Carville: Remembering Leprosy in America

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the midwife or the seventh son), 100 on “ail-
ments” (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 hore-
hound to dead man’s hand and toads and
frogs), 8 on “ideas” (amulet, doctrine of signa-
tures, and so forth), and 5 on “cultural tradi-
tions” 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 bib-
liographic entries given at the end of every ar-
ticle. 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 thumb-
ing through the book is rewarding, too. One
might think of looking up “ginger” or “gin-
seng,” “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 care-
fully at the entry for the humble potato, treated
in two pages of prose followed by a page of ref-
erences (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 “rheu-
matism” 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 infor-
mation. 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 Brit-
ish and British-derived American folk medi-
cine.

Carville: Remembering Leprosy in America.
By Marcia Gaudet. (Jackson: University Press
of Mississippi, 2004. Pp. xvii + 221, foreword,
preface, 16 photographs, one map, two appen-
dices, endnotes, bibliography, index.)

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From 1894 to 1999, Carville, Louisiana, was the
site of the only in-patient facility in the con-
tiguous 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 com-

nunity that was rich in narratives and tradi-
tions 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-


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