

Mother Goose rhymes

Telling tall tales of the times

By Alice Collins
staff writer

Mason Purnell Johnson, who has written a book about Mother Goose characters, became infatuated with Mother Goose when she was a young child living in the Appalachian Mountains in Kentucky.

Her feelings only grew stronger when she was warned that Mother Goose just wasn't for her.

"An Appalachian woman told me they (Mother Goose rhymes) were not suitable for children to recite because they were about evil people," she recalls. "I was very puzzled about that."

She began to learn more about Mother Goose rhymes, those crazy catchy verses, when she was going to college in Detroit.

And what Mason Johnson found out, enhanced her love and has been a motivating and directing force in her life ever since.

MRS. JOHNSON, 77, and living with her husband in Bloomfield Township, published her first book about three weeks ago — "History and Gossip in Mother Goose Rhymes."

"It wasn't until I was in college that I discovered the fact that Mother Goose Rhymes were about real people, and my search for their identities began," she said in an interview last week.

She reveals the results of her lifelong research in her book. "The rhymes are actually simple codes composed by illiterate people of Britain from the 13th to 17th centuries," said Mrs. Johnson. "They weren't meant for children."

"It was a way for the simple people of the time to criticize and poke fun at the high and mighty at a time when free speech was unknown," she said. The rhymes convey gossip and are often untrue, she said.

IN HER BOOK, she reveals the identity of the giant who sold pies to Simple Simon, the spider who frightened Miss Muffet, Little Jack Horner who sat in the corner, Little Boy Blue and Old Mother Hubbard.

"Rock-a-bye baby" was a warning to Mary, Queen of Scots.

TAKE FOR EXAMPLE:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty has a great fall
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Can't put Humpty Dumpty together again."

Humpty Dumpty is Richard III, Mrs. Johnson reveals. "In the rhyme he's portrayed as a very bad man who stole the throne from his young nephews and had them murdered in the Tower of London."

"He's supposed to have been hunchback, short, fat and ugly. Somehow, this became egg-shaped," she said.

"The rhyme gloats on his fall from the throne and remarks that all of his vast armies can't put him back on the throne."

Richard did not murder his nephews, but this gossip in rhyme caused a history to be written of the period putting Richard in the worst light possible, Mrs. Johnson said.

NONE OF the nursery rhymes was written originally. They were passed on orally. The first publication was in Boston in the 17th Century.

Mrs. Johnson's interpretations of the rhymes came, she said, "from years of reading English and American history, reading historical novels, diaries and from casual references in English and American literature."

She interviewed people from many places in the world. Some of her best sources were Americans in Appalachia where these rhymes were passed orally from generation to generation."

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"Where are you going my pretty maid?" refers to the well-known royalist abolition for country girls, according to Mrs. Johnson. "They were thought to be better looking than the spoiled court ladies who were often fat and ugly."

MRS. JOHNSON was educated to be a teacher and received a degree in literature and writing from Wayne State University.

She moved to Detroit from Kentucky when she was 15. After studying at Wayne, she got a teaching certificate. She then taught two years.

"I quit teaching when I got married (to law student Oren A. Johnson), but I immediately went back to Wayne. I had always meant to get my degree."

"Well," she continued, "it created quite a sensation. Married girls didn't go to school then. Everybody thought I was divorced or something!"

After getting her degree, she went on with her research, traveled with her attorney husband, who at one time was assistant Wayne County prosecutor, raised two children, read a great deal, wrote letters, poems and short short stories and painted.

"I STARTED giving talks (on Mother Goose) to club and church groups — mostly women's organizations — about

15 years ago," she said. About five years ago her speaking engagements increased and took more the form of lectures. She's also a popular speaker for senior citizen's groups. She's booked up a year in advance now.

"I had no idea of writing a book all these years. Then I realized people were showing such fascination in the rhymes."

Two years ago, she decided to write the book and spent many early morning hours at her living room desk putting it down in long hand.

She is her own publisher and publicist, with help from her husband, now retired, and her printer, Harjo Press.

Her book can be purchased at The Little Professor Bookstore in Birmingham, at Metro News Center at Maple and Telegraph and by writing directly to her.

It will soon be distributed in other parts of the country. "I'm rather proud," she said. "I get kidded by friends about getting a late start."

"It's selling very well, with 300 of the first 500-edition already sold. I think we'll do another edition."

Mrs. Johnson is already thinking about her next book. "I've thought of writing about my husband's family which goes back to the Revolution."

Cancer society forms unit here

The American Cancer Society invites residents of Farmington, Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield to an informational meeting on the establishment of a new unit for this area.

The meeting will begin at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Jan. 12, in Thompson Brown Realtors, 32823 12 Mile Road.

There will be films, displays and presentations with free educational materials and programs distributed to medical professionals, schools, libraries, teachers, businesses, clubs and organizations.

Members of the society will tell about support programs and medical services for cancer patients, their family, ministers and health professionals.

An outline of fund-raising activities will be given. No charge.



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Congregation at historic site

Bushnell Congregational Church of Detroit has been granted permission by the Northville Historical Society to begin holding Sunday-morning services in Mill Race Historical Village.

The 9 a.m. services, with Detroit Symphony organist Ray Ferguson, the 25-voice Chancel Choir and the preach-

ing of Dr. Robin Meyers, will commence Jan. 10 in Northville's historic landmark.

Bushnell is the first church granted permission to meet in Mill Race Village, where it will continue to gather its new congregation while awaiting completion of its new building.

Painting price sets record

A world record was set at the December auction at Stalker & Boos of Birmingham.

"Le Retour de la Fete," an oil on canvas by 19th century Italian artist, Niccolò Cammici, established a record when it sold for \$70,000. According to Frank Boos, president of the art auction house, this is more than three times the previous world record price for a painting by the artist.

Among those bidding was the artist's great grandniece, who came from her home in Italy to buy the painting. The final price, however, exceeded the

amount she was prepared to spend. Other highlights among art works sold were "The Hunt," oil on canvas by Max Pitzner, \$14,000; "Courtship in the Barn," by J.B. Macs and J.D. Col, \$5,000; a set of photo engravings of American Indian studies by E.S. Curtis, \$4,000; French bronze Empire candelabra, \$1,600; and a 19th century Japanese woodblock print by Hokusai, \$600.

The next auction will be Jan. 29-31.

Every General Motors car on the road today has some feature on it that is a product of 74 year old John Dabry's work. As a young immigrant he answered a Want Ad placed by Buick, started as a draftsman and eventually rose to chief chief engineer.

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OFFICIAL NOTICE
JOINT COUNCIL MEETING
CITIES OF FARMINGTON, FARMINGTON HILLS AND NOVI
The City Councils of Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi will conduct a Special Public Meeting on January 19, 1982, at 7:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers at 3155 W. Eleven Mile Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan.
The purpose of the meeting is to receive recommendations from the consulting firm of Cable Television Information Center on the proposals to provide cable television service to the Cities of Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi.
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