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**“Measuring” with String, Thread, and Fibre:  
A Practice in Folk Medical Magic\***

by *Wayland D. Hand*, Los Angeles, Cal.

Several years ago Elfriede Grabner treated the subject of measuring people for diagnostic and curative folk medical purposes<sup>1</sup>. Her survey dealt principally with the German-speaking countries, but included several other European lands, as well as making mention of kindred practices among aboriginal peoples in various parts of the world. Having encountered several of these measuring practices in my study of American Folk Medicine over the last few years, I am placing them into the record herewith, for what light they will throw on the transmission of a magical practice in folk medicine from the Old World to the New. The measuring of people to learn, first of all, whether they are afflicted, and, secondly, to divest them of the disease if they have one, apparently is a practice going back to the time of Pliny the Elder, if not before<sup>2</sup>. The early accounts of measuring, from Hildegard, abbess of the Benedictine cloisters at Rupertsberg near Bingen on the Rhine, in the twelfth century, to numerous other writers up to the time of Martin Luther in the sixteenth, are sketched in the Grabner paper<sup>3</sup>. The same measuring practice was known in the Scandinavian north as early as the middle of the fourteenth century<sup>4</sup>. Most of the early writers cited depict what may still be regarded as perhaps the principal form of measuring. This constitutes taking the measure of the length of the body with string, thread, and the like, from extremity to extremity, and then comparing the length with its width, as measured from fingertip to fingertip of the outstretched arms. Since length and width are supposed to be equal,

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<sup>1</sup> Elfriede Grabner, Verlorenes Mass und heilkräftiges Messen: Krankheitsforschung und Heilhandlung in der Volksmedizin, in: Elfriede Grabner, ed., Volksmedizin: Probleme und Forschungsgeschichte. Wege der Forschung. Bd. 63. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgemeinschaft 1967, 538-553. This had originally appeared in the Zeitschrift für Volkskunde 60 (1964) 23-34.

<sup>2</sup> Historia Naturalis, Book 7, 17. I have used the Loeb Classical Library edition, tr. H. Rackham, W.H.S. Jones, and D. E. Eichholz, 10 vols. Cambridge, Mass. and London 1938-1962.

<sup>3</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 538-541.

<sup>4</sup> I. Reichborn-Kjennerud, Vår gamle Trolldomsmedisin. 5 vols. Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo. II. Hist.-Filos. Klasse, 1927, No. 6; 1933, No. 2; 1940, No. 1; 1942, No. 2; 1947, No. 1. Oslo 1927-1947. Vol. 1, 103.

according to early ideas of body proportions<sup>5</sup>, any disparity as to length was thought to indicate an unhealthy state of some sort and the presence of disease itself. By this circumstance it was explained that the person had "lost his measure", as the saying went. This was tantamount to losing the vital force of life itself, and an early death was anticipated<sup>6</sup>. If the divergence was only minor, it was thought that the ministrations of the healer would still be availing. Notions of "lost measure", on the whole, seem not to be known in the United States, but this deficiency can likely be laid to insufficient collecting of data and the general lack of interest in the study of this phenomenon. Even so, an air of mystery hovers over measuring as a ritual act, as in Virginia, for example<sup>7</sup>. In the South Slavic countries, measuring is still resorted to in diseases thought to be inflicted by magical powers or demons<sup>8</sup>. Although these notions are not encountered in American folk medical tradition, resort is nevertheless had to special kinds of healers, such as wise women and cunning men, to deal with diseases by measuring that do not yield to common medical treatment. Even an element of fear seems to attach to the simplest kind of measuring. Such a routine and harmless thing as the measuring of children, particularly before they are a year old, is still frowned upon in many parts of the country out of feelings, perhaps, that the measure, after all, contains the real life essence of the child. This is the case in the South, and in parts of the Central States and the Southwest, where it is thought that the child would thereby be measured for a coffin<sup>9</sup>. These same notions are held in many parts of Europe, of course<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> From the earliest history of lineal measure, the cubit, i.e., the distance from the elbow to the outstretched middle finger, has been used. It remained for the Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius to work out a system of measures that included the width of the fingers, the palm, and the length of the foot. Cf. J. Howard Gore's summary in *Journal of American Folklore* 5 (1892) 109. (Hereinafter cited: JAF.)

<sup>6</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 538, 541, 553, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> JAF 5 (1892) 108 (with reference to "go-backs", a well-known but little understood wasting disease of children).

<sup>8</sup> P(hyllis) Kemp, *Healing Ritual. Studies in the Technique and Tradition of the Southern Slavs*. London 1935, 122. Martin Luther was among the first to note the use of measuring against these maladies. Cf. Grabner (see note 1 above) 540.

<sup>9</sup> Wayland D. Hand, ed., *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina* (constituting vols. 6 and 7 of the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore. Durham, North Carolina 1952-1964). VII, 4, No. 4880, especially the notes.

<sup>10</sup> William George Black, *Folk-Medicine. A Chapter in the History of Culture*. Publications of the Folk-Lore Society, 12. London 1883, 181; Kemp (see note 8

Along the Eastern Seaboard, and elsewhere in the country, measuring a child under one year of age is believed to stunt its growth<sup>11</sup>. On the positive side, measuring was believed to insure health and well being, particularly if the child were frail or sickly<sup>12</sup>. This notion echoes positive feelings about measuring in South Slavic lands as being healthy and stimulating<sup>13</sup>. It was customary there, for example, for a tailor to salute a person he was measuring for clothes with the greeting, "To your health!"<sup>14</sup> By way of contrast, in the mid-thirties in Illinois, it was believed that if you did so much as measure yourself, you would bring bad luck to your family<sup>15</sup>. Even measuring with a tape measure or a yardstick was regarded as bad luck in the Scotch Irish and English tradition of Pennsylvania as late as the mid-twenties<sup>16</sup>.

Since measuring with string and other kinds of cordage appears to be one of the earliest and best known forms of ritual measurement for disease, we may begin with this phase of the subject. Specifically, it will be the purpose of this paper to point out extensions on the basic ideas set out in Grabner, and other writers<sup>17</sup>, to show the development of these curative notions and practices in America. So far as I know, no one has attempted to treat this folk medical prescription, although both Bourke and Knortz called attention to certain aspects of measuring in scholarly writings before the turn of the century<sup>18</sup>, and many collectors have since contributed items to what may now be regarded as a considerable body of evidence.

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above) 123; Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens, ed. Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli and Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer. 10 vols. Berlin and Leipzig 1927-1942. 5, 1855. (Hereinafter cited HDA.)

<sup>11</sup> Edwin Miller Fogel, Beliefs and Superstitions of the Pennsylvania Germans. *Americana Germanica*, 18. Philadelphia 1915, 54-55, No. 154; Harry Emerson Wildes, Twin Rivers. Rivers of America. New York 1942, 313. Cf. HDA, 4, 1318; 5, 1855; Grabner (see note 1 above) 542.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Knortz, *Amerikanischer Aberglaube der Gegenwart*. Ein Beitrag zur Volkskunde. Leipzig 1913, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Kemp (see note 8 above) 123.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Folk-Lore from Adams County Illinois*. 1st ed. New York 1935, 140, No. 2880.

<sup>16</sup> Henry W. Shoemaker, *Scotch-Irish and English Proverbs and Sayings of the West Branch Valley of Central Pennsylvania*. Reading, Pennsylvania 1927, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Sartori, Zählen, Messen, Wägen. *Am Ur-Quell*. 6 (1895) 87-88; Jacoby, Mass und Messen, HDA, 5, 1852-1861; Gustav Jungbauer, *Deutsche Volksmedizin*. Berlin 1934, 134, *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> In his *The Medicine-Men of the Apache*. Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, 1887-1888. Washington, D. C. 1892, 572-575, John G. Bourke briefly discussed "*Medidas*", "Measuring Cords", "Wresting Threads", etc. Cf. also his shorter notices in JAF, 5 (1892) 241-242; 7 (1894) 135. J. Howard

The classical measuring and comparing of length and width, as discussed by various writers<sup>19</sup>, seems not to have been well known in America, although this type of diagnostic test was practiced sporadically in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and perhaps elsewhere, around the turn of the century<sup>20</sup>. Other kinds of equalizing measures, of course, have been employed in different parts of the country, as well as in Latin America<sup>21</sup>. A curious variation, involving a different principle of measurement, is seen in a measuring custom reported from Kentucky. "If a child is delicate, have an old woman measure it. If three times its diameter does not equal its height, it has decay"<sup>22</sup>. It is not clear whether the diameter was calculated at the shoulders, the chest, the waist, or elsewhere on the torso.

Full-length measuring with string and other kinds of cordage is well known from the Eastern Seaboard to the Central States, and parts of the South, and is also encountered elsewhere<sup>23</sup>. Collectors are more at pains, however, to indicate the manner in which the string or yarn

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Gore wrote an insightful note on "The Go-Backs" in the same journal in 1892 (Vol. 5, 107-109), with special attention to proportional measurements in the cure of this little understood disease of infants. After this paper had been completed, I learned of the excellent treatment of "measuring" in Indiana from Professor Linda Dégh. See Barbara Ann Townsend and Donald Allport Bird, *The Miracle of String Measurement*. *Indiana Folklore* 3 (1970) 147-162. This study contains the largest body of texts in print for any area in this country, constituting the most complete survey we have of this magical practice. For technical reasons, I can utilize this material in the notes only, citing page references only, unless new facets of the subject are treated.

<sup>19</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 538, 541, 544, 549, *passim*; Adolf Wuttke, *Der deutsche Volksaberglaube der Gegenwart*. 3rd ed. by Elard Hugo Meyer. Berlin 1900, 340; Gore (see note 5 above) 109. Many of these notions, perhaps most, are based on the observation of Pliny: "It has been noticed that a man's height from head to foot is equal to his full span measured from the tips of the middle fingers" (*Natural History*, 7, 17).

<sup>20</sup> K. Knortz, *Nachklänge germanischen Glaubens und Brauches in Amerika*. Halle 1933, 113, as cited in Grabner (see note 1 above) 548.

<sup>21</sup> George M. Foster, *Relationship Between Spanish and Spanish American Folk Medicine*. *JAF* 66 (1953) 211.

<sup>22</sup> *Kentucky Folk-Lore and Poetry Magazine* Vol. 3, No. 4 (January, 1929) 15. For entries dealing with measurement at the waist, see *JAF* 49 (1936) 196; *Brown Coll.*, VI, 201, No. 1544; *Folk-Lore* 23 (1912) 474.

<sup>23</sup> Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folklore of England and North America*. *Indiana University Folklore Series*, No. 20. The Hague 1966, F 950.3(a); *Brown Coll.*, VI, 31, No. 175 (North Carolina); *West Virginia Folklore* 14 (1964) 49 (West Virginia); *JAF* 5 (1892) 108 (Virginia); *ibid.* 10 (1897) 79 (Pennsylvania); *Publications of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society* 26 (1962) 136 (Pennsylvania); *Indiana History Bulletin* 35 (1958) 118, No. 1 (Indiana); *Hoosier Folklore*, 7 (1948) 17 (Indiana); *Kentucky Folk-Lore and Poetry Magazine* 6, No. 1 (March, 1931) 9 (Kentucky).

is disposed of than they are to give exact details as to how the measurement itself is made. In Illinois, three long strings, one white, one blue, and one red, were used until recently for the cure of erysipelas, and the measurement of the child was made by an old woman as the child lay on a board<sup>24</sup>. Generally, however, the measurement was taken with the child in an upright position. More precise measurements were possible when the patient, boy or girl, was nude, as seen in typical examples from Virginia and Indiana<sup>25</sup>. Not all measurements of the body were full length. In Louisiana in the mid-forties, for example, an undernourished child was measured only from the neck to the toes with a woolen string, not from the crown of the head to the feet, as was usually the case<sup>26</sup>.

Cross measuring from the left elbow to the right knee and vice versa, found in different parts of the Slavic countries<sup>27</sup>, in Hungary<sup>28</sup>, and in German speech islands in Southeast Europe<sup>29</sup>, has not been reported in America. In the Pennsylvania German country<sup>30</sup>, however, there is a measurement of the elbow, the wrist, and the foot that is reminiscent of a South Slavic cross-measurement, namely, from the right great toe to the middle finger of the left hand, and vice versa<sup>31</sup>.

Measuring of the head for headache, sometimes with cloth simulating a bandage, as described by Grabner<sup>32</sup>, is encountered in the British Isles<sup>33</sup>, but I am hard put to document this kind of craniometry in America. An example from Illinois is too vague to mean much<sup>34</sup>.

Perhaps the principal use of string measurement in a diagnostic way in this country is the measurement of the length of a person in terms of the length of his feet. This ritual is employed in tests for such childhood maladies as flesh decay, short growth, "go-backs", and the like, and is found throughout the Eastern, Southern, and Middle

<sup>24</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Folk-Lore from Adams County Illinois*. 2nd ed., *Memoirs of the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation*. New York 1965, 265-266, No. 5827. Cf. *Indiana Folklore* 3 (1970) 152 (naked on the floor); 149, 155 (naked on stomach).

<sup>25</sup> *JAF* 5 (1892) 108 (Virginia); *Hoosier Folklore* 7 (1948) 18 (Indiana); *Indiana Folklore* 3 (1970) 149-150, 152, 155.

<sup>26</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*. Boston 1945, 531. Cf. Grabner (see note 1 above) 542.

<sup>27</sup> Kemp (see note 8 above) 122.

<sup>28</sup> *JAF* 75 (1962) 135.

<sup>29</sup> *Zeitschrift für österreichische Volkskunde* 57 (1954) 141-143.

<sup>30</sup> *Publ. Penna. German Folklore Soc.* 26 (1962) 136.

<sup>31</sup> Kemp (see note 8 above) 122.

<sup>32</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 544.

<sup>33</sup> *JAF* 7 (1894) 226 (Ireland); *Folk-Lore* 33 (1922) 395-396 (Ireland).

<sup>34</sup> Hyatt (see note 15 above) 2nd ed., 214, No. 4888.



States<sup>35</sup>. The patient is first measured with a string in the usual way, namely, from head to toe. After this, the foot is measured from the heel to the tip of the toes, and then the body length is divided by this unitary measure. According to popular belief, the height should equal seven lengths of the foot, not six, as reckoned by Vitruvius<sup>36</sup>, the Roman architect and engineer, who was one of the first writers to occupy himself with bodily proportions. Discrepancies in measurement, where the length was supposed to equal the width for diagnostic purposes, indicated to the wise woman making the measurement that the child was suffering from the wasting sickness, "go-backs", or *abnemmes*, a Pennsylvania German term for a non-thrifty child, or other ailments equally mysterious. In Indiana, for example, if the seven lengths of the foot exceeded the patient's height, he was thought to suffer from "long growth", so called; if, however, seven lengths of the foot fell short of the length of the body, the malady was diagnosed as "short growth"<sup>37</sup>. In other accounts from the same state, it is specified that the string used for measurement should pass down over the left hip to the heel<sup>38</sup>. Sometimes magic words are spoken, and the string is placed on the gate to be worn away, an interesting feature that we shall discuss later in connection with disposal of the *Zwischenträger*, or the agent of divestment<sup>39</sup>. Gore has pointed out the difficulty of precise measurement in these cases, what with the resiliency of yarn and other kinds of loose, fibrous cordage used in the calculations<sup>40</sup>. In rare cases an elastic cord was used that could be stretched, if necessary, to equal the child's length, for example, as among the whites in the Allegheny Mountains<sup>41</sup>.

There seems not to have been a well defined category of "measurers" in the United States, say, that one could compare with the modern-day *Messerinnen* of Silesia and elsewhere in the German-

<sup>35</sup> JAF 5 (1892) 108 (Virginia); Southern Folklore Quarterly 8 (1944) 277 (Ohio) (Hereinafter: SFQ); Folk-Lore 8 (1897) 185-186 (Ohio); Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 19 (Indiana); Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 149-150; Madge E. Pickard and R. Carlyle Buley, *The Midwest Pioneer, His Ills, Cures and Doctors*. Crawfordsville, Indiana 1945, 75 (Midwest).

<sup>36</sup> JAF 5 (1892) 109.

<sup>37</sup> Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 18. The three notes on measuring for short growth in this estimable state folklore journal (pp. 16-19) reveal the kind of detail that is so necessary for the appraisal of field data and theory based on such collectanea.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 17; Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 152.

<sup>39</sup> Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 16.

<sup>40</sup> JAF 5 (1892) 108.

<sup>41</sup> JAF 7 (1894) 116.

speaking countries<sup>42</sup>. These healers were in the main elderly “wise women”. In the United States this kind of healing office was not as well known, although in some parts of the country the practitioners were known as “string doctors”, as, for example, in Illinois<sup>43</sup>. Whereas these magical healers were generally old women in Europe<sup>44</sup>, there appears to have been no such predilection for female functionaries in this country. Women, however, are specially noted as officiants in the measuring ritual in West Virginia<sup>45</sup>, although in the same account it is stated that only women can cure little boys and only men can cure girls<sup>46</sup>. A notable instance of an old crone’s being summoned to measure a sickly child is seen in the case of Theodore Dreiser, in Indiana in 1871. An old German woman is reported to have measured the infant Dreiser from head to toe and from fingertip to fingertip of his outstretched arms in the approved classical fashion<sup>47</sup>.

Healers specializing in measuring apparently are viewed in the same light and fall under the same general prescriptions as apply to other kinds of healers. In Indiana, for example, the power to measure for short growth, a disease apparently related to *abnemmes*, “go-backs”, and other maladies that befall infants and growing children, must be derived from someone else who has the power<sup>48</sup>. Posthumous children—sex not specified—are said to be especially endowed with this healing power<sup>49</sup>. As in the case of other kinds of healers, those measuring children for short growth must never accept pay, or they will lose the gift<sup>50</sup>. The notion was once held in Virginia that the string used for measuring had to be made by a young child, a young girl, on a spinning wheel, but that practice stopped years ago, and any kind of thread is used nowadays. Borrowed into this tradition, no

<sup>42</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 541 ff.; Black (see note 10 above) 114.

<sup>43</sup> J. M. Beveridge, M. D., *Survival of Superstition as Found in the Practice of Medicine*. Illinois Medical Journal 31 (1917) 269; cf. Tom Peete Cross, *Witchcraft in North Carolina*. Studies in Philology 16, No. 3 (July, 1919) 263.

<sup>44</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 541 ff.; Black (see note 10 above) 114.

<sup>45</sup> West Virginia Folklore 14 (1964) 61. Female practitioners are favored in Indiana, too, as seen in the paper by Townsend and Bird (cf. note 18 above).

<sup>46</sup> West Virginia Folklore 14 (1964) 61. Cf. Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 149, 154, 160.

<sup>47</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn*. Greenwich, Conn. 1965, 9–10; cf. W. A. Swanberg, *Dreiser*. Bantam Books No. Q 3345, New York 1967, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 17.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.; Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 159–160. For a treatment of posthumous children as healers, see Wayland D. Hand, *The Folk Healer: Calling and Endowment*. Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences 26 (1971) 264–265.

<sup>50</sup> Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 17; Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 150, 159.



doubt, are ideas of innocence and pristine vigor that apply to healers generally where children under seven or eight are involved<sup>51</sup>.

Measuring is ordinarily only one part of the healing ritual, and is perhaps the least magical phase of the whole curative procedure. Disposal of the disease, once the limits of its possible ravages have been ascertained, through disposal of the *Zwischenträger* or through manipulations of the patient, lies at the heart of, and at core constitutes the magical efficacy of the healing office itself. As throughout folk medicine, and all of folklore, for that matter, there is constant adaptation of materials, ideas, and functions from one situation to another. It is not surprising, therefore, to find examples of "passing through", "plugging", magical incantations, and kindred magical practices in the various kinds of cures effected through bodily measurement or the circumscription and containment of disease by measuring its physical limits.

Two examples of passing through, one from West Virginia and one from Indiana, will indicate the range and complexity of these curative rituals, involving as they do, maintenance of the magical power resident in the thread by not allowing it to touch the floor, resort to repetition and numeral magic, observance of the fixed proportions of the measurement, verbal magic, and the ritualistic disposal of the strand used in the measurement. Here, then, is the magical procedure in the Pennsylvania German tradition of the neighboring state of West Virginia: "Measuring: You use a flax thread, start at the back of the head and measure to the heel. The thread shouldn't touch the floor. A loop is made and the child is passed through nine times<sup>52</sup>. If the feet measure more than a seventh of the length of the body, the child has undergrown. The thread must be placed somewhere so it will wear out fast, then the child will get better"<sup>53</sup>. The Indiana variation on passing through is as follows: "If a child has short growth, take the string you measure him with, and make a loop out of it. Then you have the person step through it and bring it up over his head. While you are doing this, say, 'In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen'. Do this three times, one time each day. Each time you measure, use a different string, and hang it

<sup>51</sup> See Hand (see note 49 above) 270-271.

<sup>52</sup> For a broad general survey of passing through, see my article, "Passing Through": Folk Medical Magic and Symbolism. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 112 (1968) 379-402. For Indiana examples of "passing through", see *Indiana Folklore* 3 (1970) 150-151, 153.

<sup>53</sup> *Publ. Penna. German Folklore Soc.* 26 (1962) 136.

up some place where no one can reach it. After you have measured him three times (three succeeding days), then take all the strings and burn them together"<sup>54</sup>. Passing a child three times through a warm horse collar in the Pennsylvania German country, is another way in which a child was measured for short growth at the turn of the century<sup>55</sup>.

There seems not to have been over the years any uniform notion concerning the color of yarn, thread, string, or other fibres used in the measurement. Where colors are prescribed, however, red would appear to be favored<sup>56</sup>. We have already seen examples of color variation where more than one thread is used, as in the red-white-and-blue combination mentioned for the cure of erysipelas in Illinois. Tom Peete Cross has also noted color options<sup>57</sup>. American prescriptions ordinarily do not recommend raw or unbleached wool, flax, and the like, as seems to be the case in parts of Europe<sup>58</sup>, nor is silk recommended, as in so many other kinds of American cures where thread or string serves as the agent of disposal. It is understandable, of course, that red silk thread would, by the power of sympathetic magic, be thought to possess special efficacy for the curing of wild-fire or erysipelas, as in the Pennsylvania German country<sup>59</sup>.

Though it is nowhere expressed in so many words, the measuring of a disease itself, by the principles of contagious magic, is somehow thought to absorb the disease, or to subsume it magically within the physical limits of the measuring device. If there is a magical transference to the *Zwischenträger*, as all writers on the subject have shown<sup>60</sup>, then disposal of the agent is a logical necessity. This is done by burial or sequestering in a damp place so that the process of rotting and decay can be hastened<sup>61</sup>. Under the eaves, one of the most popular

<sup>54</sup> Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 18.

<sup>55</sup> JAF 10 (1897) 79. For European references to passing through in connection with measuring rituals, see Kemp (see note 8 above) 122-123; Wuttke (see note 19 above) 339.

<sup>56</sup> JAF 10 (1897) 79 (Pennsylvania); Publ. Penna. German Folklore Soc. 26 (1962) 137. Cf. Kemp (see note 8 above) 121.

<sup>57</sup> Cross (see note 43 above) 263.

<sup>58</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 542-543, 550, *passim*.

<sup>59</sup> A. Monroe Aurand, Jr., The Pow-Wow Book. A Treatise on the Art of "Healing by Prayer" and "Laying on of Hands", etc., Practiced by the Pennsylvania Germans and Others, etc. Harrisburg 1929, 53.

<sup>60</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 544, 552; Kemp (see note 8 above) 121.

<sup>61</sup> Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State. American Guide Series. New York 1941, 119; Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 150, 161. Cf. Reichborn-Kjennerud (see note 4 above) vol. 1, 161.

places to dispose of such carriers, was favored<sup>62</sup>, but many other places were utilized, including burial under the doorstep<sup>63</sup>. Disposal through wearing away rather than by decomposition is seen in a variety of methods whereby the agent is exposed to wear<sup>64</sup>. Most ingenious of all was the placing of the string or yarn on a gate, or even on the hinge of a gate, so that the wasting process could be accelerated<sup>65</sup>. Nowhere is there mention of the yarn's being carried away by some new host, as is often the case where items are disposed of near traveled places. In Indiana the string was wrapped around the door hinge<sup>66</sup>, or on the water pump cylinder rod within a few inches of the top<sup>67</sup>, while in some parts of the Midwest the string was twined around a grindstone<sup>68</sup>. In Pennsylvania the string was wrapped around a fencepost, which is logically associated with a gate<sup>69</sup>, but in Ohio the string is tied around a hot stove pipe, so as to be consumed almost immediately<sup>70</sup>.

Burning of the intermediate agent in measuring rituals is not as common as other methods listed here, but it is encountered in various places. In Louisiana an undernourished child is made to eat the ashes of the woolen string employed to determine his affliction<sup>71</sup>. In Maryland, to find out whether a child is suffering from marasmus, its body was measured with a string, legs and arms, and then the string was tied around an egg, and the egg was placed in a bed of hot coals. In this unusual kind of diagnosis, it was believed that, if the string

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<sup>62</sup> Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 17; Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 155; Publ. Penna. German Folklore Soc. 26 (1962) 136.

<sup>63</sup> Brown Coll. vol. 6, 31, No. 175.

<sup>64</sup> JAF 5 (1892) 108 (Virginia); Publ. Penna. German Folklore Soc. 26 (1962) 136.

<sup>65</sup> JAF 5 (1892) 108 (Virginia); 10 (1897) 79 (Pennsylvania); Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 15 (Pennsylvania); SFQ (see note 35 above) 8 (1944) 277 (Ohio); Indiana History Bull. 35 (1958) 121, No. 52 (Indiana); Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 16 (Indiana); Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 153, 161.

<sup>66</sup> Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 19. Cf. Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 154 (door jamb).

<sup>67</sup> Hoosier Folklore 7 (1948) 17.

<sup>68</sup> Pickard and Buley (see note 35 above) 76; Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 154, 161. The recent Indiana survey notes disposal on a buggy axle and the tying of the string around an automobile tire, revealing, as the authors say, an adaptability to modern living conditions. Indiana Folklore 3 (1970) 152 (buggy axle), 150 (auto tire). Cf. p. 161.

<sup>69</sup> Wayland D. Hand, More Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from Pennsylvania, in: Two Penny Ballads and Four Dollar Whiskey, ed. Robert. H. Byington and Kenneth S. Goldstein. Hatboro, Pennsylvania 1965, 145, No. 88.

<sup>70</sup> SFQ 8 (1944) 277.

<sup>71</sup> Saxon (see note 26 above) 531. Cf. Wuttke (see note 19 above) 340.

burned with the egg, the child did not have marasmus, but, if it did not burn, the child had the disease<sup>72</sup>.

There is space only to mention the use of clothing instead of string or other kinds of materials as the medium of measure. The only references at my command come from the Italian tradition, and the practice seems not to have gained much of a foothold on our shores<sup>73</sup>.

*Medidas*, or measures of the body of saints and other holy personages, are utilized, or were until recently, in the Latin American tradition. In the early 1890's, Bourke called attention to the use of these more elaborate kinds of measurements, often simulating ribbons or broader pieces of cloth, supposed to be cut to the exact height of the saints in question, and containing prayers effective for ailments at different parts of the body, according to a vertical scale<sup>74</sup>. In sixteenth-century England one of these measuring cloths was known as "the length of our Lorde"<sup>75</sup>, and students of folklore can see actual fold-out prayers of this kind, on paper rather than on cloth, in the atlas volume of Spamer's standard work on German Folklore, where Lengths of Jesus and Lengths of Mary are shown, as well as similar measures of saintly persons<sup>76</sup>.

The use of straw, blades of grass, broom straw, and other plant fibres, as well as various kinds of yarn, thread, string, and similar manufactured products, for the measuring and magical riddance of corns, bunions, warts, wens, and other excrescences is fairly well known and can not claim space in this essay<sup>77</sup>.

It is hard to summarize a ritual of this complexity, and there is not space to do so. In describing how measuring works in the case of wasting sickness, or *abnemmes*, however, Brendle and Unger elucidate one important idea, even though it is but one of many. They write: "At the present time when we speak of taking a photograph we use the word *abnemme*. Similarly when a person was measured from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot and crosswise from tip to tip

<sup>72</sup> Annie Weston Whitney and Caroline Canfield Bullock, Folk-Lore from Maryland. *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society* 18. New York 1925, 92, No. 1852. Cf. Grabner (see note 1 above) 543, where the test involves jaundice. Cf. *Indiana Foklore* 3 (1970) 155.

<sup>73</sup> JAF 7 (1894) 140 (Texas); *California Folklore Quarterly* 3 (1944) 213. Cf. Grabner (see note 1 above) 542.

<sup>74</sup> JAF 5 (1892) 242; *The Medicine-Men of the Apache*, 572-573.

<sup>75</sup> Bourke, *Medicine Men* (see note 18 above) 573.

<sup>76</sup> Adolf Spamer, *Die deutsche Volkskunde*. 2nd ed., 2 vols. Leipzig and Berlin 1935, vol. 2, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. *Brown Coll.*, vol. 6, 136, No. 974; 161, No. 1204; 339, Nos. 2613f.

of his outstretched arms—the height is to be as great as the width—he is *abgenumme*, measured off or taken off. His correct likeness is taken. In that likeness his diseases are tied with knots. Symbolically a rebirth is represented”<sup>78</sup>. This accords well with Grabner’s observation that one’s measure is a mysterious extension of oneself<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas R. Brendle and Claude W. Unger, *Folk Medicine of the Pennsylvania Germans. The Non-Occult Cures. Proceedings of the Pennsylvania German Society*, 45. Norristown, Pennsylvania 1935, 147.

<sup>79</sup> Grabner (see note 1 above) 549.