

# **The Origin and Practition of Pow-Wow**

## **Among the Pennsylvania Germans**

**By Patrick James Dugan**

To many inhabitants of Berks County, the practice of Pow-Wow, or faith-healing, is part of their daily living. These people who heal the sick are known by some as "Pow-Wow" doctors or "hex doctors."

These practitioners use religious charms to end the evil influences of witches who cast spells upon man and beast. Carleton F. Brown, in "The Journal of American Folklore" states:

"Accordingly, the incantations of the witch-doctors make extensive use of religious symbols and prayers in which one easily recognizes the survival of liturgical weapons employed by the medieval church in its warfare against witchcraft.

The Pow-Wow practitioner is more closely allied with theology than medicine and feels he is a mediator between the patient and God. Among the Pennsylvania Germans, the "plain folk," such as the Amish, Dunkers, and the Mennonites, as well as among the Lutheran and German Reformed church members - Pow-Wow and the Pow-Wow doctor has a significant following.

The practition of "Pow-Wow" is almost as old as Berks County itself. In 1819 a German immigrant, Johann George Hohmann, wrote a book of incantations and prayers entitled "Long Lost Friend" to be used in times of sickness and distress. The author himself is a mysterious figure in Berks County's history.

About the year 1799, there arrived a ship which consisted of German Redemptorists. Among them was Hohmann, his wife Catherine, and his son Caspar.

Charles Schuyler Castner states:

"The exact date and place of Hohmann's birth are obscured by a proliferation of conflicting claims and unsubstantiated records, but then so are the date of his death, the actual place of his death and the location of his burial place.

The Hohmann family was purchased by a farmer by the name of Fretz who lived in Bedminster Township. Later, he formed the acquaintance of Nicholas Buck for whom he formed a strong attachment. Arrangements were made to allow Hohmann to pay off the rest of his indenture with Nicholas Buck while his wife and son worked for Mr. Fretz.

Hohmann stated he had knowledge of drawing and watercoloring which he was taught in Germany. He therefore used these artistic abilities to create "taufscheins" or baptismal certificates (German translation).

The German laws were rigid on the matter of birth, and the age and baptism of every infant was to be duly entered in church records and a certificate given to the parents of the infant to be exhibited wlienever required by the authorities. The certificate was used to document legal age for marriage and, for boy, age for military service.

The "taufschein" contained the names and addresses of the parents, the name of the child, the

sponsor and the officiating clergyman, as well as the dates of the birth and baptism. This custom continues even to this day.

Hohmann's success in selling these certificates was so great that after ten months he was able to purchase his freedom as well as the freedom of his wife and son. His business became so extensive that an outline of one of his designs was commercially printed in Allentown and he would then save time by water-coloring it.

After about sixteen years of creating baptismal papers, Hohmann was able to purchase a home and several acres of farmland near Reading. During the period between 1815 and 1820, when Hohmann sold his certificates to the people of Berks County, he saw everyday life of the people of the community. It was in 1819 that he wrote his book, "Long Lost Friend," containing prayers and medicinal recipes for home and barnyard use.

Most historians cannot explain why Hohmann wrote his book. If he did practice Pow-Wow, it would have been considered a poor source of income. Carleton F. Brown maintains that Hohmann was no quack who would enrich himself upon the superstitions of the unenlightened. Hohmann believed in the charms or he would not have written the book. It cannot be forgotten that he had been born and raised in Germany and was educated in the customs and superstitions of the German people.

Why Hohmann used the word "Pow-Wow" is not known. The name might have been in use at the time to refer to religious ceremonies of the local Indians or the name could have had a distinct meaning to the author. "Long Lost Friend" opens with an unusual claim:

"Whoever carries this book with him, is safe from all his enemies, visible or invisible; and whoever has this book with him, cannot die without the holy corpse of Jesus Christ, nor be drowned in any water, burn up in any fire, nor can any unjust sentence be passed upon him. So Help Me.

"Long Lost Friend" does not claim any powers for casting spells or putting the Hex on someone. It contains prayers against evil and recipes for illness. Many of Hohmann's ideas are taken from the Bible.

In the preface, Hohmann states the Bible verse which he considers the basis for the practition of Pow-Wow:

"Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." Psalm/50/15.

Hohmann makes other remarks in his preface:

"I say: any and every man who knowingly neglects using this book in saving the eye or the leg, or any other limb of his fellow-man, is guilty of the loss of such limb, and thus commits sin, by which he may forfeit to himself all hope of salvation . . . If men were not allowed to use sympathetic words, nor the name of the MOST HIGH, it certainly would not have been revealed to them, and what is more, the Lord would not help where they are made use of. God can in no manner be forced to intercede where it is not his divine pleasure . . . Woe unto those who misconstrue these things at the moment of danger, or who follow the advice of any preacher who might teach them not to mind what the Lord says in the Fiftieth Psalm.

The following prayers and remedies are among many which are found in "Long, Lost Friend:"

**A GOOD REMEDY FOR THOSE WHO CANNOT KEEP THEIR WATER** - Burn a hog's bladder to powder and take it inwardly.

**A GOOD REMEDY TO STOP BLEEDING** - This is the day on which the injury happened. Blood, thou must stop, until the Virgin Mary bring forth another son. Repeat these words three times.

**TO EXTINGUISH FIRE WITHOUT WATER** - Write these words on each side of a plate, and throw it into the fire and it will extinguish forthwith:

SATOR  
AREPO  
TENET  
OPERA  
ROTAS

### **Albertus Magnus**

Another source of prayers is from the "Book of Albertus Magnus."

Albertus Magnus (died 1280 A.D.) was a theologian and philosopher of the Middle Ages and was known for the practition of magic. Gypsy charms are to be found in "Long Lost Friend." Another source used by Pow-Wow specialists are "The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses."

It is believed the "Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses" date back to the pre-Christian era even though the name of Jesus and the Twelve Apostles are to be found in these writings.

In the Pow-Wow Book Ammon Monroe Aurand states Moses learned magic while he lived in the house of the Pharaoh. 15 The Old Testament story of the Brazen Serpent, declares Aurand, is one proof that Moses learned magic from the Egyptians.

These books begin with an introduction:

"Instruction. These two books revealed by God, the Almighty, to his faithful servant Moses, on Mount Sinai, and in the manner they also came into the hands of Aaron, Caleb, Joshua, and finally to David and his son Solomon and their high priest Sadlock.

This book contains many magic seals and engravings which are understandable to those who practice Pow-Wow. One must become a Christian before using these books, or the incantations will be ineffective. At the end of these books is an additional section on the "Use and Efficacy of the Psalms," in which each Psalm is explained as well as the purposes for their use. The practitioner who makes use of these books must be very devout.

The Pow-Wow practitioner must be a person of common sense and respected and loved by all. Pow-Wow faith-healers do not practice professionally but have another occupation. This person must be at least 30 years old and believe in the Holy Bible. The Pow-Wow healer must have a strong constitution. The reason for this is the healer receives the sickness of the patient in his or her own body and can be weakened by the sickness. There are certain ways a person can be ordained as a practitioner of Pow-Wow.

The original way to learn Pow-Wow is called "crossways." A man can teach a woman and vice versa. The possible explanation for this is just as a man and a woman are needed for procreation, the effectiveness of exchange in Pow-Wow results from man to woman. Those who break the rules by teaching a person of the same sex, will lose their powers and be as weak as any other mortal. However, there are ways to avoid this end.

A man may explain to a desk how to Pow-Wow while another man may be sitting there, and by coincidence, be writing a letter, listening to the explanation. Another example is if a woman tells a piano the practice of Pow-Wow, and listening nearby is another woman who learns simultaneously.

Practitioners may not ask a fee for services rendered. If they do, it is thought to destroy their effectiveness. A patient may give something of their own free will to the Pow-Wow person if they wish.

The practitioner may recite a portion of scripture and pray over the patient. Not all sickness requires medicine, but many illnesses are treated as if they did to keep the patient in the belief that they will be healed.

When a patient is too sick, the Pow-wow practitioner will come to the house. If the person is under treatment of a medical doctor, they will try not to let him know about the Pow-Wow healer. Some faith-healers are known for certain cures and are called in for specific problems. Faith in the healer is the reason why people are cured by "hex doctors."

The ill are told they must have faith in the Pow-Wow practitioner or they will not be healed. A prayer-like supplication with message is the rule in most healings. Various people are treated in special ways by the faith-healer.

When a baby is healed, the parents must respond to the scriptures and prayers. If a small child can comprehend what is happening, they may answer the prayers independently. Adults will repeat the words if they are healed and in many cases, repeat the prayers three times. The Pow-Wow doctor will use certain amulets or perform various rites in healing and exorcizing a patient.

Some Pow-Wow healers made amulets which are worn around the neck on a string. They consist of a small muslin cloth bag which contains a German inscription written backwards or upside-down. They may contain words such as:

"Nazareus Iesus Rex" (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews).

### **Historian Ann Hark**

In her article "Cure by Pow-Wow," historian Ann Hark claims some practitioners recite prayers very carefully while others will repeat certain verses by using words which are not to be found in "Long, Lost Friend."

Some cure sickness while others counteract hexes. There are Pow-Wow doctors who claim that faith alone is necessary while others claim the words alone will heal a patient. Some patients are not made well after one attempt to heal them by a faith healer. A healer may try six or more times to heal a patient before a cure occurs. If a cure does not occur after a certain amount of time, the Pow-Wow practitioner will stop treatment because the patient apparently lacks faith.

If the healer has been successful, then he will get an answer or a specific feeling in his body. The Pow-Wow practitioner will feel a sudden chill going up and down his spine. Nearly every town in Berks County had (in the year 1884) a Pow-Wow practitioner who was called upon almost daily.

As long as Pow-Wow does not endanger the life of a patient, it will continue to co-exist beside modern-day medicine. The practice of Pow-Wow remains in Berks County today as it has for the past 160 years. Local residents respect the healers because it is believed their talents come directly from God. Ann Hark best describes Pow-Wow by saying: "Take one part faith and one part superstition, add a dash of sheer coincidence, mix thoroughly, and presto! Anything can happen - and often does."

This article originally appeared in the Summer 1988 issue of The Historical Review of Berks County

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