

Henry, Rebecca



Creole Folk Medicine

Rebecca Henry lives in Opelousas, where she is a teacher's aide working with children with language disorders. Born in Leonville in 1941, she grew up on the countryside around Opelousas and speaks both English and French fluently. A sharecropper's daughter, she spent her youth picking cotton in the fields with her three sisters and two brothers. Today, she spends much of her time trying to preserve the Creole traditions she grew up with, especially folk medical traditions and educating others about Creole culture. Conserving the oral history of the culture is essential, she believes.

Mrs. Henry learned about home remedies from her mother. She says, "We lived in a rural area where there were no doctors. This was our only means of medical attention." Her mother learned it from her mother and grandmother. Mrs. Henry is passing on her knowledge to her own granddaughter as well as to the public. She practices her remedies at home with her family and "throughout southwest Louisiana" as well. She notes that Creole culture and healing traditions includes African, French, and Spanish influences. Creole healers in the past were usually women, sometimes midwives, who passed tradition along orally.

The home remedies depend on plants, roots, and household items. For instance, a traditional cure for an earache involved blowing cigarette smoke into the ear, then placing a piece of cotton coated with Vicks Salve in the ear to keep the smoke in place. Other remedies include a homemade syrup of baking soda, honey, whiskey, and lemon juice for coughs; using earwax to cure cold sores; roach grease for skin sores; and a poultice of chopped okra flowers for boils. Her mother put salt in her hair and tied a scarf around her head for headaches. Broken limbs were coated with mud, which hardened to form a cast.

According to Mrs. Henry, everyone knew home remedies when she was a girl. In addition, there were *traiteurs* who were specialists in particular areas of healing and who used prayer to treat. *Traiteurs* were considered skilled healers. She recalls being fascinated by healers as a child. "Things were done around me and the more I saw, the more I wanted to know. My great-aunt Tilya was a *traiteur* and a midwife, and I got a chance to see it all," she said. Mrs. Henry enjoys making the remedies she remembers from her youth, and says, "I like things of the Earth. I like to go out to the woods and gather weeds and herbs. I just like the outdoors." She adds that traditional medicine worked and that its effectiveness should not be underestimated. Mrs. Henry feels that folk remedies should be better researched today.

Mrs. Henry is a columnist for the monthly "Creole Magazine" and is presently writing a book on Creole traditions. She is active in the Holy Ghost Roman Catholic Church and has received several awards for community service, including the Martin Luther King Service Award from the Diocese of Lafayette. She has demonstrated her traditional remedies at festivals, universities, elementary schools, and at Vermillionville in Lafayette. Mrs. Henry is also interested in the origins of certain Creole foods and cooking, family traditions like storytelling, and the use of the French language in families. She is also a storyteller and a maker of dolls. She teaches a class on folk medicine at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette.

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