



The truth about Dog days gospel

Hendersonville, NC: Here in the mountains of western North Carolina "dog days" officially begins July 28th. The local folks, many of whom I've known since I started spending my summers here in 1939, tell me the season lasts 40 days, beginning when the Dog Star makes its bright appearance over the eastern horizon.

It was the Romans who gave the star the name of Sirius, or Dog Star. They blamed it for the arrival of the hot, muggy weather. But here in the mountains dog days has other meanings.

Here the people speak a language flavored with pure Cornish or Celtic idioms. While a lot of flatlanders make fun of them and call them hillbillies, their language is far more authentic than that spoken in any other place in the nation.

At the same time, it is flavored with fables and just enough folklore to keep things interesting.

"You'uns got dawg days down thar in Florida? We'uns shore hate to see 'em get h'ar."

Our down-the-road neighbor, who was born right here in this holler where we have our cabin, started the whole thing last week by reminding us that whatever weather you have the first day of dog days will be a good sign of the weather for the next 40 days.

I remember Aunt Lou Summey, who lived on top of the mountain near the big walnut grove and up the winding dirt trail from our cabin. One summer back in the '40s, when my little brother and I were running barefooted through the mountains, dressed in overalls and sucking on hay straws, Aunt Lou scared the bratches off us with some of her tales.

"Lots o' dawgs go mad during dawg days," she wheezed into the twilight, sitting on her rickety old porch near the grape arbor.

My little brother John and I were sitting on the big stone that acted as a step to her porch. Down in the holler the evening fog was creeping up the mountain, and we were huddled together, listening.

Aunt Lou dipped a pinch of Peach Blossom, stuffed it under her lip, and continued.

"Not only dawgs, but 'coons, bats, even

foxes. Why, I seen a big old red fox come a-stalkin' up the road one e'en, jest about this time o'day. Hit was just twilight, and I could see his lips a-snarlin' and his fangs a-drippin' white foam. He'd already bit three younguns down thar in the holler and was fixin' to leap at my throat when my son Jessie blasted him with the scattergun. You'uns shore better watch out fer wild critters when you go home t'nite. They'll leap fer yer throat outta the fog and get you'uns fer shore."

We'uns set all kinda records running home that night from Aunt Lou's house.

It was Herschel Lee's wife Lee-Lee who told John and me that nothing would heal during dog days.

"Now that's the gospel truth," she told us wide-eyed kids sitting in her dirt yard

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while she boiled sheets in a big, black iron kettle over an outside fire. "You'uns run a brier 'twixt your toes and hit'll not heal fer 40 days. Hit's the dew. You get dew in yer scratches, and they'll just fester. Asides that, if'en you stub your toe, the nail'll always fall off. Hit's the gospel."

My brother John is now a medical doctor. We never talk about dog days, but I'll bet he still believes—despite what he learned in medical school—that your toenail will always fall off if you stub it during dog days.

We were indoctrinated by a lot of "gospel" in childhood—not just about mad foxes and briars between my toes, but about God's judgement, the Second Coming, and what you have to do (and not do) to be (and stay) saved.

No amount of seminary or Bible study has been able to separate me from all my superstitions. After all, if it was good enough

for my granny, it's good enough for me—even if it was all mixed up.

I know it ain't all true, but it's still kinda fun to believe.

So, up here when it's "lay-by" time on the farm and folks have enough time to sit a spell on the front porch, rock and talk, chew and spit, whittle on a stick, spin a few yarns, and watch the stars come up in the evening—dawg days brings back a raft of memories.

It's time for the sweet corn to ripen; for big, green, ripe watermelons; and plump, frying-size chickens. It's time to eat honey in the comb, to tie strings on June bugs, to chase lightning bugs in the evening across the pasture, to watch old mules turn the sorghum mill, and sip 'lasses out of a ladle made from a dried gourd.

In these little mountain towns they rope off Main Street on Monday night, and I join the cloggers as they make country music on the pavement. It's time for protracted meetings in the brush arbor, all-day singings and dinner-on-the-grounds, hayrides on dirt roads, and so many churns of homemade ice cream that you have to unbutton your pants and let your belt hang loose.

I hate to leave them behind—these dawg days. It's so much easier to believe a fable than the truth.

I cut my teeth on mountain fundamentalism—a fundamentalism mixed with fear and superstition. But it also contained a pure gospel—just like the language of the folks in the hollers. And today, as I talk to them, they, too, realize there is more than what we once thought was "the gospel truth."

I intend to climb a few more mountains before I die, exploring the spiritual heights waiting for me since the foundations of the earth. It's hard to shuck off my dawg days theology, but I'm determined to know, even as I am known.

That is, lessen' that critter I sees comin' at me through the fog is a big old red fox with white foam a-drippin' from his fangs. If hit is, I ain't gonna wait around to see what's truth and what ain't.

But don't get skeered. I ain't gonna run long. I'm too old and too fat. And when I find thar ain't nothing really chasing me, I'll be back.

And that's the gospel truth. ↵