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Robert H. Sutphin

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ORAL HISTORY

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Date July 6, 1974

Robert Sutphin
(Signature - Interviewee)

Box 97
Address

Max Meadows, Virginia 24360

Date July 6, 1974

Guy R. Sutphin
(Signature - Witness)



Appalachian Culture I

Guy R. Sutphin

The person interviewed was Robert H. Sutphin of Max Meadows, Virginia, for the oral history assignment for the class, Appalachian Culture I. The date of the interview was July 6, 1974. Both sides of the tape were used and the total recording time was approximately sixty minutes.

The areas and people mentioned on the tape are those in or around the town of Hillsville, Virginia, in Carroll County. The subjects on the tape in order of occurrence are as follows: his birth, remedies for people and animals, birth in general, marriage, courting, flu epidemic, funerals, baptism, first automobiles and airplane, entertainment, education, the best profession of the day, farming, discipline in the school, responsibilities of children, and law enforcement.

It is my belief that Mr. Sutphin was a good person to interview due to his experiences as a boy growing up and as a young man living on the farm and in the hills of Virginia. He has had to work hard for a living and exhibits many of the characteristics of the Appalachian area.

Robert H. Sutphin

GRS: I am interviewing Robert Sutphin and he lives at Box 97, Max Meadows, Virginia. He was born September 26, 1913, we are taking this interview July 6, 1974 and my name is Guy R. Sutphin, uh, during this interview I will be speaking to this gentleman as Dad, since Robert Sutphin is my father, uh, Dad how many were in the family, how many brothers, brothers and sisters did you have?

RHS: I have one brother and four sisters.

GRS: Uh, when you were born was anything interesting or out of the ordinary about being born, by any family?

RHS: Well they said I weighed 15 pounds when I was born and I had to nurse my aunt (laughter) and . . .

GRS: How did you mother, did she come out of this okay?

RHS: After so long a time she did, she said, uh, she looked over there in the cradle, they had me in an old wooden cradle, by the window, and she said I was looking over the scenery (laughter).

GRS: Okay, uh, was this a common practice for, uh, someone else to nurse a baby where the child has been born?

RHS: Well I've heard tell of it in my lifetime, uh, other babies you know, had to nurse other women on count the mother's milk didn't come down.

GRS: Okay, uh, during your time, real early, uh, did you know of out of the ordinary remedies that you don't hear much about today? Say for, for people were there any remedies out of the ordinary?

RHS: Oh yel, I've hered tell of whole lot of remedies that, uh, (noise in background) (laughter) they use to doctor with say instances the risen on it, you. . .

GRS: You talking about a boil?

RHS: Yel, I've hered, I've see my father do it, he would get this fresh cow manure from a cow on a planten leaf, we called it, and put that on that boil and wrap it up. You don't hear tell of that any more.

GRS: Did it work?

RHS: Yel, it worked.

GRS: It would bring that boil to a head?

RHS: Yel, then take fat meat and put on it.

GRS: Anything else?

RHS: Well, then they used to have a tea, they called sheep tea, that they boiled sheep manure and made a tea and dipped children and would break the mouth of the measles, I hered of that (laughter) my mother told me about that.

GRS: Okay what about some other things, you mentioned that bag they hung around their neck or something?

RHS: Oh yel, they use to wear what they called asafetida bad, old people would, uh, they'd put this bag around their neck and you'd smell them for, uh, I don't know how far, to keep from taking other diseases.

GRS: Did that keep the diseases away?

RHS: I don't know you couldn't get close enough to tell (laughter) but I hered tell that and I've, I've liked to have see it on one man that I knowed of.

GRS: Do you know any other remedies right off, they had for people which you never here about today?

RHS: Well if anybody had the itch, they'd put a little talon and sulphur in it and mix it up and put it on

there for the itch.

GRS: Do you mean beef talon?

RHS: Just any kinda talon you know, beef, mutton talon.

GRS: Okay what about, what about some remedies for something maybe wrong with the animals or something?

RHS: Uh, well you can get a cow, they have what they call hollow tail, you take it and split their tail, fill it full of salt and turpentine, then you could wrap it back up. Then there was the disease called the worm in the cow, I've seen my daddy do this, there was a root you would dig and it was called canel root. You'd take and cut a hole in a biscuit and put that root in there and tie it, would pull all that germs out of that cow, I've seen that done and then an old cow would have a hollow horn and they would cut her horns off on the account it wasn't doing no good, you know.

GRS: Can you think of anything else, uh, with animals or people that they use to do?

RHS: Well, uh, I've hered tell of babies having rash in their mouth, you know, that they would get some person that had never seen its father you know, would blow in its mouth and would cure that.

GRS: What kind of rash was it, do you know?

RHS: Well it was just a broken out rash up in the roof of their mouth.

GRS: Um, mmm.

RHS: And they blow in their mouth and it would cure it.

GRS: Right. Okay anything else?

RHS: Well now you, uh, my aunt told me one time that she

was about 80 years old, went down there one time and she told me that, that, that a child had a rash on its face and said the way to cure that, said the quickest way to cure it is to take a wet diaper wash his face with it.

GRS: With its wet diaper!

RHS: Yel.

GRS: Okay now lets go on to something else with the, with the birth of the babies in the community did they have the doctors come around or was doctors plentiful over Hillsville, Virginia?

RHS: Not back in my days they wasn't too plentiful, they wasn't.

GRS: Well what happen when a woman was expecting a baby, who took care of this? Was it someone in the community that they could turn to (coughs) kinda, deliver the baby?

RHS: Well in the community where I lived now they was Miss Webb, they called her, a woman she, they called a mid-wife or something like that and she would go around and deliver babies just like same as a doctor, I know she'd, they'd come and get her and then they'd come and get my mother and take them, they go off this woman and deliver the baby she'd always try, uh, get my mother to go with her and try to get her to go too.

GRS: Um, mmm. Uh, well what about when a child was born there a high death rate, with mothers?

RHS: Oh yel, they was, I know several women who died, you know, and the baby would, they would save the baby you know, they didn't, you know, these mid-wives didn't have the proper medicines to cure them with, you know.

- GRS: Um, mmm, well who took care of these children or these babies after they were born, who usually took care of them?
- RHS: Well they, well I know one woman over there was dying when a baby was born and this woman's aunt then raised this baby and 3 more little children.
- GRS: Do you know how the baby nursed or . . .
- RHS: Well now this family, there was a man lived there close he gave them milk.
- GRS: What from, a fresh cow?
- RHS: Yel, to raise that baby.
- GRS: Uh, did you ever, back then did something, just something happen to catch me, uh, I just happen to think of it, did you have very many people getting divorces?
- RHS: Heck no, I never did here tell of none of that there in them days (laughter), uh, I never hered tell of that, GRS: Yel. uh, I never hered tell of that, if they wanted to separate they'd just up and leave (laughter).
- GRS: Okay, uh, uh, what about was there any special, was there any special ceremony that, uh, two people you know, if they were courting or something like this, any special thing you knew that these people were going to get married or, or maybe meeting one at church several times or anything like this or anything special about a marriage ceremony?
- RHS: Well now this fellow we called Mr. Topper, he was a preacher, uh, and I guess he married back in them days, he married more people than anybody else around there and he, uh, you go there to get married he give you a choose of the way you wanted to get married, now just plain floor he charged you fifty cents to get married on the plain floor and he had a sheep skin there and you stand on that he charge you one dollar.

GRS: You mean just a regular old skin from a sheep?

RHS: Yel, just on a skin of a sheep he charge you a dollar to get married on that, another time they went down there, I guess this about the last ones he ever married, I went with a couple down there one night to get married and he was in bed, they got this skin out and put it next to the bed there, the sheep skin and they set on it and they finally had to hold him up in bed / GRS: He was that old? /, yel he was that old.

GRS: So what was the purpose of the sheep skin?

RHS: How I can't tell you, (laughter) it had some purpose for something, but I don't know what it was.

GRS: Maybe, uh, they, that was just something people was just charged that extra fifty cent to get married on that sheep skin / RHS: Yel. / Well how long, how long did a boy and girl go together before they got married? Was there any particular length of time?

RHS: Well back in them days, uh, as I remember they'd go together a whole lot longer than they go together now.

GRS: Yel, when they got married did they give any rings, wedding rings, token or diary or anything like that?

RHS: Well back in them days, if a boy got old enough and money to get married he was doing good, without getting any ring (laughter).

GRS: Yel, well did usually he have, did the family, the man and wife did they usually, when they got ready to get married did they have a house picked out or place to live or did they live with the family?

RHS: Well most times back in them old days they were looking for some big farm around there would rent then a house and or they lived with their in-laws

until they could get them a place.

GRS: Um, mmm. Well what about, did you ever get any of this, uh, you know, this, a man going over to visit his neighbor without the husband being at home or, any adultery, did that take place very much back then?

RHS: I never did hear tell of much of it.

GRS: Well if that ever did happen what would usually be the outcome, did someone get shot?

RHS: Well he wouldn't only get shot, but he'd get murdered.

GRS: Uh, uh, (laughter) uh, well what about (typewriter in background) you ever hear anything along the line of homosexuality back then, uh, about a man liking a man or something like that (pause)? Did you ever hear anything like that?

RHS: Well I don't know what to say to that (laughter).

GRS: Well we'll go on to something else, you was telling me about one time the family, uh, had a flu epidemic and you were the only one that was, uh, that was well enough to take, take care of them what was, what happen?

RHS: Well back then when that flu was so bad, uh, they was, all of my brothers and sister, mother and dad was in bed and I was the only one up going around and there was one of these old telephones on the wall you know, so someone had helped put a table over there to that telephone, and they put a chair up in it well I had a chair I could climb up in to get on that table and get up there and I know Miss Smallage she'd come over there and help wait on them before she'd come in that house she'd put a big dip of snuff in her mouth.

GRS: A big dip of snuff?

RHS: Yes sir, she'd put a big dip of snuff in her mouth.

GRS: This lady dipped snuff?

RHS: Yel, Miss Smallage.

GRS: How old was Miss Smallage?

RHS: Well I'd say she's up in her 60's then, [GRS: Um, mmm.]
and then she called over there to see how they was, you
know, and I'd go over there to answer the phone to talk
to them cause the rest of them was in bed. But Miss
Smallage would come over there and do the cooking and
stuff but she'd always put that dip snuff in her mouth
[GRS: Before she'd come in?/] before she'd come in
the house!

GRS: Well what was, what was you doing, you know, to take
care of them?

RHS: Well if they wanted water I'd try to get water to them
and whatever they wanted if I could do it I would wait
on them.

GRS: What kind of medication were they taking?

RHS: Well I just don't know what they were taking, they
had a doctor out there, Dr. Tipton, old Doc he came
out there and seen them a time or two.

GRS: Were there many people dying from this flu?

RHS: Oh yel, there was alot of people dying back then.

GRS: Um, mmm. Well let's go on to something else, uh,
what did, what were usually the procedures for a
funeral did you have, uh, see, did everyone in the
community come in and sort of ship in when there
was a funeral?

RHS: Oh yel, they'd bring food in and come and set up
that night long and so, you know, back when I first
remember they didn't have funeral homes here in
Hillsville.

GRS: In other words, they didn't have a mortician?

RHS: No, and I remember one funeral they had, Mr. Bronson died and so the neighbors went in and they washed him and put his suit on him, and Fred Gardener who use to run the barber shop out here I remember him shaving him, and they put him in the casket, well my daddy had a big pair mules and a wagon so the day of the funeral they put him in that wagon and the preacher got up on the seat beside daddy and they was a fellow there and Ed Webb he drawed the breaks and these mules were wild, and I've often hered my daddy say if them mules got scared he'd left some corpse laying along the road somewhere (laughter) it was about from where he lived, to the church, about four miles and they's, I'd say about 5 or 6 wagons and buggies following that funeral to the grave.

GRS: They was having a funeral possession sort of like they have one today?

RHS: Yel, it was with horses and mules and wagon and buggies and people walking in the road, they didn't care to walk to a funeral back in them days.

GRS: They had to walk about four miles?

RHS: Yel.

GRS: So after they got to the grave site what was usually the procedures, what did they do?

RHS: Well it was a whole lot like it is today, it was according to what denomination you belong to, now some denomination they would hold a funeral a whole lot longer than others, now it would generally go on a hour, funeral service would be held a house and the men, neighbors would dig the grave, you know, and they would. . .

GRS: Did they have it 6 feet deep?

RHS: Yel, they had it volt there, they'd dig a volt in the bottom there, you know, for the box and thing to go in and you come up to the top of that and then they drive them out and lay planks across there and they'd, they wouldn't lay the flowers there was no grass or nothing to lay the flowers on, back then, they layed the flowers on the dirt there, until the preacher get through and as soon as he get through, they just layed the flowers back out of the way and people just stand right there and watch em fill that grave up and all the men that helped dig it, would pitch in and help fill the grave back up and they placed em reefs back on that grave. Now I tell you one death member that was (typing in background) Mr. Murrel Akers, he weighed, I'd say about 400 pounds that's what my daddy estimated he weighed. They had to go to Gaylox to get his casket the biggest casket they could find and they's trying to put that man in that casket and they kinda got him in there side ways and got him hung and they couldn't get him turned and they just had to leave him like that, that's the way he was laying in that casket.

GRS: Well, uh, what kind of lumber did they make these caskets out of?

RHS: Well I don't know, I guess they's just made em out of plain pine lumber, you know, with GRS: Yel. and they would just lower them down in the grave with ropes and put something under their caskets so the ropes would come out, now I've seen that done. Mainly like they lower now GRS: Yel.

GRS: Well, uh, was there someone in Hillsville that made the caskets that you could purchase em?

RHS: No, not there in Hillsville, over there at Gatehouse there's a place that they made em.

GRS: Did you ever hear tell of a, some man making his own casket or his own head stone or anything like that?

RHS: Well I've hered of it, a fellow Issic Webb made his own casket and, and well in fact we have got a picture of that casket in mother's album and he was, uh, and uh, there's a preacher that preached his funeral they got it set up against the church to get a picture of, this fellow Webb. He was a preacher and they made his picture in that and we've got that picture in that album at home, / GRS: Um, mmm. / that preached his funeral set beside of him and that's the only one in that picture.

GRS: Um, mmm. Well when someone died did the people in the community, what did they do, when this happen, when someone died in the community?

RHS: Well it ain't like today they'd gather enough stuff for a week or two and they'd set up all night.

GRS: What was the purpose of this, I believe it's called a wake, isn't it, setting up all night?

RHS: I think so.

GRS: Well what was the purpose of this setting up, do you know?

RHS: No, I don't know, just to show respect I guess.

GRS: What about the people, the immediate family did they help to carry on the work or did the people of the community, / RHS: Oh no, the people wouldn't let them do nothing. / in other words the people in the community just came right in / RHS: Yel. / just took over and everything.

GRS: Well what about back then when there was baptism, uh, did you ever see any baptisms?

RHS: Oh yel.

GRS: Well where did they take place?

RHS: Well over there, well personally I've seen over there what they called little Revine and they had, and I thought they's drowning this woman (laughter) that's what I thought was going on.

GRS: What did they do?

RHS: Well they got to shouten and everything else there, you know, they had on great old big long dresses and lead them out in there and got up about their waist and the preacher would put their hand over their face, he throw them under about three times (laughter), I thought he was drowning them (laughter).

GRS: How many people did you see get baptized at that, at that time, was there many?

RHS: I'd say at least 10 or 12.

GRS: Was this something that happened ever so often?

RHS: Normally when they had these big meetens, you know, and joining the church, you know, they join the church and they got to be baptized well, some denominations believed in it, you know [GRS: Um, mmm.] and I can tell you a good joke about that. . .

GRS: Okay.

RHS: Uh, these two little children they went to this here baptism, you know, and they seen em baptize these people, you know, so they had some little kittens so they decided to baptize them. They took them down to the branch and they baptized the kittens so they got a hold of the old cat and tried to baptize her, she went to, she went to scratchen them and some denominations just sprankles, so this little boy said sis, why don't we just sprankle the damn thing and let it go to hell with all the rest of the denominations believe in just sprankling them, you know.

GRS: Yel, well uh, you said there was a meeting, do you

know what these meetings were called, you said where they had this baptism down there at the little Revine?

RHS: Oh, they use to have August meeting over there, uh, the first one I went to em many times, the first one was at Snake Creek and they would have this feet washing on e woman would wash another woman's feet and the other woman would wash her feet and the men the same way, they sometimes, well I don't know what you'd call that but I've seen it done time and after times at these meetings, but the first one is always at Snake Creek they called it, uh, uh, / GRS: That's over close to Hillsville?/. Yel this was a baptist organization, the next they'd have was at the Big Bridge down there on Little Revine there at a big covered bridge, down there that crossed this creek and they would have it the second Sunday in August and than the third Sunday be in Harmon, I mean at Pine Grove on top of Hobb Cap Mountain, over there, / GRS: Um, mmm./. and the fourth one would be in Harmon they'd have these meetings, / GRS: Each Sunday in August?/ yel, each Sunday they have em there in four different places, they'd be, I can remember back when we use to load up in the wagon and daddy take us to the bridge, uh, and by the time we'd get there the wagon would be loaded with people that we couldn't hardly find a place to sit or sit down . . .

GRS: In other words, back then, uh, just about everybody went to church?

RHS: Well they went to church more than they do today, I'd say / GRS: Yel./ and then they'd, uh, I seen as many as hundreds and hundreds of horses, wagons and buggies there be at these meetings and you hardly ever seen a car back in them days.

GRS: When was, when was about the first time you ever, that you ever saw a car?

RHS: Well I don't remember just exactly, I know we use

to, uh, there was a fellow worked, I reckon it was about the first car I ever seen in Hillsville, and he would, we'd hear come, of him coming out the road we'd run from the house to the road just to get to see where well, if we didn't get to see the car we always try to see his tracks in the dirt, you know, we only had dirt roads back then, see where his tire tracks went along the road and . . .

GRS: Do you know what kind of car it was?

RHS: No, I don't know what kind of car but he was, but he run a mill over there, so his boy learned to drive his daddy's car, you know, he let his boy learn to drive this car and so one night this boy took his mother, sisters, and the family, well he took them all but the old man to the preachen, now I've heard daddy tell this and said when he come back the boy couldn't stop the car and he run it around in front of the house and he was trying to stop it and so the old man he run out and grabbed hold of the crank and he was going to crank it, (laughter) / GRS: So he was going to crank it? / yel, going to crank it to stop it and broke his arm all to pieces (laughter).

GRS: Okay let's stop for this side.