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THE GOURD IN SOUTHERN HISTORY

By Eddie W. Wilson

According to archeologists and ethnologists, gourds were of economic importance to the earliest peoples of the South.¹ Then, immediately after the coming of the white man to this area, artist, historian, traveler, and diarist began to include the gourd in their delightful descriptions of this new land and its inhabitants. Finally, mention of the gourd has persisted throughout the years and today it is frequently found in Southern prose and poetry.

From numerous archeological sites have come fragments of gourds, gourd vessels, and gourd-shaped ceramics. Among those who have made such discoveries or have written concerning them are N. C. Nelson, who found gourd-cups and bits of gourd shells in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, in an age-level devoid of evidence of maize culture²; W. S. Webb and W. D. Funkhouser, who list pieces of gourds, gourd seeds, and a gourd-shaped vessel of black clay from bluff,³ rock shelter,⁴ and "ashe cave"⁵ dwellings of pre-historic Kentuckians; F. H. Cushing, who found gourd vessels and gourd-shaped clay vessels which had been left "in profusion"⁶ by the "pile-dwellers" on the gulf coast of Florida; and W. H. Holmes, the eminent ethnologist, who made extensive studies of early American ceramic art.

As to this art, Dr. Holmes says that in vegetal form for pottery the gourd predominated in the South. It is "probably the most varied and suggestive natural vessel. We find that the

¹ In keeping with the place the gourd has held in the South's history, the Gourd Club of Cary, North Carolina—the Alpha Chapter of the Gourd Society of America whose headquarters are in Boston, Massachusetts—holds an annual Gourd Festival. Here, in addition to the displays of hard-shell and ornamental gourds grown each season by the members, are exhibits of old gourds which have served in the past in ways mentioned in this article together with surprisingly varied types of the members' gourd craftsmanship. Moreover, a broader phase of the gourd is emphasized: its significance, symbolism, and usages in many parts of the world. Thus the Festival promotes in a singular manner the spirit of internationalism.

² N. C. Nelson, "Contributions to the Archeology of Mammoth Cave and Vicinity," *Anthropological Papers*, American Museum of Natural History, Part 1, XVII, 29.

³ W. S. Webb and W. D. Funkhouser, "The McLeod Buff Site in Hickman County, Kentucky," reports in *Archeology and Anthropology*, University of Kentucky, III, 29.

⁴ "Rock Shelters in Manifee County, Kentucky," reports in *Archeology and Anthropology*, III, 155.

⁵ "The So-called 'Ash-Caves' in Lee County, Kentucky," reports in *Archeology and Anthropology*, I, 57.

⁶ Quoted by W. H. Holmes, "Aboriginal Pottery of the Eastern United States," *Fourth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology*, 128.

primitive potter has often copied it in the most literal manner.”⁷ Furthermore, in the process of shaping such clay vessels, he states that sections of gourd shell served as molds on “the inner surface to support the wall . . . while scrapers were used to manipulate the exterior surface which rendered the walls sufficiently thin and even and polished.” Then he adds that in many instances the scrapers were pieces of gourd shell.⁸

Again, a strikingly handsome example of a gourd dipper in pottery form, pleasingly decorated, came from a mound in southern Alabama.⁹ And in Noel Stone Grave Cemetery in middle Tennessee was found a little terra-cotta gourd-shaped rattle, “well burned but slightly fractured in digging.” Inside the rattle were clay pellets. “This may have quieted many an urchin in prehistoric days.”¹⁰

Then, in later years, certain successors of these gourd-growers and potters fortunately for us were portrayed in art just as they were first seen by colonizing expeditions which came to North Carolina and Florida. Here in the wonderful water color drawings of John White and the exquisite paintings of Jacques Le Moyne we see the gourd as dish or bowl, container, water-jar, and rattle. Indeed, White’s “A chieff Ladye of Pomeiooc” is carrying a “gourde full of some kinde of pleasant liquor.” One wonders if this was a native perfume or a native drink!

Also, the gourd was serving certain Southern tribes as ladle, dry measure, bait container, fish carrier, strainer, funnel, flageolet, whistle, life-belt float, martin’s nest, and mask.¹¹ The Rappahannock Indians of Virginia had a gourd lamp which consisted of a gourd filled with clay and slivers of “fatwood” thrust in the center of the clay.¹²

It was in the religious life of the early Southern Indian, however, that the gourd played its most colorful role. Here the gourd rattle was especially prized as the instrument of magic in the hands of the shaman, medicine man, or priest.

⁷ Holmes, “Aboriginal Pottery of the Eastern United States,” *Fourth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology*, 446.

⁸ Holmes, “Aboriginal Pottery of the Eastern United States,” *Fourth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology*, 54.

⁹ Henry Clyde Shetrone, *The Mound-builders*, 141.

¹⁰ Gates P. Thurston, *The Antiquities of Tennessee and the Adjacent States*, 164.

¹¹ Frank G. Speck, *Gourds of the Southeastern Indians*, 51.

¹² Frank G. Speck, “The Gourd Lamp among the Virginia Indians,” *American Anthropologist*, XLIII, 676.

The Comanche medicine man was known to rattle his gourd all night long as he prayed and chanted.¹³ The ruler of the Tejas Indians interpreted the noise of his rattle, when thrown on the ground, as the voice of God answering to grant or to refuse the ruler's petition for "a great deal of corn, good health, fleetness in chasing the deer and the buffalo, and great strength for fighting their enemies."¹⁴ When Cabeza de Vaca and his companions of the Coronado Expedition were traveling through Texas, "he secured some gourds or rattles, which were greatly revered among these Indians and which never failed to produce a most respectful behavior whenever they were exhibited."¹⁵ In the Green Corn Dance of the Creeks of Alabama, "the structures of the sacred square were festooned with gourd vines"; gourd rattles provided an accompaniment to the "low sustained chant" of the dancers; and the "black drink" of purification for the new year just beginning was taken "with a most reverential expression" from a gourd dipper.¹⁶ William Byrd, Daniel Boone, George Washington, and many others have given us interesting descriptions of Indian festivities in which the gourd rattle was the principal musical instrument.

It is not surprising that the white settlers in the South, having seen how useful gourds were to the Indian, began to plant them in their gardens. When Anna Catharina moved from Pennsylvania to the Moravian settlement of Bethabara in North Carolina in 1762, she mentioned gourds as among the plants in the gardens there.¹⁷ The agricultural and horticultural enthusiast, Thomas Jefferson, was very proud of the gourds he grew in his garden at Monticello and the gourd seeds he gave to friends both in America and in France. According to his garden diary he raised both the common varieties and unusual ones. He once sent Bernard McMahon, seedsman and florist of Philadelphia, certain seed of which McMahon wrote Jefferson on December 26, 1806:

"Of the Cucurbita you were so kind as to send me, some grew to the length of five feet five inches. I have one of them now

¹³ J. Frank Dobie, "Stories in Texas Place Names," *Straight Texas, Publications of the Texas Folk-lore Society*, XIII, 83.

¹⁴ Mattie Austin Hatcher, "Descriptions of the Tejas or Asinai Indians," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXV, 291.

¹⁵ George Parker Winship, "The Coronado Expedition, 1540-1942," *Fourth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology*, Part I, 360.

¹⁶ John R. Swanton, "The Green Corn Dance," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 10, 181.

¹⁷ Adelaide L. Fries, *The Road to Salem*, 109.

in my shop window, perfectly dry, which is five feet one inch long, perfectly straight and in every part about four inches in diameter."¹⁸ Jefferson mentions gourds several times in his garden diary. Another diarist, Dr. Martin W. Phillips, owner of a large plantation in Mississippi, records that in April, 1840, "The frost on the morning of the 31st [May] killed gourd leaves."¹⁹

With like regard for the gourd, the pioneer carried it as he ventured farther westward and the place of the gourd in Southern frontier homes has been described in various instances. One writer says:

Sanitation was a little-known term, but nice home-makers knew that scalding water, soap or ashes and long hours of sunning on the high out-side shelf at the back of the kitchen brought a certain purity and sweetness to the milk crocks or gourds. . . . Short handled gourds were used for milking; and one with two holes in it, plus a square of cloth, served as a milk strainer. Nice people also hung their drinking gourds out of the cedar water-bucket. Trifling folks left the dipper in the bucket to become soggy and greenish-black with mold. Gourds also were useful for storing soft soap, coffee, brown sugar, shelled peas, beans, corn, dried peppers, popcorn, dried fruit, dried pumpkin, etc. The top of the squatty fatty gourd was cut carefully so as to make a lid. The newcomers took pride in the gourds they raised, but they were never able to grow as large fatty gourds as back in Georgia or the Carolinas. Molasses and honey did not do so well in gourds but kept better in whisky barrels. Lard kept very well in a well-cleaned gourd; and often a small one was used for the drippings, though likely to be soggy. . . . In the summer-time the family toilette was made outdoors. The tin or gourd washpan sat on its block of wood, and over it hung the family towel and comb. . . . The slovens were those who let their gourds get soggy.²⁰

At that time the woman carried water in a large gourd to the men working in the field and she blew on a gourd horn to call them to dinner. She used the neck of a gourd as sausage stuffer. She kept the stockings to be darned in a big gourd, and she used a small, egg-shaped one when darning. She gave the baby a gourd rattle to shake as a toy and to cut his teeth on.

¹⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Garden Book, 1766-1824*, 317.

¹⁹ Franklin L. Riley, "Diary of a Mississippi Planter, January 1, 1840 to April, 1868," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, X, 319.

²⁰ Afton Wynn, "Pioneer Folk Ways," in J. Frank Dobie's *Straight Texas*, *Publications of the Texas Folk-lore Society*, XIII, 210, 211, 232.

The man, when hunting deer or bear, sometimes carried his powder in a gourd. Then, later as a soldier of the American Revolution, he took that same powder gourd with him to the battlefield. On display in the Hall of History in Raleigh, North Carolina, there are three such gourds which were carried to battle by James Carr, Nicholas Lewis, and Captain Samuel Martin.

Moreover, the gourd of the pioneer days had a prominent place in merry-making. Music for the square dance consisted of various tunes and among these was "Sugar in the Gourd." And there was the gourd banjo. According to Miss Jean Thomas, "the Traipsin' Woman," founder of the American Folk Song Festival, this was a straight, long-necked gourd, cut flat on one side, the seed scooped out, the opening covered with paper glued down with flour paste. The strings were wire or cat gut.²¹

Miss Thomas also states that in sections of the Blue Ridge the gourd still serves as wassail cup from which sweet cider is drunk in the keeping of Old Christmas on January sixth.²²

In the realm of story, it was the Cherokee who was the first Southerner to introduce the gourd. In one of their best-known animal myths, "Ball Game of the Birds and Animals," the martin retrieved the ball at a crucial point of the contest and for this was given a gourd "in which to build his nest, and he still has it."²³

Today Paul Green treats the martin pole in his short story, "The Humble Ones," where the wind swayed the dry gourds on the martin poles and they "knocked mournfully together" on the "crossarms" which "looked like a gallows."²⁴ In his symphonic drama, *The Lost Colony*, he depicts Uppowoc, the medicine man, with a feathered gourd rattle while old Tom, the philosopher-buffoon, carries a gourd dipper with his wooden bucket of water.

Bernice Kelly Harris philosophizes in her *Sweet Beulah Land*: "Puttin' a handle to a gourd don't make it no dipper."²⁵ Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings mentions gourds many times in her descriptions of life in the "scrub-country" of Florida. Cecile Hulse Matschat, also writing of Florida, tells of drinking liquor out of a gourd at a still.²⁶

²¹ Jean Thomas, *Blue Ridge Country*, 44.

²² Thomas, *Blue Ridge Country*, 159.

²³ James Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokee," *Nineteenth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology*, part I, 287.

²⁴ Paul Green, *Salvation on a String and Other Tales of the South*, 63.

²⁵ Bernice Kelly Harris, *Sweet Beulah Land*, 20.

²⁶ Cecile Hulse Matschat, *Suwannee River*, 156.

Among the poets who have sung of the gourd is John Charles McNeill. In "Tommy Smith," he sings of "the old cider-hogshead . . . with the brimming gourd."²⁷ And in "Before Bedtime" he says:

Paw bends to read his almanac
An' study out the weather,
An' Bud has got a gourd o' grease
To ile his harness leather.²⁸

This paper cites only a few references out of a vast amount of material relating to the true significance and rich tradition of the gourd in the South throughout the years. Research regarding the same gourd which hung as a dipper by the old spring or well continues to reveal new, delightful, and interesting aspects of the subject.

²⁷ John Charles McNeill, *Songs Merry and Sad*.

²⁸ McNeill, *Songs Merry and Sad*.