

A Glimpse Into the Snake Handling Churches of Appalachia

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Snake handling service held in Lejunior, Harlan County, Kentucky at the Pentecostal Church of God, September 15, 1946. The church's funds have not been used in this church and it is not on company property. Most of the members are coal miners and their families. (National Archives and Records Administration, photo by Russell Lee)

My mother was just a young girl when she first heard the thumping tambourines and saw the mountain worship coming from “the bottom” near her West Virginia home.

“My mom and dad were ‘again it’, but soon curiosity got the best of my friend and I wasn’t long until the two of us had followed the mysterious sounds over the creek, through the thicket and to the bottom where the big white camp meetin’ tent had been spiked to the ground.”

The “mysterious sounds” she and her friend had heard was that of Appalachian religion. The vision was soon filled with dancing, screaming and beating of tambourines; an alien grandmother, who had been brought up in the more refined First Baptist Church.

“It seemed like total chaos, there was people everywhere. They were dancing, shouting and of course, holding snakes.”

My mother’s parents would eventually find out about her foray to a snake handling camp and to hear her tell the story, her father was none too happy.

Though she never attended another “meetin’ with snakes”, the sights and sounds of that night have never escaped her memory.

A handful of years later, the father of a classmate, who was a well known snake preacher in the area, died after having been bitten by a venomous serpent and as she the family did not mourn for him, stating, “Well he should’a had more faith and he wouldn’t have died.”

Worship for West Virginia’s snake handlers was much like so many other parts of life: dark and heavy in judgment.

But where does the uniquely Appalachian practice of snake-handling come from and why is it still doing it?

To obtain this answer, we must first travel back in time to the closing days of Jesus’ ministry. Speaking to his apostles, Christ stated, “They shall take up serpents; and if they touch any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall be healed.” (Mark 16.18).

For two millennia, the mainstream Christian interpretation of this verse was that Christ speaking directly to his apostles, a church office that was to go extinct following the death of the last person to have seen Christ's physical earthly body. It was also believed that the Apostle Paul fulfilled this prophesy when he was ship wrecked, as recorded in the Book of Acts:

"And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a blast of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast fasten on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. And he shook off the beast into the sea, and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead, as they expected; but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god." (Acts 28).

And thus the words of Christ concerning serpents were accepted as having been intended for the apostles only for the next 18 centuries throughout most of Christendom; however, this changed in the opening days of the 1900s in rural Appalachia.

Around the year 1910, a well known Church of God preacher named George Went Hensley in the Grasshopper Valley in southeastern Tennessee, began preaching a literal interpretation of the verses and to prove their faith, he and his followers first began the practice of handling venomous snakes in the mountains of Appalachia.

In the following decade, the Church of God repudiated the practice of snake-handling. Hensley and his followers formed their own body.

Around this same time period, serpent-handling in north Alabama and north Georgia occurred with James Miller in Sand Mountain, Alabama. Miller apparently developed his practice independently of any knowledge of Hensley's ministry and Miller's teachings eventually became known as the Church of Lord Jesus with Signs Following.

Worship services usually include singing, praying, speaking in tongues and preaching. The altar, behind the pulpit, is the designated area for handling snakes. Rattlesnakes, cottonmouths, and copperheads (venomous snakes native to North America) are the

common, but even cobras have been used. During the service, believers may approach and pick up the snakes, usually raising them into the air and sometimes allowing the snakes to crawl on their bodies. The snakes are considered incarnations of demons, and handling snakes demonstrates one's power over them. Members are not required to handle the snakes. Some believers will also engage in drinking poison (most commonly strychnine) at this time.

Over sixty cases of death as the result of snakebites in religious worship services have been documented in the United States. If a handler is bitten, it is generally interpreted as a lack of or failure to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Bitten believers usually do not seek medical help, but look to God for their healing. George Went Hensley died in Florida in 1951 after a venomous snakebite.

Believers generally adhere to strict dress codes such as uncut hair, no cosmetics, the wearing of ankle-length dresses with pantyhose for women, and short hair and long-sleeved shirts. Most ministers preach against any use of all types of tobacco and alcohol.

According to [ABC News](#), an estimated 125 churches practice serpent handling in the United States, most of which are concentrated in rural Appalachia, although some are as far as Canada.

All Appalachian states except West Virginia outlawed the snake-handling ritual when it emerged. West Virginia's state constitution does not allow any law to impede upon nor restrict a religious practice.

Most snake handling, therefore, takes place in the homes of worshipers, which circumvents the process of attempting to obtain a government permit for the practice. Law enforcement ignores it unless and until they are specifically called in, which does not usually happen until a death has resulted.

Snake handling was made a felony punishable by death under Georgia law in 1941, following the death of a seven-year-old child from a rattlesnake bite. However, the punishment was so severe that juries would refuse to convict, and the law was repealed in 1968. The American Civil Liberties Union has defended the religious freedom of snake handlers against various attempts to

practice banned.

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