensitively balances well-chosen extended quotations with synthesis and discussion.

The borders of Carville—and of the community it contained—were semipermeable. Chapter 3, “Through the Hole in the Fence: Personal Narratives of Absconding from Carville,” examines the long-term equilibrium between the strict regulations concerning confinement and the lax enforcement of those regulations. Patients slipped out now and again, sometimes for fun, sometimes for serious tasks like getting married (Louisiana required a blood test, while Mississippi did not), and always to explore the boundaries of their lives. Tellers of these stories relate justifications for fleeing, details of passage to the outside, and returns to Carville (voluntary or not). These personal escape narratives allowed patients to assert some limited, but psychologically critical control of their fate. Their common stigma inspired escape and then also return: patients would grow weary of hiding the truth or would need medical attention. Punishments were just harsh enough to assure that “escaping” would remain infrequent yet lenient enough to allow some possibility of respite, thus balancing sanity and physical health.

The fourth chapter, “‘Talking it Slant’: Personal Narratives, Tall Tales, and the Reality of Leprosy,” feels a bit crowded. Gaudet explores disease as a multivalent metaphor, and then she cites casual vernacular uses of the word “leper” to illustrate the crudity of the stigma and the patients’ frequent need to creatively temper the truth. Teenagers who slipped out of Carville to attend football games often simply lied about where they were from. One patient managed to tell a saloon audience on the outside that he was a leper in a way that almost guaranteed being disbelieved; this is the only narrative closely examined in the chapter. In contrast to the brevity of chapter 4, the sixth one is a bit overlong. “‘Under the Pecans’: History and Memory in the Graveyard at Carville” focuses on grave-

stone inscriptions in the hospital’s two cemeteries. Many quarantines continued in death, since permission for burial elsewhere was elusive. Just as patients in the early eras of Carville received new names on arrival, these pseudonyms appeared on the stones. To protect their families from discrimination back home, those early markers were inscribed simply with initials, a first name, or a patient’s number.

Chapter 5, “The World Turned Downside Up: Mardi Gras at Carville,” is my favorite. There, Gaudet narrates a real twist on festival identity transformation: “The carnivalesque world upside-down is challenged, decentered, reversed upon itself when the carnival inversion includes those who historically have been the ultimate Others” (p. 118). Set apart in daily life, the citizens of Carville became “normal” when fantastically masked and costumed. They were able to participate in a delightful, gaudy pseudo-anonymity for a few hours, building up to this with weeks or even months of anticipatory labor. A tradition including thousands of people, which was still a modest minority of the citizenry, Mardi Gras participation is an avid (and expensive!) hobby for its self-appointed culture bearers. But at Carville, nearly everyone was passionately involved; the permanently stigmatized were happy to join a broad community of the annually abnormal.

This book is short but elegantly conceived and written, and it will be useful in the classroom. Illustrating and analyzing Carville’s sub-species of common folklore genres, most chapters are self-contained. Gaudet’s *Carville* is an immediate classic, a wonderful combination of scholarship and compassion.

**Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy.** By Wendell Berry. Photographs by James Baker Hall. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. Pp. 78, 47 black-and-white photographs, photograph identifications.)

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*Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy* is in most senses a coffee table book. The text covers only nineteen