

A STUDY OF THE USE OF MADSTONES IN OKLAHOMA

By *Kenneth L. Ketner**

In the early days of Oklahoma's settlement the madstone treatment for hydrophobia (rabies) apparently was in widespread use. In most cases objects described as madstones by their owners reputedly were taken from the entrails of deer. The madstone was used in Oklahoma primarily to treat rabies; however, it was also described as being a cure for the bites of poisonous snakes. In the typical case the madstone is applied to the patient's wound from which it supposedly "sucks" the "poison." There are many customs and beliefs associated with madstones. Indeed, the above outline serves only to introduce the general idea of the phenomenon. The purpose of this paper includes giving a detailed exposition of the known examples of the use of madstones in Oklahoma plus attempting to place them in a historical and cross-cultural context while proposing a tentative hypothesis to explain their past popularity.

In November of 1961 Joe Buswell and the writer conducted a very pleasant interview with Mr. and Mrs. John Salisbury of Oilton, Oklahoma. We were seeking information about the madstone which John's father obtained shortly before the turn of the century. John Salisbury, Senior was a one-time U.S. Marshal who had homesteaded in Pawnee County near Merrimac in the opening of the Strip. The following is a slightly edited and reordered version of John Salisbury's reminiscences about the madstone originally owned by his father:¹

Our madstone is about as big around as a silver dollar, and I should say about a little better than a fourth of an inch thick. If you looked at it through a powerful magnifying glass, you will see that it is full of little holes, and it looks like hairs are in the holes in there. It is very polished. The Pawnees said that they have them, and that they have seen them in various sizes.

My father's deputy, Mr. Bob Reidner, obtained the stone in the Arbuckle Mountains while on a trip down there. It was supposed to have come from the paunch or stomach of a white deer. We had it for some time in our family and didn't know of its significance until a Pawnee Indian, Mr. Grant, told us what it could do. Since my father passed away,

*Kenneth L. Ketner is a graduate and, also, has the M.A. degree (Philosophy) from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater. He has the M.A. degree (Folklore and Mythology) from the University of California, Berkeley. He is at present engaged in studies toward a Ph.D. degree in Philosophy at the University of California, Santa Barbara, California.—Ed.

¹ The original tape-recorded version from which this edited account is taken was obtained by Joe Buswell and Kenneth Ketner in 1961. The original tape is archived in the Oklahoma State University Library. A copy has been placed in the Archive for California and Western Folklore, University of California, Los Angeles.

ownership of the madstone went to my older sister, Mrs. Bertha McCoy, and now that she is sick, I've got it over in a safe deposit box in the bank.

Mr. Grant told my father that madstones could cure rattlesnake bites and hydrophobia bites. He said that he had seen and heard of lots of cases that were cured of dog bites by using the madstone.

When you are bitten by a mad dog and it breaks the skin and draws blood, the dog's saliva gets into your blood and that is where it gets poison into your blood. The hydrophobia gets into your blood and goes all over the system.

These people that had gotten bit would come to our home. Sometimes they would come because they had just heard about the stone, or sometimes medical doctors around Pawnee [the city of Pawnee, Oklahoma] would bring patients to the stone. There was no Pasteur treatment at the time. Doctors had no other treatment for hydrophobia.

When they would come for the madstone, dad would prick their wound and make it bleed if it wasn't already bleeding. Then he would apply the stone to where the blood was. If it stuck, that meant that there was poison there. If it didn't stick, there was no poison and the patient was okay. When it sticks it will just stay there even if you shake it. I've heard of those that have been to the stone in our home and had hydrophobia, and it was on them, and they could feel it drawing. And when it gets full of that poison, it won't stick. It will drop off. Then you take it and put it in a container—dad used an old-time tin cup—which is about three-fourths full of sweet milk. You boil it in the milk and that takes the poison out. The poison makes the milk turn green. Then you cool the stone and put it back on the patient just like before. It keeps drawing like that until it gets all the poison out of your system. Finally it won't stick any more when all the poison is out. That generally took about nine days.

When a patient used to come for the stone he was usually bitten on a limb. My dad would apply the stone where the wound was located. My dad moved from the farm into the town of Pawnee. After that the doctors brought their hydrophobia cases down to my dad. The doctors showed him a better way to treat people. They told him to take a sterilized razor blade and cut a small place on the left arm on the inside wrist. They would make it bleed good. Then they put just a little corn starch around the cut and placed the madstone on the bleeding place. Then they would tie the stone on with a piece of gauze and put the arm up in a sling. This way he didn't have to lie down and it made it so much easier. And it worked just as good, you know. The hydrophobia was in the blood. It didn't matter, just as long as the stone could touch the blood.

He sometimes had three and four patients at a time, so he would alternate the time — each one so many hours. He never charged anything, except for eats if they had to stay. He didn't even charge for that if they were broke.

One man once offered dad a thousand dollars for the stone. Several people wanted to buy it, but he wouldn't sell.

No telling how many people that madstone cured. Dad kept a book on it at one time, but that is lost now. One time a man came for the stone. Before we could treat him he had a fit. After he calmed down, we put on the stone and he was cured. Another time three men came for the stone. It only stuck on one. He later told us the other two men hadn't been bitten. He just wanted to be sure the stone would really work like he had heard.

A parallel account of the same stone is given in a short newspaper article (with picture) which recounts an interview with John's sister, Mrs. Bertha McCoy of Stillwater, Oklahoma. It provides a few additional items of information:²

"First it was boiled in sweet milk. That was to open the pores of the stone . . . Then it was applied to the wound. If there was poison, it would cling to the wound until the poison was drawn out."

Then the stone was boiled again in milk, and this milk would turn green from the poison. If there was no poison in the wound, the stone wouldn't stick . . .

The stone owned by the Stillwater woman came from the stomach of a white deer which her father shot in the Dakotas.

"Yes, it worked . . . I was just a girl then, but I saw it many times. Of course they have better treatments now, but it was all we had then."

Mrs. McCoy keeps the madstone — a round, light brown object about the size of a silver dollar — carefully wrapped up in a small leather bag. In the bag with it is a faint, penciled note that it is to be passed on to the next eldest in the family.

The stone probably wouldn't work now, Mrs. McCoy says, since it hasn't been used for many years.

Mrs. McCoy's statement that the stone probably would not work now at this time suggests that she is aware that nowadays few persons believe in its effectiveness or even know of its existence. It is known that many people trusted in its powers when her father used it. The inference suggested tentatively here is that it "worked" sixty years ago because almost everyone thought it would. Saying it would not perform today seems to imply that nobody believes in it anymore. What is important here is that that the question of controlled testing (scientific proof) is irrelevant. Had it *actually* worked then, it would still work today. The point is that to the believer of *circa* 1900, it was *expected* to be effective, and it did "work." Today, people *do not expect* it to work, so it will not. Expectation of favorable results, divorced from controlled testing or other forms of legitimate evidence, seems to be a necessary condition in folk medicinal practice.³

After the interview with Mr. Salisberry, a visit was made to one of the physicians that he mentioned as a regular prescriber of the madstone treatment. Dr. J. L. Lehew⁴ explained that he began his practice in Pawnee in 1897, after graduating from a medical school in Kansas City, Missouri. He remembered the

² Bill Harmon article (title unknown), *The Stillwater News Press* (Stillwater, Oklahoma), Nov. 14, 1958, p. 3.

³ A necessary condition is a condition, in the absence of which, a particular result or idea will not occur or be effective. But, the presence of a necessary condition does not mean that the result or idea will occur or be effective.

⁴ Buswell and Ketner tape-recorded interview with Dr. J. L. Lehew, December 24, 1961, Guthrie, Oklahoma (tape copies filed at locations described in note 1 above).

Salisberrys, and he had a vague recollection of the madstone. He stated that he used the Pasteur treatment for rabies and anti-venom serum for snakebite. He did not encourage nor recommend the use of madstones. He was asked if he knew anything about the change in madstone usage which, according to Mr. Salisbury, was instituted by the local doctors. He replied that he had no knowledge of it.

Perhaps other physicians were instrumental in making the change in the usage of the Salisbury stone. One is inclined to think that such a thing did occur because doctors have been associated with madstones on other occasions. A historian of early Kansas history has said: "One curious heritage of the pre-bacteriological age which lived on into the 1890's was the 'madstone' cure of hydrophobia. Although Pasteur had first successfully inoculated against this violent disease in 1885, Kansas doctors continued to apply the stone for almost another decade."⁵

Consider also this evidence from Texas: "Dr. J. M. Noell moved to the Alto area in 1820 from Virginia. The pioneer Texas physician had at this time, as family records show, a stone which displayed unusual powers of adhering to wounds inflicted by mad dogs . . . Dr. Noell warmed the stone in milk and applied it to the wound."⁶ Furthermore, we learn that "many early physicians, realizing that they could offer their patients no hope, referred them to . . . [Dr. Noell] to have the stone applied."⁷

In Virginia, in the late Eighteenth Century, "Dr. Trent was criticized by Dr. James Mease for indulging in quackery to the extent of using a snakestone in treating a case of hydrophobia."⁸

The method of applying the madstone to the wrist instead of the wound is not unique in the Salisbury family. Loman Cansler, in an excellent article, has pointed out a few cases of this technique from Missouri.⁹ Of the two specific stones mentioned by Cansler, one (the Stoll stone) involved the Salisbury technique of breaking the skin of the wrist and binding on the stone with cloth. In the other case (the Lightburne stone) the

⁵ Thomas Neville Bonner *The Kansas Doctor* (Lawrence, 1959), p. 59.

⁶ Michael J. Ahearn "The Noell Madstone," *And Horns on the Toads*, ed. Boatright, Hudson, Maxwell (Dallas, 1959), p. 147.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁸ Wyndham Bolling Blanton *Medicine in Virginia in the Eighteenth Century* (Richmond, 1931), p. 205. Cf. Arthur Palmer Hudson, *Specimens of Mississippi Folklore* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1928), p. 154; Eston Everett Ericson "Madstones in North Carolina," *Folklore*, Vol. XLIX (1938), p. 166.

⁹ Loman D. Cansler, "Madstones and Hydrophobia," *Western Folklore*, Vol. XXIII (1964), p. 101.

left wrist was shaved and washed. The stone was bound onto the bare skin, then shortly thereafter the bandage was removed to see if the stone would stick.¹⁰ It is not known whether these atypical modes of application noted by Cansler are related through some direct historical connection with the change in Salisberry's *modus operandi*. At least, the possibility exists.

Another account of madstone usage in Oklahoma tells of a stone owned by a family named Starr who lived (*circa* 1900) in Evansville, Indian Territory, a location now in Sequoyah County:¹¹

A custom, followed in [Evansville], involved a family named Starr who had in their possession a Mad Stone. People would come from near and far when they had been bitten by a rabid dog . . . They didn't believe the stone was magic, but it was the practice followed to treat a rabid dog bite and they had great faith in its power to cure.

. . . The stone was said to be round, a little larger than a silver dollar and light brown in color. History of the stone relates that a Cherokee Indian had killed a white deer in the Boston Mountains of Arkansas. The stone was taken from the stomach of the deer. It was also used for rattle-snake bite. The madstone was a highly prized possession of the Starr family. It had been handed down from one generation to another. The method used was to boil the stone in sweet milk until it became soft and pliable, then apply it to the wound. If there was a poison in the wound, the stone was supposed to stick fast, but, if there was no poison, it would not stick, according to the story.

After the stone had been applied to the bite, it was again boiled in milk and the milk would turn green from the poison, according to legend. The stone would then be removed from the milk, dried, carefully wrapped and put away until the next victim appeared.

This article provides a possible clue for a part of the history of the theme of white deer as sources for madstones. The Starr family might have been Cherokees (Starr is a fairly common name among Cherokees). At the least they were in touch with the Cherokee culture. So far as I can determine, a white deer as source appears only in cases from Oklahoma, Texas, and the Ozark region of Arkansas and Missouri (of course, the writer has not seen all cases, nor are my sources necessarily complete). Deer are often mentioned as sources for madstones, but only in this area are white deer specified. Aside from the Salisberry and the Starr stones, the only other known Oklahoma citation of the white deer theme is the Moss-Scribner stone of Ada, about

¹⁰ v. Robert S. Withers "The Madstone," *Missouri Historical Review*, Vol. XLIX (1955), p. 125.

¹¹ This article appeared in a newspaper from either Edmond or Oklahoma City, Sunday, May 10, 1959, Vol. LXI, No. 19. The newspaper's name is unknown; however, the article is headed as "The Big Parade," by W. L. Y., apparently a regular column in that paper.

which it was said that "the best authorities seem to agree that it's the petrified brain of a white deer."¹²

Vance Randolph reports several descriptions of this theme from the Ozarks: "Homer Davis of Monett, Missouri, used to have a mad stone, shaped like a half-moon. The old-timers say that it was always dipped in hot milk before applying it to a wound. It was a porous stone, said to have been taken from the stomach of an albino deer more than seventy-five years ago."¹³

An old-timer of Taney County, Missouri, "who had given the matter considerable thought, said that so long as the deer was *white* it made no difference in what part of the body the stone appeared."¹⁴

Professor E. E. Dale, who spent his boyhood in Texas, in reporting on frontier medical practices, states that the madstone "was said to have been taken from the body of a white deer . . ."¹⁵ Mr. Walter Negley of Fort Davis, Texas, states that "the best madstones are supposed to come out of the stomachs of white deer."¹⁶

All this suggests that in the region mentioned it is very important to the participants that the madstone be obtained from a white deer. The reason for this, as suggested earlier, might be contact with the Cherokee culture. Perhaps Cherokees give white deer a special status, a significance which was transmitted to the general populace in regions of close contact with that tribe. The following account seems to confirm that conjecture:¹⁷

A witch deer was killed in the hills south of Park Hill, Indian Territory, by Mr. Caleb Starr of Vinita. When he saw the deer in the woods, it stood motionless among the trees and was near the stump of a tree. Mr. Starr watched several minutes before he was sure it was a deer, being that its coloring was so much like the natural surroundings. He fired, killing it, and skinned the same. He gave the pelt to Major D. W. Lipe, who sent it to Saint Louis to a taxidermist and had it mounted. It was then kept in the Rogers County Bank for a while, after it was received from Saint Louis, and was finally loaned to Oklahoma University by Miss Lola Lipe, who at that time was a teacher in the Claremore city schools. She was a daughter of Major Lipe, who was treasurer of the Cherokee Nation for eight years. He was one of the outstanding figures of Oklahoma Tribal history.

This deer was called a "Witch Deer" on account of being almost a perfect white. His body is long and narrow and the neck is slightly longer than that of the ordinary deer, and the head has a proud poise.

¹² Cansler, *op. cit.*, p. 105n.

¹³ Vance Randolph *Ozark Superstitions*, (New York, 1947), p. 141.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁵ Edward Everett Dale, *Frontier Ways* (Austin, 1959), p. 196.

¹⁶ Frost Woodhull, "Ranch Remedios," *Man, Bird and Beast*, ed. Dobie, (Austin, 1930), p. 24.

¹⁷ Pocahontas Club, *As I Recollect* (Oklahoma City, 1949), p. 175.

"Witch Deer," according to an old Cherokee legend, appeared in the country inhabited by the tribe only before some great disaster, or change in government, to the people. The last such deer was killed just before the removal of the Cherokees from Georgia to Indian Territory. And this particular deer was killed just before statehood. This is believed to be the last specimen of "Witch Deer" which guided the superstitions of the Oklahoma Indians. It now stands in the tribal museum at the University of Oklahoma along with hundreds of other relics which trace the State's history.

We may therefore propose as a tentative hypothesis that the Cherokees on their forced travels spread this theme of the significance of the white deer which was later incorporated into the madstone phenomenon.

Two further descriptions of madstone usage from what was then Indian Territory serve to illustrate a significant factor common to almost all instances of its employment; that is, the patient almost always goes (or is taken) to the madstone at its owner's residence where its owner (or a close associate) performs the "cure." A few cases are known in which the stone was brought to the patient:¹⁸

The hot, dry weeks of August and early September were fearful days, full of tension for the settlers in the Creek Nation in Indian Territory. They were known as "Mad Dog" days. This was the time when rabid dogs roamed the countryside leaving agony and death in their wake. This was before anyone had ever heard of rabies shots.

. . . We had had a cooling rain, so people said, "I guess the dog days are done for this year." It was September and near the end of summer school. . . . On this lazy, bright blue September day we were slowly making our way home from school, stopping now and then . . . We were all swinging on [a] huge huge gate when a small white dog appeared — seemingly out of nowhere.

He ran blindly into the gate and we knew by his glazed eyes and frothing mouth that he was mad. . . . My big brother, in one quick sweeping motion, set me on top of the high gate in a steel grip. . . . The Lallus boy and Sissie Craig fell off the gate and both were bitten by the rabid animal.

It was almost dark when the Lallus boy got home and told his mother what had happened. Granny washed the wound in strong lye soap, then put coal oil in the open wound. This done, she commanded the boy to be still. "Don't you play around get all hot," she said. "We'll go to the doctor tomorrow."

. . . I was only six, but I remember the Deep Fork River was "out of the banks," very deep and swift. The Lallus boys' father was dead and his widowed mother was known all over the valley as "Granny" Lallus.

. . . At break of day she had her old side-saddle on the mare — a lunch tied to the saddle horn and her son mounted behind the saddle.

¹⁸ Olivia Myers, "Mad Dog," *Frontier Times*, Vol. XXXVII October-November, 1963), pp. 49-50.

. . . Granny half-turned in her saddle to wave farewell to us and took off through the Deep Fork bottoms to take her only child to the mad stone. The mad stone is a famous cure-all stone taken from a spotted deer. People for ages have believed that rubbing it on the wound would cure a mad dog bite. I'm not sure, but I think she went to Okmulgee to the mad stone. Anyway, a few days later she was back. Many, many times I have heard the story told about how the mad stone stuck three times.

. . . Sissie's father wasn't sure the dog was mad or perhaps he, like, my mother, was educated enough to realize the mad stone could not possibly keep a person from going mad. (In those days we did not use the word "rabies.") At any rate they did not take Sis to the mad stone.

. . . Sometime later we were playing . . . Sissie put her little hands to her head and said, "Oh! my head hurts. Let's go get a drink." . . . Sissie took a brimming dipper full of water and lifted it eagerly to her lips. The next instant she lay on the kitchen floor in a horrible convulsion.

Mad! All through the nine long days and nights before her death she moaned and cried for water only to suffer all over again those terrible convulsions.

Here is a similar reminiscence from another part of Indian Territory:¹⁹

I would like to give you a true account of an incident that happened in our family at Jim Town, Indian Territory, in 1895.

. . . A big, black, shaggy Shepherd came galloping along the road dragging a long section of heavy chain and frothing at the mouth. . . . The kids jumped up . . . hollering, "Mad dog."

My brother Joe jumped up and looked in the wrong direction and the dog whirled to one side and bit him in several places on his back.

The rabid dog followed the road for a couple of miles into the Red River bottom where a man by the name of Tom Patton and another man were riding after cattle. . . . The dog turned on [Tom] and bit him several times on the leg.

My stepfather, H. B. Tucker, put Joe behind him on a horse and headed for Gainesville, Texas, which was about thirty miles to the south across Red River. He had heard that there was a madstone located there. On their arrival, the stone was placed on the wounds but failed to adhere (or stick, as we called it). My stepfather returned home convinced that the dog was not rabid and went back to plowing corn.

He had not much more than got his team hitched to the plow when here came a rider with a message from Tom Patton who had also gone across the river into Texas to a madstone that he had heard of. He said that the madstone was sticking and to bring Joe on over at once. My stepfather unhitched the team from the plow and hitched them to a covered wagon and loaded the family into it. With the messenger as a guide he lost no time getting to the madstone. It was still sticking to Tom's wounds, there being several and each having to be treated separately.

When applied to a fresh wound it would stick for a while before it would fall off. Then the attendant would place it in sweet milk over a fire in the fireplace as they did not have a cookstove, and boil it for a few minutes until the milk turned a yellow-green and became slimy. After this,

¹⁹ W. H. Crockett, "The Madstone," *Frontier Times*, Vol. XXXVIII (December-January, 1964), pp. 1, 64.

it would be re-applied to the wound. Each time it would stick to the wound. Each time it would stick for a shorter period of time until eventually it would not stick at all. Then it would be placed on another wound. On Joe, it adhered tightly for several hours before it came loose.

These folks lived in a two-room log cabin with a side room or lean-to attached. The family consisted of the father, mother, and a teen-age daughter. The daughter, as the story was told to us, had a hobby of collecting what she called 'pretty' rocks, and in her collection she had one rock that she was especially fond of. One evening a stranger rode up to the cabin and asked permission to remain over night. The next morning as he was preparing to leave, the daughter brought out her collection of rocks to show to him.

After he had ridden away, the girl noticed that her favorite rock was missing. Her father mounted a horse in double fast time and followed and overtook the traveler. He demanded the return of the stone from the business end of an old squirrel rifle. The man admitted taking it but explained that the "pretty rock" was a madstone and very valuable.

It was about three inches long and two wide, was oval-shaped and tapered at each end. I remember thinking that it resembled a bar of Grandma's Tar Soap after it had about been used up. It was bluish gray and somewhat porous. Tom Patton eventually died with an infected leg — a direct result of the dog bites. For a number of years Joe had blood boils around the area of the bites each spring about the time of the attack. My stepfather learned later that the madstone in Gainesville had been used on a race horse for a rattlesnake bite and it seems that snake venom cannot be removed and renders the stone useless for treatment of rabies.

My honest opinion is that had Brother not received treatment by the madstone he would have gone raving mad within a few days.

These are two good examples of the transportation of the patient to the madstone. What might explain this uniformly patterned aspect of the madstone custom? Probably, it is founded upon a few considerations of common sense at the time. Hydrophobia was a dread sickness for which the only hope (so it was thought) was application of a madstone. Persons exposed to rabies usually "went for a madstone" as soon as possible. It became something of a sacred public duty, for persons knowing of a madstone's whereabouts, to report its location and "potential" to victims of suspected "mad" animals.

Madstones were thought to be very valuable to mankind. A person possessing an authenticated madstone would naturally be opposed to loaning it. Most owners of madstones who treated patients with it did so only as a sideline. They had their livelihood in farming or merchandising or any of the other pursuits of the time. These people could not afford to drop everything and run off to treat, at a moment's notice, the victim of a rabid animal's bite. However, they would provide treatment at their home as a public service whenever patients requested it. The argument, then, seems complete. Madstones (particularly those having a reputation of being authentic and proven) were expected to be effective cures for a terrible malady. The owner of the stone

would not lend it because he valued it highly. The owner could not afford to come to the victim. Hence, the victim must make the trip.

This discussion, if correct, rules out another possible explanation for the pattern of use under consideration here—namely, that it was thought that the owner possessed some special knowledge, skill, or power without which the stone could not be effective. If this were correct, one would expect that only one person would always manipulate the stone. The evidence does not support this. It is true that the victim rarely manipulated the stone, probably because he did not know how. But there were numerous cases of different persons in the owner's family performing the cure.²⁰ The situation might be compared to getting a measles vaccination today. Few laymen have the simple knowledge or experience required to administer the injection, but any nurse at the hospital can do the job.

There must have been considerable variation in popular notions of the length of time between exposure and development of symptoms. Some rushed to the stone immediately. Others were in fits when the stone was applied as Mr. Salisbury related. Yet others went to a madstone without undue haste. In Texas "it was generally considered that a person infected with rabies could not go mad for at least two weeks."²¹ Salisbury has provided an example of "successful" treatment even after the patient had a fit.²²

Medical science has some very interesting information to offer in this matter:²³

Hydrophobia is an acute infectious virus disease, usually transmitted in the saliva of a rabid animal. It is characterized by a variable incubation period, by symptoms of irritation of centers in the brain, and by psychic excitation and hyperesthesia followed by paralysis and death. . . . Responsibility for its presence rests on the dog. . . . The virus enters through a bite, or when the saliva comes in contact with an open wound or with the mucosa of the lips or nose. . . . The incubation period varies from ten days to more than two years. The average is fifty to sixty days. The length of this period is influenced by the location and extent of the bite and by the species of the biting animal. . . . In this country rabies in

²⁰ v. Cansler, *op. cit.*, p. 102; J. Frank Dobie, "Madstones and Hydrophobia Skunks," *Madstones and Twisters*, ed. Boatright, Hudson, Maxwell (Dallas, 1958), pp. 11-12; Crockett, *op. cit.*, p. 1; Ahearn, *op. cit.*, p. 149. The pattern of inheritance of madstones also militates against special powers for the operator because no mention is made of the transmission of any such powers other than the simple mechanical skills of manipulation. The only case found, in which the victim manipulated the stone, is in Woodhull, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

²¹ Dobie, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²² Cf. Ahearn, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

²³ Russell LaFayette Cecil. *Cecil-Leob Textbook of Medicine* (Philadelphia, 1959), pp. 56-59.

man is usually due to the bite of a dog. Cats, wolves, skunks and other animals make up less than ten percent of infective agents. . . . Once the symptoms have developed, death is inevitable.

Thus, there is no fixed incubation period for rabies; and persons who were "cured" by a madstone after they had experienced "fits" were suffering from a psychosomatic malady, not rabies. Today there is no known effective cure for rabies after true symptoms have appeared. The only procedure available to physicians is the preventative Pasteur treatment which is an immunization process functioning like vaccinations given to prevent childhood diseases. Just as a typhoid vaccination cannot cure a live case of typhoid fever, the Pasteur treatment cannot cure a live case of rabies.

Since medical opinion is quoted at this point, it would be appropriate to take up an examination of the reasons why many persons believed in the efficacy of the madstone technique:²⁴

It is estimated that ten to fifteen percent of all persons bitten will develop hydrophobia unless immunized. The mortality from bites on the face and head will average sixty to seventy percent; those on the hands, fifteen to twenty percent; those through clothing, one percent. . . . Contact in the absence of a wound is rarely followed by rabies. . . . The mortality of those treated with the Pasteur treatment is less than one in 1000.

In other words, on the average, about eighty-five percent of those persons exposed to rabies through a bite if left untreated will suffer no ill effects. Of course, this information has been developed only recently through broad-ranging studies. It is certain that most persons felt that being bitten by a "mad" animal meant almost sure death unless some providential prophylaxis could be provided. The disease was (and is) so horrible in its manifestation in mankind that an exposed person would surely seek some kind of treatment. Madstones, due to historical reasons (discussed below), had come to have a reputation for effectiveness. Thus a victim often sought a madstone which no doubt neither helped nor harmed his chances for survival, although it must have had a beneficial effect upon his state of mind.

The expectation of the success of the madstone treatment was continually reinforced by rumors and reports of its effectiveness. The popular conception of what constituted "proof" of its effectiveness involved two factors: (I) Very often it was claimed to be a sound remedy because it had been observed that persons who had used it had not developed the disease. Here is a prime example:²⁵

The mad-stone, a device for curing the effects of poisonous bites has been known in our state for many years. For example, such a stone was re-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-59.

ported in Halifax county nearly ninety years ago; I quote from the Tarborough (N.C.) *Free Press* for October 21, 1848: "*Mad-stone* — We are happy to learn that Mr. Elijah Pope, Sr., of this county, whose residence is near Dawson's Cross Roads, has succeeded in procuring a Mad-Stone, or Stone, that will cure any poisonous bite — either Mad Dog, Snake, or Spider. Mr. Pope has been called upon several times to apply the stone since it has been in his possession, and has been successful in every case. Such as may be so unfortunate as to be poisoned by the bite or sting of anything, would do well to call on Mr. Pope . . ."

II. Believers in the madstone's prophylactic powers sometimes cited cases wherein death came to victims who declined to avail themselves of its help.²⁶

The following two types of incident (cited here as III and IV) seem to have been almost universally ignored or unconsciously suppressed:

III. There were cases in which a madstone was "properly" employed yet death followed: "A man . . . was bitten by a skunk and advised to go to Chicago for the Pasteur treatment but stopped enroute in Kansas City where he was persuaded to try a 'mad stone' treatment. He died several weeks after his return."²⁷

IV. Another kind of cases usually is ignored, those in which no madstone was applied followed by no symptoms of rabies.²⁸

The madstone phenomenon provides an excellent test for developing a tentative hypothesis for the nature of what folklorists have described as "superstition," or popular belief. Before offering a theory here, a short digression is required. One is justified in claiming that X is the cause of Y if, in *all* trials, *each and every one* of the following requirements are met: (1) X does not chronologically follow Y; (2) whenever X occurs, Y occurs; (3) whenever X does not occur, Y does not occur. If any one (or

²⁵ Ericson, *op. cit.*, p. 165. Cf. Woodhull, *op. cit.*, p. 24; Hudson, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-5; Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Folklore From Adams County, Illinois* (New York, 1955), p. 205; Gwyn A. Parry, *The Jackson County "Madstones,"* (Chillicothe, Ohio, 1960), p. 2; *Journal of the American Folklore Society*, "Notes and Queries," Vol. XV (1902), pp. 292-3; Withers, *op. cit.*, p. 125; Ahearn, *op. cit.*, *passim*; Crockett, *op. cit.*, p. 64; Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 50; Cansler, *op. cit.*, *passim*; Dobie, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

²⁶ The only instance of this that the writer has found is quoted in this study from Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²⁷ Francis C. Quebbeman, *Medicine in Territorial Arizona* (Phoenix, 1966), p. 219. Cf. Dobie, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁸ v. Cansler, *op. cit.*, p. 104; Dobie, *op. cit.*, p. 9. There are no examples of this kind of condition in the accounts examined, with the possible exception of Dobie. Of course, since most persons thought that a bite from a "really mad dog" inevitably resulted in death by hydrophobia (v. Cansler, *op. cit.*, p. 104), anyone bitten by a suspected dog who did not get any kind of treatment and subsequently did not die from hydrophobia was counted as lucky because the dog, therefore, must not have been "really" mad.

any combination) of these conditions fails to hold, X cannot possibly be the cause of Y. That is, either (4) the appearance of X and the lack of Y, or (5) the absence of X when Y appears (or both 4 and 5) eliminates X as the cause of Y.²⁹ In the case of the madstone, these eliminating conditions respectively are instances III and IV.

Only one case is known here, in which an informant offered *both* conditions (2) and (3) (I and II respectively) as evidence for the madstone's efficacy. In the majority of cases the evidence cited is of the nature of condition (2) only. These seem to have been of paramount significance to informants and to the populace in general. Only rarely were incidents like type II cited as proof for the madstone's power. Never did a madstone owner intentionally withhold treatment to see if death would occur, thus tending to confirm the power of the madstone. Such an alternative is properly unthinkable. Yet it is equally improper for the standpoint of sound logic to depend solely upon evidence like type I while disregarding or not seeking cases like types III and IV which clearly disconfirm the reputation of the madstone.

With these considerations in mind, the following is proposed as a working hypothesis to explain at least some kinds of "superstitions." A superstition is, in many instances, a belief held on the basis of only conditions (1) and (2) above, the "X" being either some naturally occurring event, or (as in the case of madstone use) a humanly induced event introduced because of its cultural significance within the particular group, "Y" being the desired result.

This cultural significance could be created by rumor, or by other beliefs, such as supernaturalism, or by past history, or by past "tests" by means of conditions (1) and (2) only; or in some few cases, by means of (3) only. Furthermore, in such a belief there will be an internal sanction³⁰ against taking cognizance of the disconfirming procedures of conditions (4) and (5) above. In the case of madstones the sanction is the fear of death. In such a belief disconfirming instances are further discounted, possibly because of the strong reliance placed upon the sole usage of (1) and (2) as confirming procedures or possibly simply because they are not known because of lack of communication, or because an active search for disconfirmations is not made. Also, implicit in forming such a belief is the emphasis given to a limited

²⁹ For a rigorous discussion of the nature of causality see Brian Skyrms, *Choice and Chance: An Introduction to Inductive Logic* (Belmont, California, 1966), pp. 80-110.

³⁰ A detailed discussion of this matter would be inappropriate in this paper. A good beginning discussion for this factor is found in Stephen C. Pepper, *Ethics* (New York, 1960), pp. 28-34.

number of trials within a fairly small area with no intent to make a broad and detailed record of all cases over a large region, keeping records of both confirming and disconfirming cases. There are problems remaining, but one feels that this is a sound approach for understanding the madstone phenomenon and many other "superstitions" having a causal basis.

Prior to concluding this study, something must be said about the origin of the madstone custom. Before the usage of the madstone in Oklahoma, and elsewhere, can be fully understood, one needs to search the historical evidence for an answer to the question of origin both of the custom and the name given it by its practitioners.

Many kinds of objects have been reputed to be madstones, ranging from buckeye seeds to clay or flint to animal calculi to balls of matted hair taken from animals.³¹ By far the most common material seems to be animal calculi, especially those taken from deer. Running second to that would be balls of matted hair.³² In the great majority of cases, informants claim that a necessary test of authenticity is that the "stone" come from an animal's body, usually a ruminant animal. This is a very important factor to keep in mind in tracing the origin of this custom. Equally important to the same purpose is the almost universal conception that the damaging thing about a mad dog's bite is the "poison" it deposits in the wound. It is this poison which the stone is said to draw out, or suck out, or sometimes, to charm out.³³

The object from the past which most closely fits this average pattern noted above (with the exception of the operation of dipping in milk) is the bezoar stone. There is a considerable literature about bezoars. Perhaps the best single source was written by George Frederick Kunz.³⁴

³¹ Charles Whitebread, "The Madstone Humbug," *Journal of the American Pharmaceutical Association*, Vol. II, (1941), pp. 359-60. This diversity is borne out in the accounts noted in the bibliography of this paper.

³² Dobie, *op. cit.*, p. 5; Oklahoma Writer's Project, *Oklahoma Folklore*, Mss. in the Oklahoma Historical Society Building, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology at the University of California at Log Angeles has in its collection such a ball of hair reputed to have been used as a madstone.

³³ For an explanation of a madstone's efficacy in terms of it being a charm, see *West Virginia Folklore*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1951), p. 15. Cf. Pauline Monette Black: *Nebraska Folk Cures* (Lincoln, 1935), p. 33; Hyatt, *op. cit.*, p. 204; Vance Randolph, *The Ozarks* (New York, 1931), pp. 98-99; Benjamin A. Botkin, *A Treasury of New England Folklore* (New York, 1947), p. 355.

³⁴ The outline of the rise of the reputation of bezoar stones as given in this and the subsequent paragraph is adapted from George Frederick Kunz, *The Magic of Jewels and Charms* (Philadelphia, 1915), Chapter V, "Snakestones and Bezoars."

The origin of the belief in the bezoar stone as an antidote to poison is lost in antiquity. It apparently appeared first in ancient Persia, the name "bezoar" derives from Persian. An Arab legend described the origin of bezoars as due to deer that had devoured snakes. After intense fever, stones were formed in the corner of their eyes. These stones were useful against poisons of all kinds.

The first mention of bezoar is by Persian and Arabic writers, possibly as early as the Seventh Century of our era. It probably was not used medicinally in Europe before the Twelfth Century. Because of the pestilential fevers sweeping Europe at the time, in their distress, people turned to the bezoar stone which was so highly recommended by the Arabic physicians whose works had recently become known on the Continent. Many different animal sources were cited by writers, but a favored source were deer or similar animals. Bezoars are concretions or calculi formed in the bodies of animals. True bezoar stones are sadly familiar to humans under the name of gall-stones or kidney-stones or the like.³⁵

Eventually in the middle ages, bezoar stones brought great prices. Most men of means kept at least one on hand in case of an emergency. The preferred mode of treatment was either drinking powdered bezoar in a liquid, or sucking on the stone, or placing it in contact with the body.

In the early Thirteenth Century the renowned Arabian physician, Ibnu 'l Baitar, in his *Treatise on Simples* gave a full description of the use of the bezoar stone to combat poison. He recommended that the substance should be pressed against a wound containing poison.³⁶ Elsewhere in the same work he ascribes to bezoar the faculty of "attracting the poison of venomous animals."³⁷ Combine that source with the widely held belief that rabies develops from the "poison" bite of a mad

³⁵ A very good article on the subject of the composition of bezoars is that by George Gaylor Simpson, "Bezoar Stones," *Natural History Magazine*, Vol. XL (1937), pp. 599-602. See also *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, ed. Maria Leach (New York, 1949-50), p. 138; *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Berlin, 1927), Vol. I, p. 1206; Carrie B. Williams, "Madstone Miracles," *Nature Magazine*, Vol. XXXVII (1944), pp. 355, 388. George Frederick Kunz in "Madstones and Their Magic," *Science*, Vol. XVIII (1891), p. 287 gives us his judgment in this matter: "The writer has examined a large number of so-called madstones, and they have all proved to be an aluminous shale or other absorptive substance."

³⁶ Joan Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, particularly in England* (Oxford, 1922), p. 41. Cf the technique of pressing given by Cansler, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

³⁷ William George Black, *Folk Medicine* (London, 1883), p. 145. Note the similarity of this explanation of bezoar's powers with the explanation of a madstone's "sucking" or "drawing" often given in America.

dog, and one has a technique which closely resembles the madstone treatment.³⁸ Unfortunately, there is very little definite information which would explain the origin of the name "madstone" with an equal degree of probability.³⁹

It is easy to show that the bezoar-madstone treatment for rabies entered this country by two major routes. The Spaniards introduced the idea to American Indians with whom they came in contact during their travels in the New World.⁴⁰ Possibly the Indians eventually transmitted the notion to white men many years later. The main source, however, must have been direct importation by European immigrants to the United States.⁴¹ The custom of dipping or boiling the madstone in milk before and after application to the victim appears to be directly traceable to the snakestone complex of beliefs and traditions, a matter as tangled as the bezoar tradition. Consider this interesting description of a snakestone:⁴²

The snake-stone (or "mad-stone"), in Arabic *hajar alhayyat*, is described by the Arab writer Kazwini, as being of the size of a small nut. It was found in the heads of certain snakes. To cure the bite of a venomous creature the injured part was to be immersed in sour milk, or in hot water, and when the stone was thrown into the liquid it would immediately attract itself to the bitten part and draw out the poison.

Other descriptions of the use of snakestone are almost the same as many instances of madstone usage except that they are often said to grow from the heads of snakes and are employed against "venomous animals."⁴³ Thus, the madstone custom is

³⁸ v. Thomas Spackman, *A Declaration of Such Greivous Accidents as Commonly Follow the Biting of Mad Dogges, Together With the Cure Thereof* (London, 1613). The notion of the bite of a rabid dog being poisonous can be traced back as far as 1613 by means of this book. Also, Spackman recommended (p. 39) bezoar as a treatment against the poison of rabies: "Take of the powder of *precipita*, of bezer-ftone, and the powder of *angelica* rootes each a scruple. Mix them together. This doth wonderfully draw forth the malignity, and is of great force against poyfon."

³⁹ There are, however, a few clues about the origin of its name in the works reviewed. The most suggestive statement is found in *Journal of the American Folklore Society*, "Notes and Queries," *op. cit.*; "... it extracts from the wound made by the dog or other animal afflicted with rabies or mad, the virus deposit . . . What is a madstone?" This passage probably dates from the late Nineteenth Century. Indeed, the earliest American uses of the word found do not predate 1800. See entries under 'madstone' in *Americanisms, Old and New* (London, 1889); *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (Chicago, 1938-44); *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles* (Chicago, 1951); *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933). The theory tentatively offered for the origin of the name 'madstone' is based upon the passage just above. If 'rabies' is equated with 'mad', this suggests that 'madstone' originally carried the weight that 'rabies-stone' would carry nowadays. Apparently 'mad' was used as a noun then.

⁴⁰ *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, op. cit.*, p. 139.

seen to be a syncretic blend of bezoar tradition and snakestone tradition.

This ends the attempt here to place the madstones of Oklahoma in a world perspective and to develop a theory to explain their continued use until recently. This paper is only a sketch of a subject broad enough to fill a good-sized book. At least the general outline of what was once a widely spread American custom can now be seen with a bit more clarity.

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⁴¹ See note 39 above and Cansler, *op. cit.*, p. 99; Randolph: *Ozark Superstitions*, p. 141.

⁴² Kunz, *The Magic of Jewels and Charms*, pp. 225-6.

⁴³ Kunz: "Madstones and their Magic," p. 459. Cf. James R. Masters: "Traveler's Tales of Colonial History," *Journal of the American Folklore Society*, Vol. LIX (1946), p. 185; H. B. Wilson, "Notes of Syrian Folklore Collected in Boston," *Journal of the American Folklore Society*, Vol. XVI (1903), p. 138.

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COVER: A view of Camp Supply in 1869 from an old print in *Harper's Weekly*. The location of this historical site in Oklahoma is shown on the map of the article, "In Memoriam: Louis McLane Hamilton . . .," this issue of *The Chronicles*.