

Herbs not chants work folk cures

By RHONDA WATTERS
Battalion Reporter

Illness: Malaria

Cure: Take the leaves of the cenizo plant, make into a tea and put in the bath water.

Just what the doctor ordered? Probably not, but there are many people who still believe in cures like this one. And for good reason. Some of them really work.

"We know that much of folk medicine works and we know why it works," said Clarissa Kimber, an assistant professor and teacher of a new folk medicine course in the Geography department.

"Folk medicine is hard to define, but I think of it as a medical system that has grown up empirically in the population," Kimber said.

Folk medicine is often thought of being associated with tribes and underdeveloped peoples, she said, but a big part of it can be found around us in common family recipes.

Kimber has studied folk medicine in the West Indies, the French West Indies and Africa. But most of her work has been done in South Texas. The use of folk cures is very prevalent in the Mexican culture, she said.

"We have at least five different kinds of folk medicine in Texas," Kimber said. There is the German hill country, East Texas, Mexican American, black and the widespread "old hometime" types.

Folk medicine has two different sides — the instrumental side, which is treating a certain condition, and the emotional side, where concern and empathy is very important.

"Most folk curists are good psychiatrists," she said, "but I am making no claims for the validity of all these cures. I'm interested in what these people believe in and what they practice."

Kimber said she became interested in South Texas Folk medicine when a work-study student told her that some of the cures she had found in the West Indies were the same as ones he had seen in his South Texas hometown.

She went down to investigate and found that the use of folk cures was very widespread and that some herb-packaging houses there that were doing profitable business.

There are three large packaging houses in Laredo, she said. Workers pick certain herbs and bring them to the plant where they are measured and packaged. The herbs are then sent to different stores where they are sold inexpensively.

There is at least one place in this area where folk cures can be purchased. It is a Mexican bakery in downtown Bryan.

The part of the plant that the cures are made from are called "medicinals," Kimber said. From her travels and research, she has collected over 400.

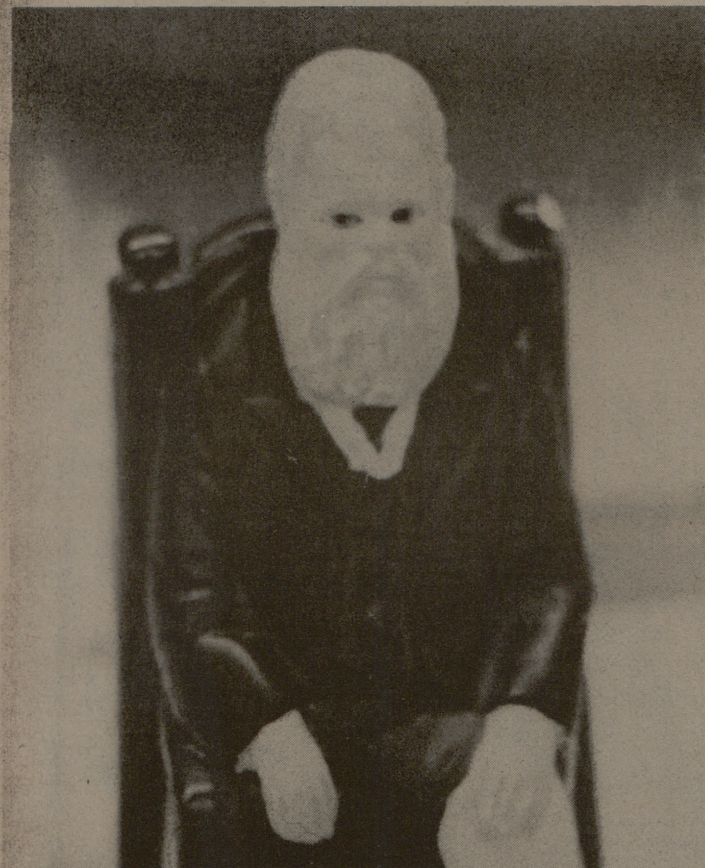
She also has a collection of folk recipes, many of which are from Texas.

Kimber uses different methods to find her folk cures and recipes. She looks in fields, countrysides, and backyards — just about everywhere. "Many times people call me up and say they have found something interesting."

Many folk cures are replaced by some modern drugs that are easily obtained, she said. One example is aspirin.

Kimber said she is always finding new folk cures because folk medicine, like many other things, is constantly changing.

"New things come in and old things go out."



This statue is a representation of a "curandero", a folk healer, named Don Pedrito Jamarilla. Folk medicine is very prevalent in the Mexican communities. Above, Clarissa Kimber shows just a few of over 400 medicinals that she has collected. Photos by Lynn Blanco

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