

1970

A survey of the snake-handling cult of West Virginia

Kenneth Paul Ambrose

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A SURVEY OF THE SNAKE-HANDLING CULT OF
WEST VIRGINIA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Sociology
Marshall University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Kenneth Paul Ambrose
May 1970

THIS THESIS WAS ACCEPTED ON May 15 1970
Month Day Year

as meeting the research requirement for the master's degree.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In most theses there are many people who contribute in one form or another to the finished thesis. This thesis would not have been possible if it were not for the gracious assistance of several people.

I am eternally grateful to Mom, Mrs. Dorothy Norwood, who spent her vacation frantically typing my thesis after two other typist started, but were unable to do it. I am very appreciative of her assistance. I would like to thank my wife, Sharon, who tirelessly helped with the revision and typing of my drafts. With her encouragement and patience, I was able to complete this thesis. I also thank Mr. Donald C. Long for his help with the revision of the final copy. My thanks is extended to my advisor, Dr. O. N. Simpkins, for his suggestions and help during this study.

Most of all, I would like to acknowledge the people in the snake-handling churches for their kind help and assistance in providing me with information. While I did not believe in their religious practice, they welcomed me as a friend. They are among the most friendly people I have met. My deepest thanks to them.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

For over half a century the snake-handling cult has been active in the United States, especially in the Appalachian area. There has been little scientific information published about this cult. The two major works were mainly confined to a single church in Durham, North Carolina, and a single church in Scrabble Creek, West Virginia. This investigator studied four churches in West Virginia, and one in Durham, North Carolina, for two and a half years to gain a deeper understanding of these people and their religious behavior.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study (1) to describe the church services in the snake-handling cult in four West Virginia communities and one in Durham, North Carolina; (2) to describe the similarities and differences which exist between these churches; (3) to compare the religious attitudes and beliefs of the snake-handling cult with those of the Southern Appalachian Studies of 1958-60; and (4) to describe the differences in the attitudes between the

young people and the adults, as revealed in the questionnaire given them in the fall of 1969.

Importance of the study. The importance of this study was to gain a better understanding of the role of religion in the lives of this segment of the Appalachian population. It was also to determine if the religious attitudes and beliefs of the adults are different from those of their children. The study revealed how the beliefs of these people affected their community and home life.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Snake-handling cult. The term, snake-handling cult will be used to mean those people who attended church services where snakes were handled. Not everyone who attended such services participated in the snake handling. The term cult was used because there were no denominational connections, no church records or membership roles were kept, and not enough time has lapsed for it to be classified as a sect.

Young people. The young people referred to in Dr. Brewer's study, Life and Religion in Southern Appalachia, were between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five. In the investigator's study the young people were between the ages of eleven and twenty-five.

Holy Ghost speaking in tongues. This phrase was a form of glossolalia which proved a person had the Spirit of

God. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible defined speaking in tongues as "...in articulated, unintelligible speech issuing from Christians who, in a state of ecstasy, believed themselves to be possessed by the Spirit."¹ The scriptural basis for this belief was in Acts 2:1-42; 10:44-48; 11:15-17; 19:2-7. John Miles described the phenomenon in the following manner:

In order to speak in tongues, you have to quit praying in English...you simply lapse into silence and resolve to speak not a syllable of any language you have ever learned. Your thoughts are focused on Christ, and then you simply lift up your voice and speak out confidently, in the faith that the Lord will take the sound you give him and shape it into a language. You take no thought of what you are saying; as far as you are concerned, it is just a series of sounds. The first sounds will sound strange and unnatural to your ears, and they may be halting and inarticulate.²

III. WORKING HYPOTHESES

The working hypotheses of this study were the following: (1) that differences between the rural community and the urban community would be noticeable in the form of church worship; (2) that because the snake-handling cult would probably be at the extreme end of Howard Becker's sacred-secular scale, their religious attitudes would reflect the traditional and conservative culture more than that of

¹George A. Buttrick (ed.), The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), IV, 674.

²John Miles, "Tongues," Voice, XLIV (February, 1965), p. 6.

Southern Appalachia; and (3) that because of the public education the children received, there would be a substantial difference between their beliefs and those of their parents.

IV. ORGANIZATION OF REMAINDER OF THE THESIS

Chapter II is a review of the literature concerning the snake-handling cult. There are very few scholarly articles written about the snake-handlers. It deals mainly with the studies of Weston LaBarre and Nathan Gerrard.

Chapter III describes the sample and the techniques which were followed in gathering the data for the study. Pseudonyms are used for church members. Chapter IV briefly discusses the early history of the snake-handlers. It also describes a typical service at one of the churches, and discusses the observed differences in the five churches. Chapter V deals with the trends in the family and religious lives of the adults and the young people. The second part of the chapter shows the differences between the religious attitudes of the adults and the young people in the Southern Appalachian Studies with those of the adults and young people of the investigator's study.

The final chapter deals with the conclusions of the study. The appendix includes pictures of a typical service, illustrating various rituals.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

LaBarre. One of the most complete studies of the snake-handlers was Weston LaBarre's book, They Shall Take Up Serpents, Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cult. This book contained an excellent chapter about the origins and history of the snake-handling cult. LaBarre discussed the history and symbolism of snake cults in Africa and in the Near East. The primary source of information for his discussion of the snake-handlers was Beauregard Barefoot, a cult leader in a southern church. LaBarre's interpretation of the snake-handling cult was mainly psychological.

This investigator proposed that the case of Mr. Barefoot was not typical of the snake-handlers in the Appalachian area. While the drive for publicity and self-glory may have been present in some degree in the snake-handling cult, it was not as strong in the Appalachian cult as it was in Mr. Barefoot. There was also no attempt by any of the snake-handling preachers to exploit members of their congregations. There were other differences between the two studies, but these were not germane to the discussion of this paper. The investigator talked with LaBarre about his book and reviewed some of these differences with him. The investigator also talked with the newspaper reporters

who covered the convention for the Durham Sun, and the captain of the police force who arrested some of the snake-handlers and captured the snakes during the "International Convention of Snake-Handlers" held in Durham, North Carolina on October 15 to October 17, 1948.

Gerrard. Nathan Gerrard of Morris Harvey College did a study about the snake-handlers in Scrabble Creek, West Virginia for seven years. Gerrard's information was helpful in the investigator's study, but most of his work was confined to the church in Scrabble Creek and to the people in that area. Gerrard's study occurred during the time the West Virginia State Legislature attempted to prohibit the practice of snake-handling in this state. The law was never passed, but during this time Scrabble Creek had a lot of publicity in the local papers. Since Gerrard studied this church, there has been a split in it. There did not seem to be as many scoffers or observers at the church as there once were. While Dr. Gerrard's book has not been published, he was gracious enough to let the investigator read one section of it.

Holliday. Robert Holliday has written a book, Tests of Faith, which gave a brief discussion of many beliefs and practices in the Scrabble Creek Church. His method was to interview the various members of the church and record their answers and pictures in his book. The book gave a

summary of their beliefs, but he did not attempt to establish any sociological patterns from his material.

CHAPTER III

SAMPLE, METHODOLOGY, AND TECHNIQUE

Sample. The churches used in this study were all small churches located at Camp Creek, Scrabble Creek, Fraziers Bottom, and North Charleston, West Virginia. The other church was located in Durham, North Carolina where many West Virginians attended services on the fifth Sunday of the month. All but ten of the North Carolina people to whom the questionnaire was given, attended services in West Virginia where snakes have been handled. Durham, North Carolina was a center for snake-handling during the 1940's. There have been some accounts of people handling snakes in North Carolina during recent years, but because the practice was outlawed, it was not practiced openly. There were no snakes handled in North Carolina when the investigator accompanied the West Virginia people to Durham.

The Fraziers Bottom church was not given the questionnaire. This church was controlled by the preacher, who refused to hold services while his wife was in California visiting their children. The church was closed when the questionnaire was administered.

In the four churches where the questionnaires were distributed, one hundred and fifty-five were distributed,

one hundred and one were returned. One church in North Charleston was under the influence of the preacher's wife, a nurse's aide at Charleston Memorial Hospital. Mrs. Poe told the congregation not to complete the questionnaire because it was an attempt to prove that they were crazy. "I've seen people in the hospital cry and cry over forms like this. They try and prove they're crazy. This is just like them forms."

This church was previously visited by a young man from West Virginia Wesleyan College, working on a senior paper in psychology. He gave them a religiosity test which was given to college freshmen entering Wesleyan. This disturbed many of the people in the North Charleston church. Most of his tests were thrown away. When this investigator attempted to administer his questionnaire, reference was made to the Wesleyan student. They refused to co-operate, and only one paper was returned. The woman who completed this one questionnaire disagreed with Mrs. Poe, and this was her means of retaliation.

While the investigator did not attend services at Jolo, West Virginia, he observed members of this church at meetings in North Charleston and Camp Creek. During these services, Jolo members handled the serpents longer than any of the other people. Other snake-handlers speak of the variety of activities in the Jolo church. They said it was

smaller, but they handled snakes longer, put snakes on the floor and walked over them, handled fire and drank poison. While this may have been, the investigator did not attend their services, therefore, Jolo will not be included in this study.

Methodology and technique. The investigator attended services in these five churches for over two and a half years, first as a nonparticipant observer, but later entering into the services in a limited degree as he gained the confidence of the group. The participation never extended to handling snakes, but merely joining into conversation and singing. Notes and tapes were kept on most of the meetings and interviews with the people. Pictures were made at various stages of the services. The investigator was also in the homes of various church members, and spent the night with some.

The questionnaire administered to the snake-handlers was taken from D. C. Brewer's section of the book, Life and Religion in Southern Appalachia. It was preceded by the investigator's questions which attempted to gain some of the family and religious background of the population in this study. The questionnaires were distributed to the members of the churches before the service, and it was requested that they complete them that night or return them at the next meeting. This was done because some of the older members had their children or grandchildren read them the

questions and wrote their answers for them. In the community of Camp Creek, the investigator went to some of the homes of absent members to administer the questionnaire.

The study limited its investigation to the five churches mentioned before. It did not, of course, attempt to cover all aspects of these groups, but mainly that which pertained to the social influence of their religion upon their lives.

CHAPTER IV

EARLY HISTORY AND DISCUSSION OF CHURCH SERVICES

I. EARLY HISTORY

Snake-handling in the Christian Church was a recent phenomenon. The snake-handlers based their practice on the biblical text from Mark 16:14-20:

Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believe not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them, they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then, after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

LaBarre stated that the cult began with George Hensley in 1909 in Grasshopper Valley, Tennessee. The cult was dispersed to Harlan, Kentucky and other areas in the South by itinerant preachers who carried their serpents with them. The greatest growth was during the mid-1940's.³

³Weston LaBarre, They Shall Take Up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cult. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), pp. 11-23.

Snake-handling was introduced into the Scrabble Creek area in 1941.

Buddy Bender, a coal miner from Harlan, Kentucky, brought a box of rattlesnakes to a worship service at the home of a friend who had moved to West Virginia. (Bender did a great deal of traveling, and had a special cover to disguise the serpent box lest the driver put him off the bus.) The practice did not take hold in the area until 1946, when Clyde Hamlack, a local miner, learned serpent-handling through his mother-in-law in services in Virginia and Tennessee, and began holding meetings in Fayette County, West Virginia.⁴

Snake-handling spread during the period after World War II. Some local preachers in the West Virginia communities of Jolo, Scrabble Creek, Fraziers Bottom, Camp Creek and others began to practice this form of religion after attending services where snakes were handled. Some of the preachers helped establish churches in different communities.

Colonel Bunn was one of the leaders in the snake-handling movement in the Zion Tabernacle in Durham, North Carolina. He promoted an interstate convention of snake-handlers in Durham, October 15 to October 17, 1948. The city of Durham had passed an ordinance banning snake-handling in the city. Bunn held the convention, and on Friday evening when they handled the snakes, they were

⁴Nathan L. Gerrard, "Scrabble Creek Folk", (Charleston: Research paper), pp. 54-55. (mimeographed)

arrested. This was the height of publicity for the snake-handlers in this area.⁵

The spread of snake-handling in North Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee had an impact on a segment of the Appalachian population in West Virginia. There has been no way of determining the exact number of snake-handlers, since they have no membership rolls or denominational system.

II. A TYPICAL SERVICE

Gathering for services. Over half of the congregation of the various churches travel over thirty miles, and some one hundred miles every week to attend services. People arrived about seven p.m. The preacher of the church made preparations for the evening service. He opened the doors, connected the loud speakers to the outside, turned on the lights, brought in a large container of drinking water, opened the windows, and placed his box of serpents behind the altar rail. His children removed the guitars and accordions from their cases.

As the people entered the church, the preacher greeted them with a "holy kiss" or the "kiss of charity". The "kiss of charity" was extended to both male and female,

⁵LaBarre, op. cit., pp. 34-43.

young and old. The preacher talked with those who came early, and asked about those who had not made the trip. The teenagers gathered on the outside to talk and exchange glances with the youth of the community.

The means of transportation ranged from a Cadillac to an old Ford. There were some new model cars and trucks as well as older ones. Some were close enough to walk to church, while others obtained a ride with a friend.

Scoffers. In only two of the communities were scoffers observed. These were mainly young people who came to watch the dancing and snake-handling. Some were just curious, some were looking for excitement. In a few cases drinking was observed. However, these scoffers showed respect for the members of the churches, and usually obeyed the preacher if he told them they were too noisy. There did not seem to be as many observers and scoffers in the Scrabble Creek or North Charleston churches as in the other two. It could be explained by the fact that they were accustomed to the activities of the snake-handlers, and the excitement was not present as it once was.

Young children. The teenage girls were responsible for their younger brothers or sisters. This included feeding them, taking them to the toilet during the service, keeping them out of danger during the service, and taking them to the car to sleep if they became sleepy during the

four hour service.

Other people arrived and brought their snake boxes to the front of the church. It was not unusual to have fifteen to twenty snakes at one of the services. The boxes varied from a rectangular wooden box, to a violin case with verses of scripture written on it. One of the teenagers of the community brought a snake in an old ammunition box for the people to handle, and showed concern only that the box be returned to him without the snake. One young man from Charleston brought a snake in a bag to sell for twenty-five dollars. The son of the preacher said that they had enough but that they would handle it there on the road. They took it out of the bag, and with no music or dancing, handled the snake before those who were gathered around them on the road.

The congregation. The congregation varied from one hundred to one hundred and twenty-five people during the summer months, and dropped as low as fifteen to twenty during the winter. There was also a noticeable decline when the preacher was out of town. There were very old people and new babies sitting together. The people were mainly from the working class, and many were thin and weatherworn. They were all clean and wore their best clothes. Some men wore shirts and ties, but most came in sport shirts. The ladies wore dresses which were clean, but longer than the

style of the mini-dress. The women had their long hair combed on top of their heads, or hanging straight down. They wore little or no makeup. A young girl attended one of the North Carolina services in a mini-dress with long, puffy sleeves. Comments were made in the service in West Virginia that the sleeves should have been on the bottom of her dress. They mentioned this in the service as a means of control over their young people. A lady bought a dress to wear in North Carolina, and let the hem down before she wore it to church.

The beginning of the services. Between seven thirty and eight p.m., if enough of the faithful members had gathered, the host preacher grabbed the microphone and said, "Welcome to ya all. We are glad to see all of ya. We want ya to feel free and obey the Lord. Feel free to do what ya want." This typical opening was followed by a discourse that most churches are not free today. They believed their church was one of the few in the country where people could really be free to worship God. The minister would welcome several people by name; a welcome was made to the scoffers and observers in the rear. "Most of us was sinners like you once upon a time," he would say.

Prayer. The next part of the service would be a call for prayer. The preacher would ask if there were any requests for prayer. Various members would lift up their

requests for the sick. "Remember John in the naval hospital and the operation he is going to have on his back." "Sister Clara in North Carolina has cancer, and let's remember her in our prayers." They were requested to "pray for me and my lost children." After all the requests had been mentioned, the preacher said, "Let's all come to the altar and pray." At this time fifteen or twenty adults came to the front of the church and knelt at the altar to pray. Everyone prayed aloud and at the same time. It was impossible to hear what was said. The prayers were loud, and contained such phrases as "O Lord, hear me," "Hallelujah," "Praise the Lord," and "Dear Jesus." The host preacher was usually the one who prayed the longest. When he finished and said "Amen", the others stood up. During the prayer, it was not unusual for one or more of the people to start speaking in tongues. The prayer lasted about five to eight minutes.

Music. The musicians usually started to play their instruments during the last part of the prayer. When the last person arose from his prayer, they began singing a song such as the one below:

Jesus on the mainline, tell him what you want,
Jesus on the mainline, tell him what you want,
Jesus on the mainline, tell him what you want,
Jesus on the mainline now.
If you want more power, tell him what you want,
If you want more power, tell him what you want,
If you want more power, tell him what you want,
Jesus on the mainline now.

They repeated these phrases, inserting "if you want the Holy Ghost, if you want more preaching, and if you want salvation." The songs they sang were very similar in beat and content. The congregation joined in the singing with those on the platform. If the people did not sing, they clapped their hands, or kept time with the music by tapping their feet. The musicians moved from one song to another with little or no pause.

The dance. During the song, one of the members started to dance to the music, feeling the Holy Ghost. The dancing varied with the individual, for each one had his own particular style. A short man in North Carolina danced with his legs and arms moving rapidly, in a step much like the Charleston. Some resembled a Scottish dance, while others walked heavily around the room, keeping time to the music. Most of the dancers let their arms hang loose, and their heads flopped from side to side. Many of them gave the impression of falling or sinking, but catching themselves before they fell. A few did fall on the floor in uncontrollable shaking. All had their eyes shut, and were oblivious to others around them. While they were in this trance, they often did not remember anything which happened to them. Their hands were often cold.

One seventeen year old girl said she remembered nothing during the dance, and said it was like being drunk.

When asked if she had ever been drunk, she said, "No, except drunk by the Holy Ghost." When some of them danced they jumped up and down.

Onto the floor comes a seventy-three year old man, Eddie Matney, one-time miner and now a caretaker of a school, known affectionately to fellow church members as "Jumping Eddie". Head thrown back and eyes closed, Eddie begins to jump, thump, thump, turning around the floor. His strong, solid body maintains a steady pace with no sign of tiring, even when trickles of perspiration run down his bald head and along his smooth, clean-shaven cheeks.⁶

The "spirit" caused one woman to run around the inside of the church and shout, "Praise the Lord." Four or five others stood and spoke in tongues, while still others shouted, "Amen," "Hallelujah," and "Praise the Lord."

Handling of the snakes. At the emotional height of the service, one of the men brought the snake box from under the altar. He opened the lid, thrust his hands into the box, and withdrew two rattlesnakes in one hand and five copperheads in the other hand. He lifted them high above his head, and shouted, "Praise the Lord." His wife and others on the platform prayed for him and said, "Thank you, Jesus," "Help him, Lord," and "Praise his precious name." Other people gathered close to the box, and handled the snakes which were passed from one to another. The

⁶Gerrard, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

music continued throughout the snake-handling. As many as ten to fifteen people handled the snakes, and all the snakes were handled before the service was over. There were various ways in which the people held the snakes, some held the snake in the middle of its body, preventing the snake from striking. Others held them by their tails, while a few held them gently in their hands, appearing to be in a trance. A few gathered handfuls of copperheads and lifted them high in the air, some let the rattlesnakes crawl up their arms, others draped them around their necks, and one placed the snake on his head like a crown. It was observed that the handlers did not squeeze or hold the snakes tightly, but loosely with apparent control over them. The ages of the handlers varied, but generally adults handled them first, and then a few young people. Very few of the teenagers handled snakes in the meetings the investigator attended. The youngest handler was a fifteen year old girl.

The snake handling part of the service varied according to the churches, but generally took only fifteen to twenty minutes of the entire service. In Camp Creek, however, the investigator timed one service where the snakes were handled for over an hour.

Speaking in tongues. Speaking tongues was proof to the congregation that a person had the Holy Ghost. It

occurred during the prayers, during the dancing, and during the handling of snakes. Usually after handling snakes, people would continue to speak in tongues. While the language or sounds which they made were not understandable, they often repeated the same phrases over and over again. Those who had the "Holy Ghost speaking in tongues" did not always have the gift of interpretation. When asked to interpret, they said they had no idea of what was said. At one meeting, Brother Wood interpreted a young girl's utterance as, "My people. My people. You are ashamed to speak my name. My people know my name, but a stranger they will not follow." The gift of tongues was used in another service at Fraziers Bottom to quiet a drunk who yelled at the preacher to pick up the snakes. The very small preacher pointed his finger at the man and spoke to him in tongues in a very strict voice, which caused the drunk to retreat.

Prayer and healing. At this time, there was a request for anyone in the congregation to come forward and be healed. The requests for healing varied from backaches and colds, to nervousness. In one service, a mother asked the congregation to pray for her mongoloid son, whom the doctors had said could not be cured. Twenty people surrounded the mother and child and prayed for the three year old boy. After the service, the mother expressed faith

that he would be healed and become normal. She asked her son where Jesus was and the boy pointed to the sky, and she said, "See, he can learn." Other healing involved placing oil on the afflicted part of the body. One young man had blood poisoning in his leg from an infected toenail, and asked the congregation to heal him.

The most interesting account of the healing powers was recounted by Mrs. Vickerson, who was in her mid-fifties. She had had an operation on her stomach, and the doctors had given up hope that she would recover. Her husband had asked Mr. White to preach at her funeral if she were to die. In a testimony she gave the following account: that she had had no food for several days and was unconscious. During the night, an angel came to her and gave her a glass of milk and told her to drink it. She did not like milk, but did as the angel said. The angel was dressed in a white robe and had a smile on her face. The next night the angel brought her some meat on a plate and more milk. This occurred for several nights until she recovered. Mrs. Vickerson was living proof to the congregation of the healing powers involved in their faith.

There were some who believed that the gift of healing had been given to them to use for Christ. Many of the people testified to the effects of the healing upon their

bodies during the service. One woman drove eight hundred miles with her family, and was extremely nervous during the service. She said that her heart was going to beat out of her chest. The congregation gathered around to pray for her; after the prayers she said she was better, and testified to the power she had received.

The person who sought to be healed went to the front of the church, where people placed their hands upon their heads or shoulders. After the prayer, the person went into a trance, spoke in tongues, or fell to the floor. The healer would often state that the Lord had revealed that someone in the congregation had trouble with his back or stomach or some other part of his body. Usually these prophecies were so general that they could apply to anyone.

When a person was bitten by a snake during the service, prayers were offered for that individual, but generally he did not go to the doctor. He went to one of the snake-handler's homes and stayed with these people, who prayed for him. The person may have been very ill from the poison in his body, and might have been quite swollen in the area where he was bitten. There were a few cases where people went to a doctor for aid. It was reported that one young man was bitten by a snake and was taken to the preacher's house, where prayers were offered for him. His parents were concerned and forced him into the hospital,

where he received shots for the snakebite. In relating this story to the congregation the preacher said, "Here John was on the road to health and was up walking around when his parents forced him to the hospital, and those doctors shot him with more snake poison, and he had to suffer again. There were two sufferings he had."

The preaching. Preaching was extemporaneous. They prided themselves on not having any notes or prepared sermons. "Those preachers who have notes can't feel the spirit talkin' to them."

Various themes continually appeared in the sermons or the testimonies. One of the vital themes was that people repent and return to the Lord. "Thank God we are on this side of eternity. There are one thousand chances on the highway that we don't make it now," said Brother White. "There may be some who will leave and never have the chance again to come to God. Time is running out. If you are to come to God, come tonight." This appeared many times in each service.

Another theme was that some people ridiculed the snake-handlers because of the "kiss of charity" and handling snakes. They stated that being a snake-handler was not easy, but there were only two places to go, heaven or hell, and their reward was in heaven.

There were social issues which emerged in the

services. In one service Mr. White told of an incident at a rest stop in North Carolina. Mr. White was standing outside the men's toilet, when a white man in a big, black Cadillac drove up. He came over and asked Mr. White where the rest room was. Mr. White said, "Over there." The white man said, "But I just saw a nigger come out of there." Mr. White said, "Go on in there. He didn't hurt it." Mr. White proceeded to preach about the equality of all men.

At another service, Mr. White said, "If a little nation overcomes America, it wouldn't surprise me if it is the black brothers. They have been humbled so long, God might raise them up." At a meeting in North Carolina where Negroes were present, the West Virginia snake-handlers greeted all with the "kiss of charity".

Another social issue was brought before the churches when some legislators tried to reinstate capital punishment. Mr. White wrote a letter to the legislators and told them that they were against capital punishment.

There were themes about family life which also appeared in the sermons. Brother Allen said, "What we need is more old time parents. If a child don't do what you say, they should get the belt." But he was very emphatic that they would not punish the child in front of other people. He said, "If you whip the child in public he will remember

it for the rest of his life. There is a right and a wrong way to punish children." He also said, "The man should be the boss of the family, but if the man don't have enough sense, the woman should be." Brother Post said that a man should not beat his wife or throw her around. "If you knock around on your wife, you are knocking around on yourself, because the wife is part of you. There should be respect for both. You should love her. When we have the Holy Ghost, we must be clean to keep it." He said, "We have to be interested in living right."

"There are a lot of people who do not take their religion seriously," said Jim Lowther. He started crying and said, "God loves me. I know that God can do without me but I can't live without him. People just don't think."

The snake-handlers told of their beliefs and felt if others did not listen to them, it was not their responsibility. Jim said, "When my mother does something wrong, I tell her about it, and when she stands before judgment she can't say, my son didn't tell me about it." There were admonishments that the people should live right, because there were other people watching them all the time.

During the testimonies, if scripture was read, the other men were very quick to see that it was quoted correctly. They looked up the scripture and argued various points.

Delivery of these sermons ranged from "Bible pound-

ing" and "shouting" preachers to very quiet speakers. Most of the preachers were very dramatic in their presentations. One of the oldest men walked around the front of the church shouting a few sentences, and catching his breath by saying, "Praise the Lord, forever." Another had the habit of shouting almost the entire paragraph, and suddenly speaking very softly at the end of it. Some preached for thirty or forty minutes, while others said only a few words.

The preacher of the host church usually spoke first and usually preached the longest, while others preached later. There were prayers and songs between some of the preachers. Encouragement came from the congregation when people shouted, "Amen," "That's right," "Glory be to God," and "Thank you, Jesus." The topics varied much more than can be covered in this paper.

Solos. Requests for special numbers occurred at various intervals during the service, but usually toward the end or during the collection. Most of the young people had favorite songs which they sang. The young people usually sat in front with the musicians, but did not face the audience when they sang. The songs ranged from, "Lonesome Valley," "Do, Lord," "Walking for Jesus," "Where Will You Shelter My Sheep," and "The Great Speckled Bird." The solos had different effects on the people. At Fraziers Bottom a young man sang, "The Great Speckled Bird is the

Bible," and one of the young ladies of the church started to shout and went into a trance induced by his melodious voice. Each singer had his specialty, and wherever he went the people wanted to hear it. It was not uncommon that they would sing the same song two or three times at a single service.

At Scrabble Creek there was one family with a boy and a girl, both under eight years of age, who sang with their parents. They sang, "How far is heaven? Daddy has gone to heaven way up in the sky. How far is heaven? I want Daddy to hold me." Others included, "I'm Almost Home," and "One More Valley." While none of the children or adults had any formal training, they learned from their brothers and sisters at an early age. The musicians were quite willing to let others play their instruments, and at the end of the service usually some of the youth would try to play. Most of the guitars were electric and amplified. They also had accordions, drums, tambourines and cymbals.

The closing. The closing generally came about four hours after the start of the service, which meant that some had a late journey home. The minister said, "Does anyone else have anything to say? If not, let's everyone stand and pray." The people stood and prayed for about two minutes, and then were dismissed. They disconnected their instruments, and closed the door until the next meeting.

Many of them attended three or more meetings a week. The young people said their good-byes and exchanged notes to be read at home. The children were carried to the cars and the long procession toward home began.

III. COMPARISON OF CHURCHES

A. Camp Creek.

Location. Camp Creek is located about ten miles from Madison, the county seat of Boone County. Madison has a population of 2,215, while the population of the county is 28,764.⁷ This was the town where most of the people did their shopping and the young people attended high school. The Camp Creek hollow had houses lining the narrow road. Some of the houses were merely shacks, while others were neat and well maintained. There had been many German and Celtic settlers in this area, with the name Dolin prominent. It was a very rural area.

Building. The church building in Camp Creek was on the side of a steep hill. The church was built over a ravine, and one end was precariously supported on cinder blocks. The building was sixty to seventy-five feet long. They were quite proud of the recently panelled interior of the church. There were pictures of Jesus on the walls. A

⁷J. Howard Myers, (ed.); West Virginia Blue Book, (Charleston, Jarrett Printing Co., 1968), pp. 540-590.

large clock hung on the back wall beside a small tapestry of The Last Supper. The pulpit had a large King James translation of the Bible on it. A metal license plate which had a cross and the words "Christ is the Answer" was nailed to the pulpit. There was a bench in front of the pulpit which served as the altar where the people prayed. A large area behind the pulpit was where the musicians sat, and this also served as the area where the snakes were handled. A large gas stove in the middle of the room served as the only source of heat in winter. Two outside toilets were located about twenty yards from the building. The steps to the church were quite steep. Loud speakers were placed on the outside of the building, pointed in opposite directions, so that all the people in the hollow had the benefit of the service. There was one door in the rear of the church, and one aisle down the center. The building could accommodate about two hundred people.

Family. The local preacher in that area was Joe Summers, an ex-coalminer, and a recipient of state welfare. His house was "up a branch" from the main hollow. The road leading to the house followed a small creek, and for part of the way the creek had formed the road. The house was clean and recently painted. The parents of Mrs. Summers lived beside them.

The family had ten children, but two had died at an

early age. Most of the children did not complete high school, but had moved to Ohio to find employment.

Jim, a seventeen year old son, had recently married a Roman Catholic girl from Ohio. Joe made remarks that "Catholics are worse than sinners." However, his wife had accepted the snake-handlers faith, and they came home to handle the snakes. They took some of the snakes home with them, and during one of their services in their home the girl was bitten by a copperhead. Joe said, "She seemed to be playin' with them and was not really in the right spirit."

One daughter called her mother, telling her that she was going to come home and pray for the Holy Ghost. She came during the weekend, and before Sunday had received the Holy Ghost, speaking in tongues. While most of them came home for their snake-handling, they did attend some of the holiness churches in Ohio.

Nancy, another daughter, was married to a young man who played the guitar for the services. He was originally a scoffer, but was converted, and was now one of the most avid handlers of snakes. Nancy did most of the singing for the group.

Only two sons and two daughters were living at the Summers home. They were eleven, twelve, thirteen and fourteen years old. They accompanied their parents to all the

meetings at Camp Creek, and most other services.

Differences. In the services at Camp Creek there was very little reading from the Bible. They quoted scripture or lifted up just a few verses to start their sermons or testimony.

One of the most striking differences was that they were the most active of the churches, and seemed to consistently have the largest crowds. Another difference was that they handled the snakes longer than any of the other churches. Average time of handling was from ten to fifteen minutes, but at Camp Creek it was not uncommon for them to handle the snakes for over an hour. They also handled them more than once during the course of the evening. There were usually more snakes at Camp Creek, and they often lifted as many as ten or twelve in both hands. A preacher from another church said in a sermon, "Sometimes they handle them so long at Camp Creek that I say, my God, why don't they put them down." The handling of the snakes provides them with status in the community of believers.

The people traveled a greater distance to this church than some of the others. It was not uncommon for half the congregation to come from sixty miles away. The scoffers in the back had a respect for the service and the people; while there were sporadic occurrences of talking and joking, none disrupted the service.

The church provided one form of community activity, a Christmas party on the Sunday before Christmas. The members of the church went to the merchants of Madison, and through them provided the children of the hollow with toys for Christmas. They said the church was filled that night.

The services were held on Friday and Saturday nights and were longer than the services at Scrabble Creek and North Charleston. They began about seven thirty eight p.m. and continued until after midnight.

B. Scrabble Creek.

Location. The Church of All Nations was located two miles from Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. The county had a population of 61,731.⁸ Scrabble Creek is about forty miles from Charleston. The houses were very close together at the "head" of the hollow, but it was sparsely settled at the other end.

Building. The church was located over a garage. The building was given to the people for their services, with the stipulation that they must pay for the utilities. The small platform on which the musicians played and the snake-handling occurred had a large pulpit in the center. The pews came from an older church, and a picture of Christ and a clock hung behind the pulpit.

⁸Ibid., p. 607.

The family. Mr. White was the leader of this church, which was the center of attention during the attempt to outlaw snake-handling in West Virginia. Mr. White owned a garbage and transferring business, and was the most successful member of all the churches. He had this income, and contributed much to the churches and individuals. He had twelve children, all of whom he had delivered himself at his home. A coal company took the house he rented, so he purchased some land and bought a new trailer. Mr. White also built another cinder block building to accommodate out-of-town members of the church.

His family was very patriarchal, the men and older boys ate before the women and children. Grace was said before each meal, even when the parents were absent. The division of labor placed an older daughter in charge of a younger child. Mr. White said, "This is good training for them. Some day they will thank us for knowing how to do these things when they are married."

Differences. One noticeable difference in the service was the frequent debate of the scriptures. They argued such topics as whether the ten virgins had their lamps, or whether they did not. The debates often were heated, but they always knew where a person stood on an issue. There was very little spoken about a person behind his back. One night they told a man that his truck obstructed the bridge

leading to the church. They made comments in his presence and the man defended himself. There were no hard feelings after the service.

While there was snake-handling in the church, there was a noticeable difference in the amount of time they handled the snakes. They did not handle them more than ten to fifteen minutes. They were not handled as frequently as they were at Camp Creek.

Another difference was the smaller congregation. Since Dr. Gerrard studied the church, a split occurred in it. Some said it was due to the installation of the fluorescent lights, while others said it centered on snake-handling. A few members attended the splinter church early in the evening, and returned to the Church of All Nations later.

The scoffers were not as prevalent in this church as they were in the Camp Creek church. They remained outside and talked about cars. They did not come into the church or create a disturbance in any way. With the exception of the White family, most of the congregation consisted of people from other communities. Very few from Scrabble Creek attended the services. Some came from Kentucky, Ohio and Virginia.

Some members resented Mr. White attending other services in and out of the state. Mr. White stated he would

not be tied down to any one church, and was free to go to other churches. When he was absent the attendance dropped drastically. An older man of the church complained that most of the church followed White, "If he goes and dies, I guess that half the church will die too."

Sunday school classes were previously held on Sunday mornings, but in recent years they were discontinued. Only one church service a week was held at Scrabble Creek.

C. North Charleston.

Location. The church was located on the north side of Charleston above a bakery outlet. The population of the county was 252,925. Charleston's population was 85,796.⁹ This was the most urban of the churches studied.

Building. The church had an extremely large room, with movie theater seats instead of church pews. Fluorescent lights, pictures of Jesus, one large bass drum, and a piano were in the room. Two restrooms were located at one side of the room. There was a public address system which was used, but not needed.

Family. The leader of this church was Mr. Poe. He drove a school bus, and his wife worked in Charleston Memorial Hospital as a nurse's aide. The people were from the working class, and a few were mentally retarded. One

⁹Ibid., pp. 516-631.

man, Brother Eskew, came from England and worked in a plant in Nitro. He had charismatic qualities for this group and commanded attention and respect. Before he came to the church, the people debated handling snakes. It was not until Eskew and Gray, the preacher from Fraziers Bottom, came that snakes were handled with any regularity. The people were from an urban setting and were more protective of their private and religious life.

Differences. The service resembled a denominational one. It began at seven thirty p.m. and usually was completed by nine p.m., except when members from other churches visited. Most of the songs were sung from hymnals and some sang selected songs which they had written. A guitar, an accordion, a piano and tambourines were used in the service.

The amount of the collection from the past weeks was written on the blackboard behind the pulpit. The amount received and the amount needed to pay the expenses were recorded. Scripture verses were written on the blackboard and used in the sermon.

Little handling of the serpents occurred in North Charleston. They handled them in order to say that they had been handled. The amount of time handling them was less than five minutes. When the church tried to introduce snake-handling some of the people wanted to participate, but were

frightened. They refused to take the snakes from another person because the Bible said, "They shall take up serpents." When the snakes were placed on the floor, some people ran to escape them.

There was a young Roman Catholic convert who had recently returned from the army. He kept his snakes at home and brought them to the services. He let them crawl out of the box and tried to pick them up by the tails. If they wriggled, he jumped back and dropped them on the floor. He said he was often bitten, but there would be no mark indicating a bite. The older people were understanding of him, but very cautious of him when he handled the snakes.

There was a lot of foot-washing at the North Charleston church, more than at the other churches. It could have been because of the availability of water there. The men and women washed one another's feet. Sometimes women dried the feet of the men with their long hair. The men removed their socks when their feet were washed, but the women did not remove their hose.

D. Fraziers Bottom.

Location. The church was located five miles up a dirt road from Fraziers Bottom in Putnam County. Putnam

County had a population of 23,561.¹⁰

Building. This was the smallest of the church buildings. It was only about seventeen feet wide, and less than forty feet long. There were numerous pictures of Jesus as well as pictures of snake-handlers hung on the walls. An old organ was connected to a public address system, which blared the music and sermons throughout the community. The pulpit was painted white and a crocheted doily placed on it. A large water cooler was in the front of the church. The church was below the hill in front of Gray's house.

Family. Mr. and Mrs. Gray were an older couple whose children were working in other states. Their home had "no smoking" signs around it. There were numerous pictures of Jesus in the house.

Differences. Meetings held at Fraziers Bottom were a special event for the snake-handlers. They were held once a month and members of all the other churches would come. The services depended on the Grays; if they were not there, services would not be held. At the other churches services were held with or without the minister.

Plenty of scoffers were on the outside and some were drinking. At one meeting when they started to handle the

¹⁰Ibid., p. 691.

snakes, one of the scoffers jumped through one of the open windows for a closer view.

A festive spirit pervaded the services, which started at eight p.m. and lasted until two a.m. The snakes were handled two or more times during the service. There was much singing and dancing. After the service the women had a large dinner in the house waiting for those who had traveled a great distance. It was three or four a.m. before they started home.

The preacher in this church was more of an exhibitionist than any of the other preachers. He was bitten by a large rattlesnake, which a man from Ohio recorded with his movie camera. Mr. Gray had set up the projector to show the film. He asked how many wanted to see it. All of them did, and he showed the pictures. After the showing, he asked if they wanted to see it again. Some yelled that they wanted to see the real thing, but the movie was shown again.

E. North Carolina.

Location. The Burning Bush Tabernacle was located just two miles from Durham, North Carolina, which had a population of about 78,000. It was on the Roxboro Road.

Building. The church building was a house with some of the interior walls removed to make one large room. One small room had a refrigerator with Pepsi-Cola in it. The

ceiling was only six feet and three inches high. A flag of West Virginia and one of North Carolina hung behind the pulpit. There was one piano in the building.

Family. Mr. and Mrs. Picks, an older couple, lived in an old southern house with large rooms, which could easily accommodate twenty people. The Picks did not have any children at home. There were many dogs around the house.

Differences. North Carolina was the place where some of the snake-handlers went on the fifth Sunday of the month. About fifteen to twenty made the journey to Durham and the Burning Bush Tabernacle. People came from West Virginia, Virginia, and parts of North Carolina to be in the services. The procession to North Carolina had a distinctive ritual. They left Scrabble Creek at nine thirty a.m., and stopped at the same restaurants, the same filling stations, and the same rest stops. When they arrived Saturday evening, there was time to freshen up before the evening service. The services were extremely long, with preaching, singing, speaking in tongues, and testifying. There were five guitars, four accordions, and many tambourines. About one a.m. they returned to the house for a big supper. The men and older women ate first and then the younger women. The Sunday service began at two p.m. and was over by five p.m. The evening service lasted from seven p.m. until eleven or twelve p.m. The

next day the party went home.

The differences between this church and the others were the festive atmosphere which pervaded the three services which were conducted in two days; the people coming from different states, and the absence of publicly handling the snakes.

CHAPTER V

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES

In order to gain a better understanding of the snake-handlers, the investigator administered a questionnaire to them. It covered areas of their family life, their religious life, and their religious attitudes. The results of the test were compared with those of Dr. Earl D. C. Brewer in Life and Religion in Southern Appalachia. The results will be discussed in this chapter.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Ages. The age distribution is seen on figures 1 and 2. There was a wide range in the ages of the adults, from twenty-five to eighty-four. Fifty-four per cent of the adults interviewed were over fifty years old. While there was this wide age difference, it did not seem to hinder the meetings in any way. The young people and the adults shared in the services together. There was a respect for the adults in their homes and in the church. Dr. Gerrard stated:

There appears to be much less psychological incompatibility between the old and the young serpent-handlers. This is partly because the old serpent-handlers manage to retain a youthful spontaneity in their approach to life. Then too, the young serpent-handlers do not take a superior attitude toward their

elders. They admire their elders for their greater knowledge of the Bible, which both old and young accept as literally true. And they also admire their elders for their handling of serpents.¹¹

The investigator found this to be true in his study. The young people had a respect for the adults which was fostered in their homes. While the young people had learned more about world problems, science and mathematics in school, their parents had vast years of experience and knowledge of the Bible, which was more important to them.

The children obeyed their parents in most matters. In a sermon, Jim Vannoy told the experience he had as a little boy when his mother told him to come to her for a whipping. He thought that he could outrun his mother, since she was on crutches. As he tried to get out the door he saw something fly by his head. He returned to his mother with a switch for his whipping. Numerous experiences which demonstrated the fact that children should obey their parents were given in the sermons and testimonies.

Sex. There were twenty males and twenty females among the young people who responded to the questionnaire. Of the adults, twenty-four males and thirty-seven females answered it. This made a total population of one hundred and one.

¹¹Nathan L. Gerrard, "The Serpent-Handling Religions of West Virginia," Trans-action, (May, 1968), p. 28.

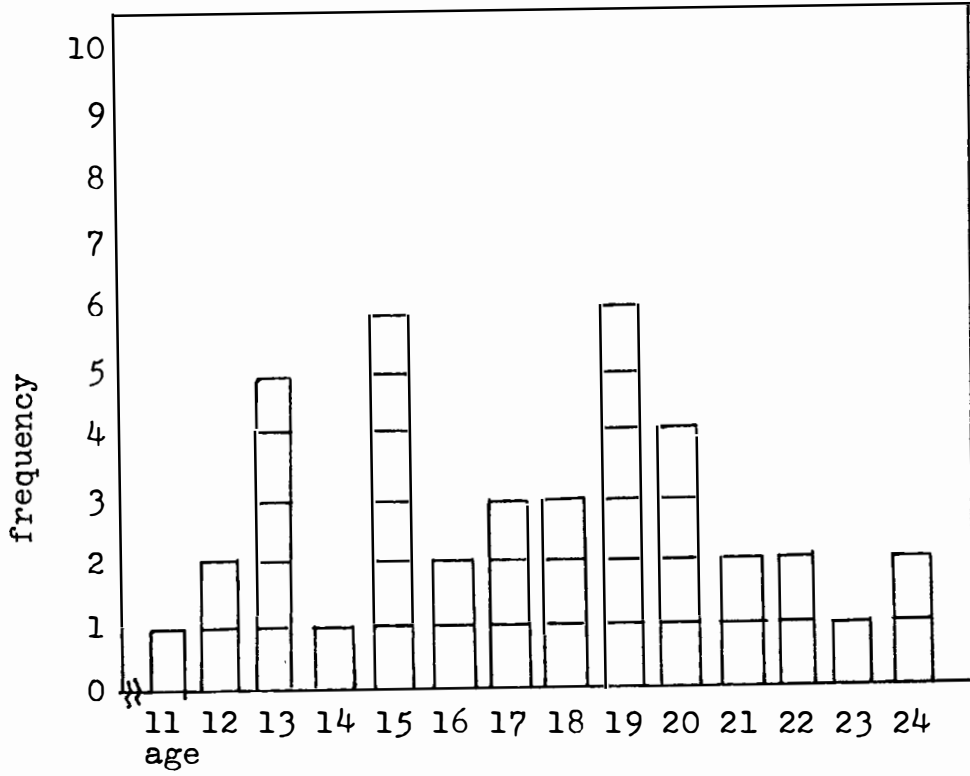


FIGURE 1
AGE DISTRIBUTION OF YOUTH SAMPLE

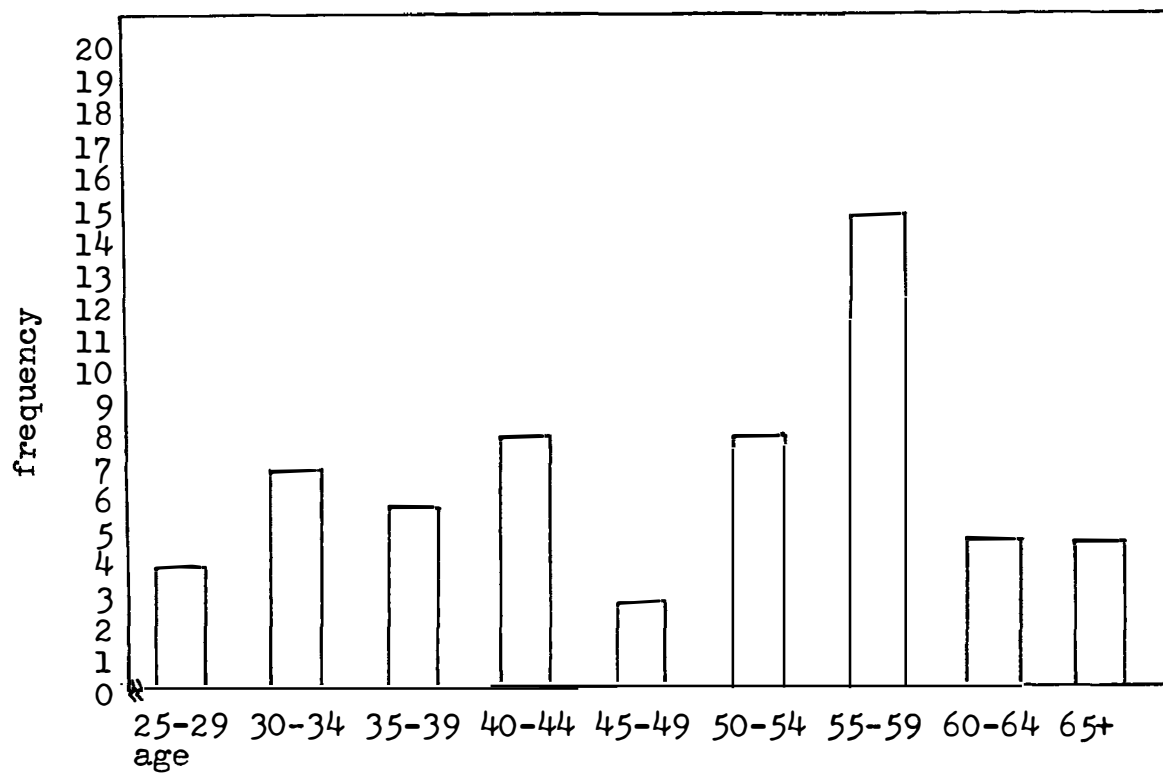


FIGURE 2

AGE DISTRIBUTION OF ADULT SAMPLE

Size of parental family. The sizes of parental families are presented in figures 3 and 4. The size of the parental families changed from their parents to their children. There were 16.4 per cent of the adults who had six or less members in their family, while 55.7 per cent had seven to twelve members. The rest of the adults, 21.3 per cent, had twelve or more in their families. The large family was not a surprising development because of the rural background of the snake-handlers.

The young people, however, had 32.5 per cent of their families with six or less members. This almost doubled the same category of the adults. There were 37.5 per cent of the young people who had families with seven to twelve members. There was a decline of about 9.5 per cent in the number of families with seven or more members. This would indicate that there was a slight decline in the number of children being born to these families.

The ability of the wife to have a large family was one of the qualities which some of the ministers brought forth in their sermon of a good wife. "Over there's my wife. She's a good woman, she had ten children and that takes a pretty good woman to do that." References were made by other ministers about the ability of their wives to have many children. This was a virtue which the older women had obtained, but which many of the younger ones will not.

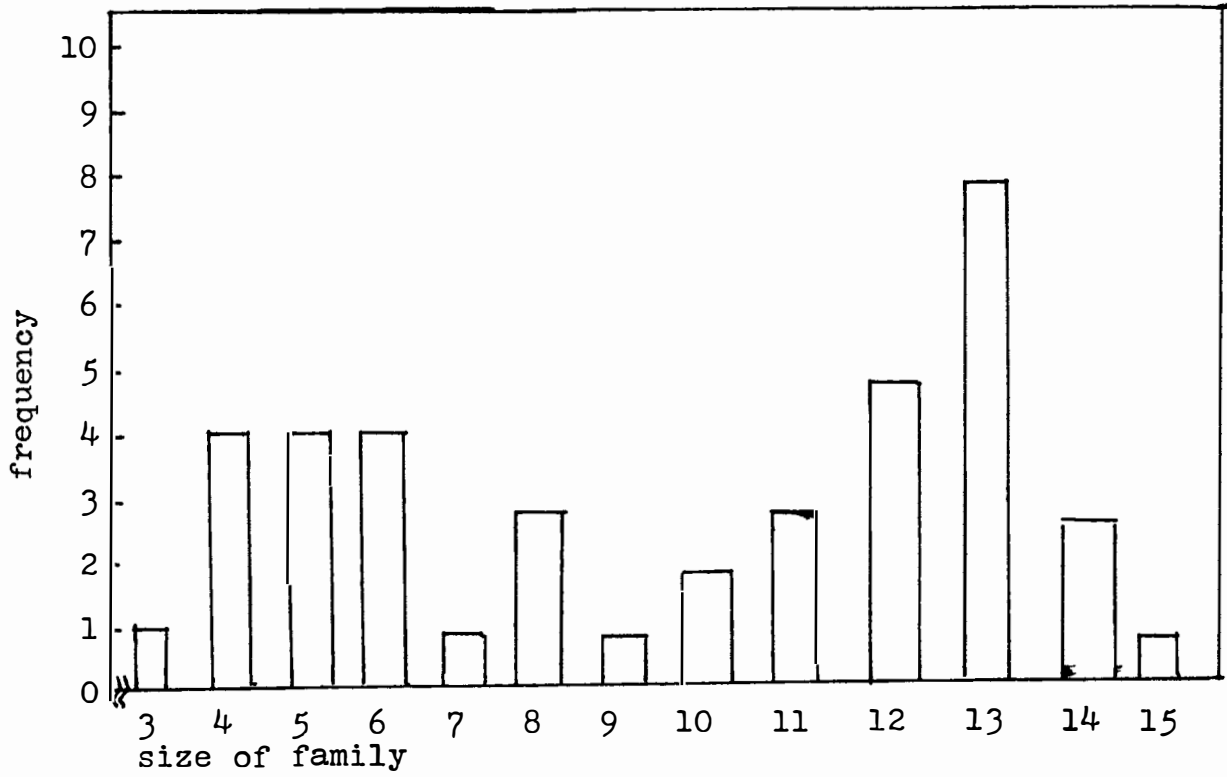


FIGURE 3

SIZE OF PARENTAL FAMILY, YOUTH SAMPLE

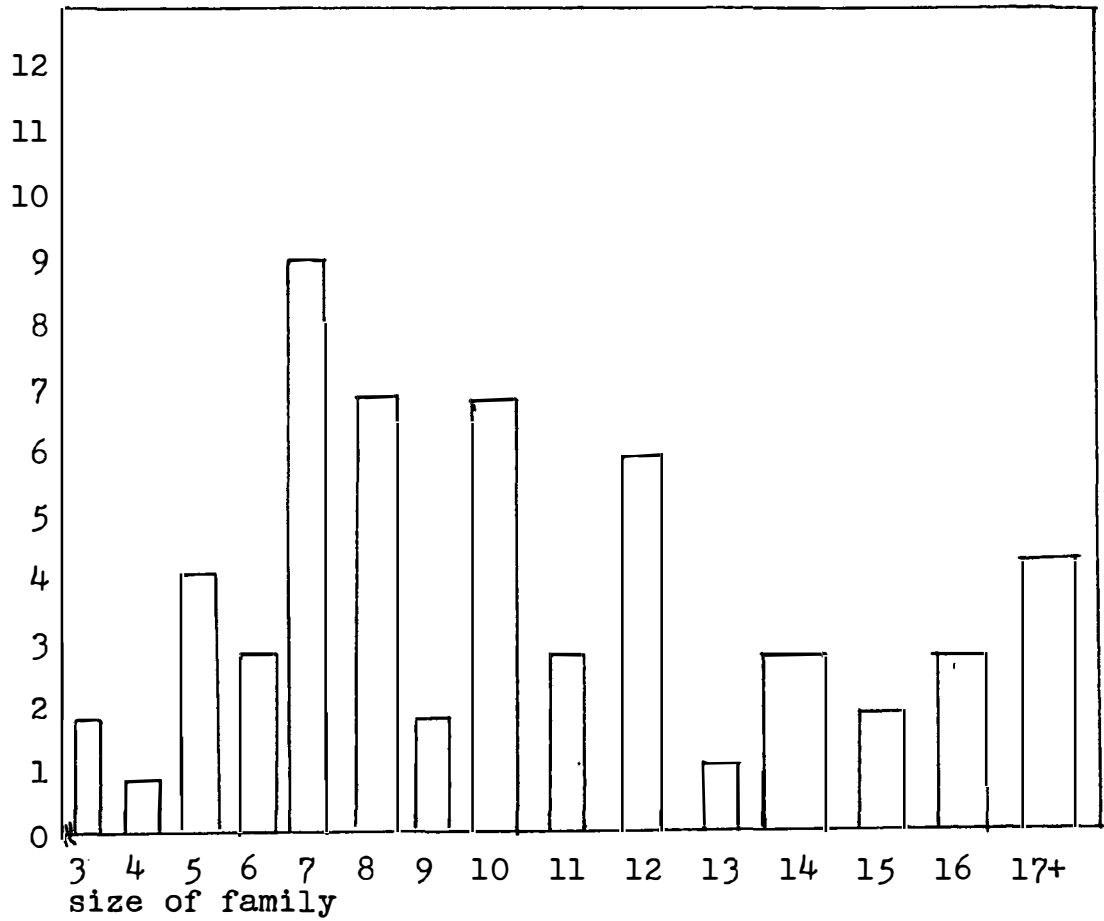


FIGURE 4

SIZE OF PARENTAL FAMILY, ADULT SAMPLE

Father's occupation. The occupations of the fathers in the adult sample showed a large number in the unskilled category. There were 41 per cent of the adult sample whose fathers worked in the coal mines, while 5 per cent of the youth sample had fathers who worked in the mines. The men who worked in coal mines, in timber, and on farms comprised 62 per cent of the fathers' occupations. In the youth sample there was a greater diversity in the occupations. There were 32.5 per cent, however, who were on some type of welfare or retired. In the youth sample more fathers were working in plants and driving trucks.

Mother's occupation. Most of the mothers remained at home in the adult sample. There were 80 per cent of the adult sample and 72.5 per cent of the youth sample whose mothers were housewives. While this was a slight decline, the investigator believed that more of the mothers will find additional employment outside the home.

Last grade of school completed. Figures 5 and 6 present the last grade of school completed. In the adult sample 78.7 per cent had an eighth grade education or less. This was the grade most of them quit school to start work. Only three of the sixty-one adults completed their high school work. In the youth sample there were eighteen out of the forty who were still attending school. In the youth sample, 75 per cent had a tenth grade education or less,

while only 42.5 per cent of the total youth sample were under seventeen years old. There were twenty-two who were not in school; of these only six had graduated from high school. This meant that 73 per cent of those not in school did not complete their high school work. This was a high percentage of high school drop-outs.

Marital status. Most of the adults in the sample had been married: forty-seven had been married, seven had been widowed, three divorced, three separated, and only one was single. Of the ones who were married, 22.9 per cent were married before they were seventeen years old. There were 45.9 per cent of the adults who had been married before they were twenty. In the youth sample only seventeen were married. Fifteen of them were married when they were nineteen years old or less, and two gave no response. Figures 7 and 8 present the ages when they were married.

There was a strong feeling that there should be no divorce or separation. They believed that a person should only have one husband or wife. If a person married again, with a living spouse, he was considered to be living in sin.

From the results of the questionnaire it appeared that the young people continued to marry at an early age. In conversations which were held informally, many of them were anxious to get married and be on their own.

Size of immediate family. The size of the families

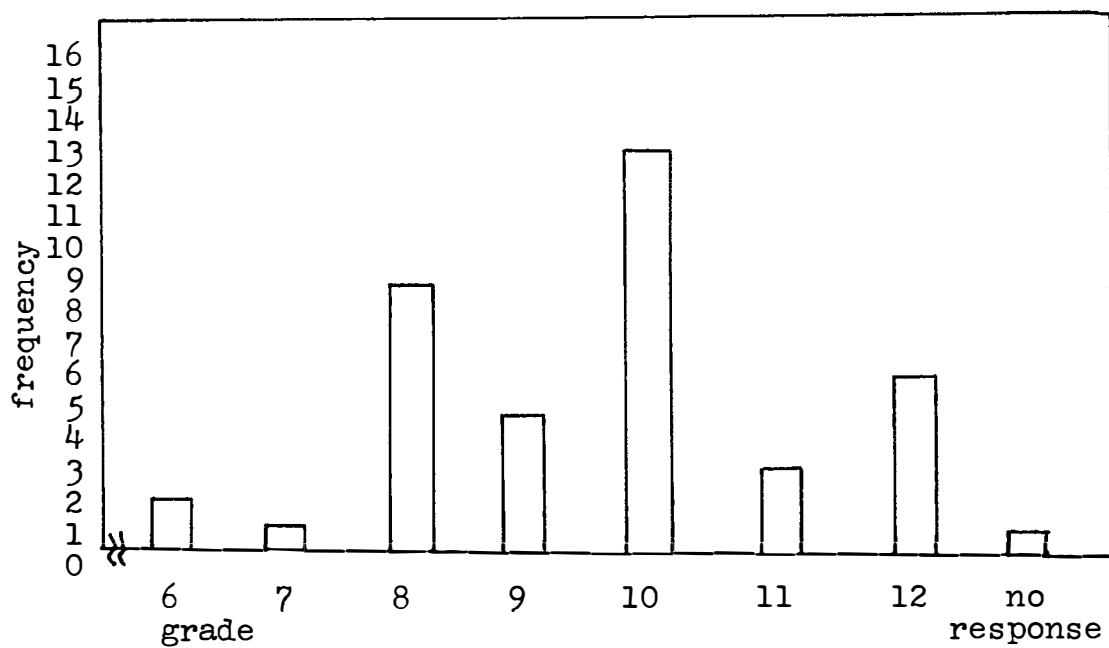


FIGURE 5

YOUTH SAMPLE
LAST GRADE COMPLETED IN SCHOOL
(18 were still in school; 22 were not)

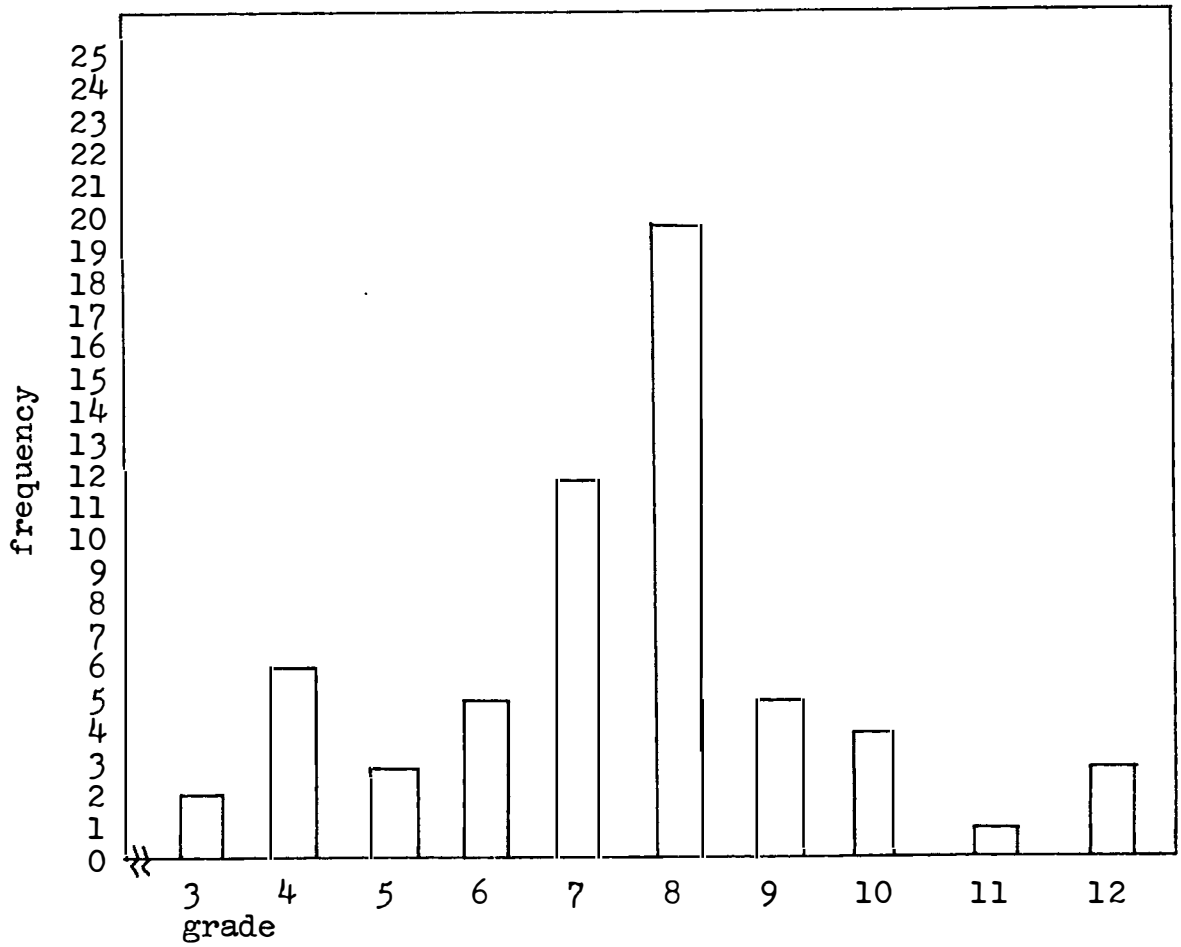


FIGURE 6

ADULT SAMPLE
LAST GRADE COMPLETED IN SCHOOL

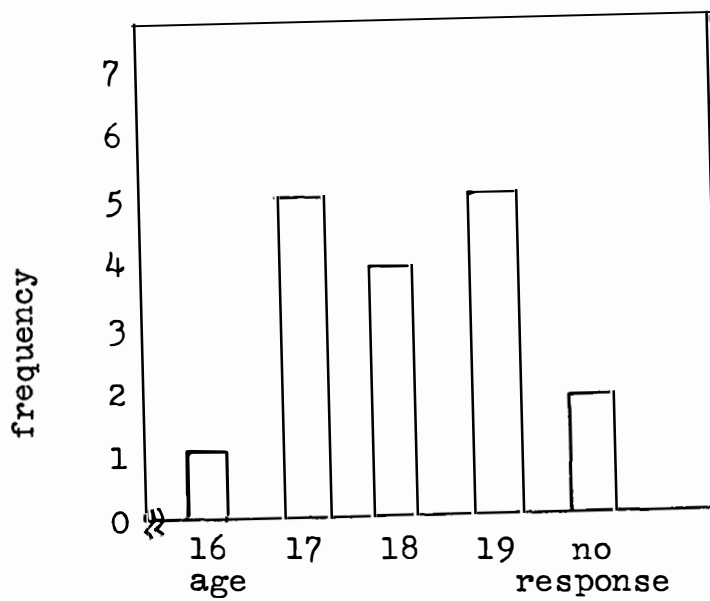


FIGURE 7

YOUTH SAMPLE
AGE WHEN MARRIED

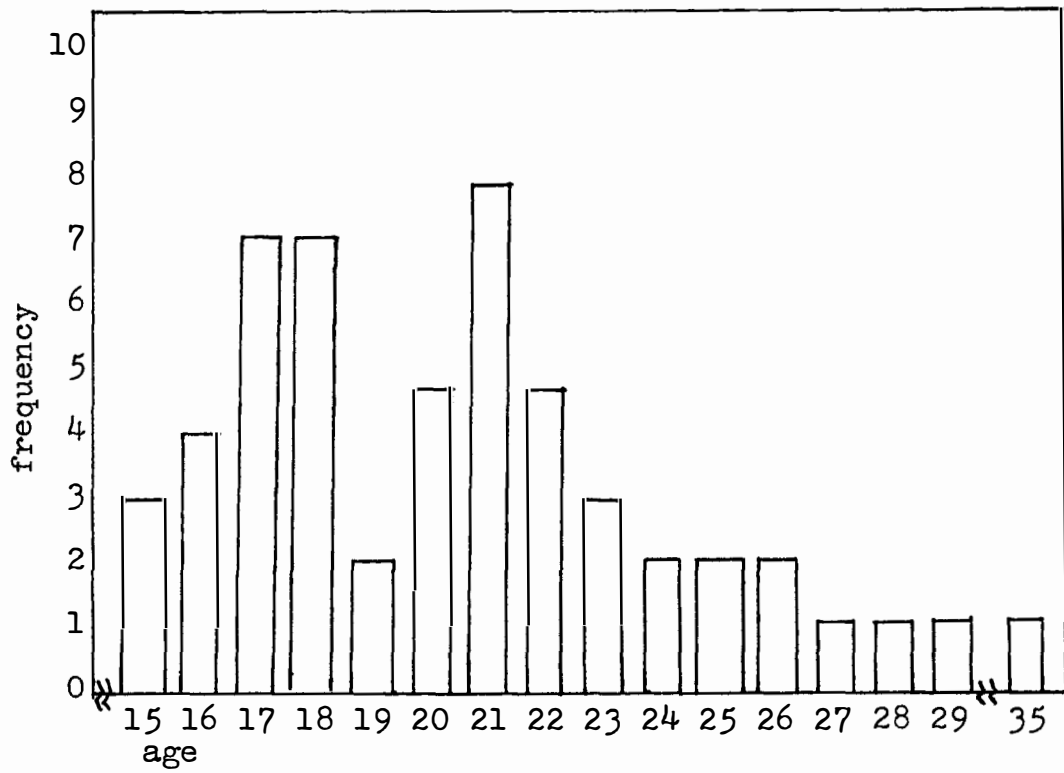


FIGURE 8

ADULT SAMPLE
AGE WHEN MARRIED

had declined during recent years. In the adult sample the families of six or less members increased to 65.5 per cent of the total number. In their parental families the percentage was 16.4, which meant that there was an increase of 48.1 per cent of the families with just four or less children. There were 45.9 per cent of the adults who had three or four children. From this fact, it was ascertained that the large families which characterized the early snake-handlers were declining.

The young people had just started their families and only eight had one baby and one had two babies. It was not possible to compare the youth and adults in this question. Note figures 9 and 10.

Source of income. The source of income for the adults in the sample was the following: twenty-two from their jobs, twelve from welfare or social security, eight from their husbands, four from pensions, and fifteen gave no response. For the young people the results were: eighteen from their parents, twelve from their jobs, three from their husbands, one from welfare, one from the navy, and five gave no response.

Range of income. The range of income is presented in figures 11 and 12 on pages 60 and 61. The monthly income was varied. Seven had less than \$100. per month. 31 per cent made less than \$3600 per year, while on the

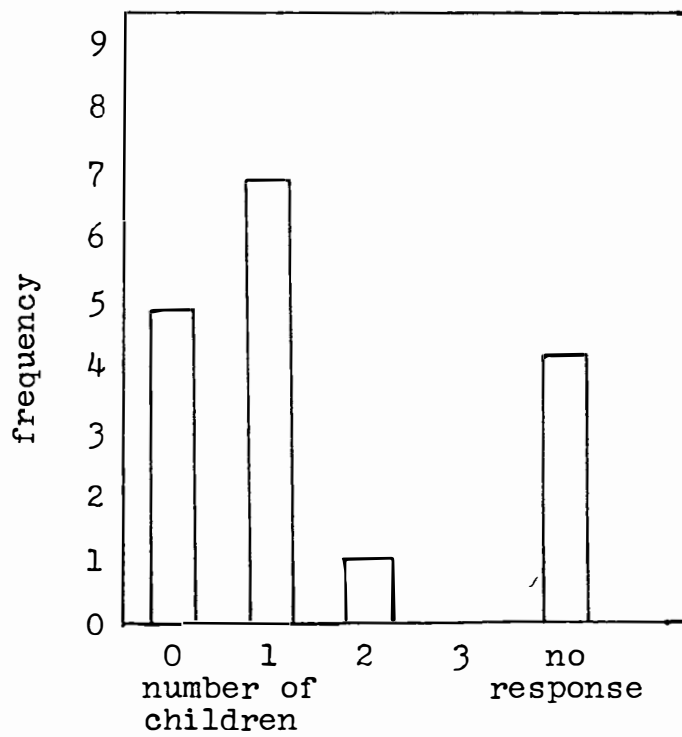


FIGURE 9

YOUTH SAMPLE
SIZE OF IMMEDIATE FAMILY

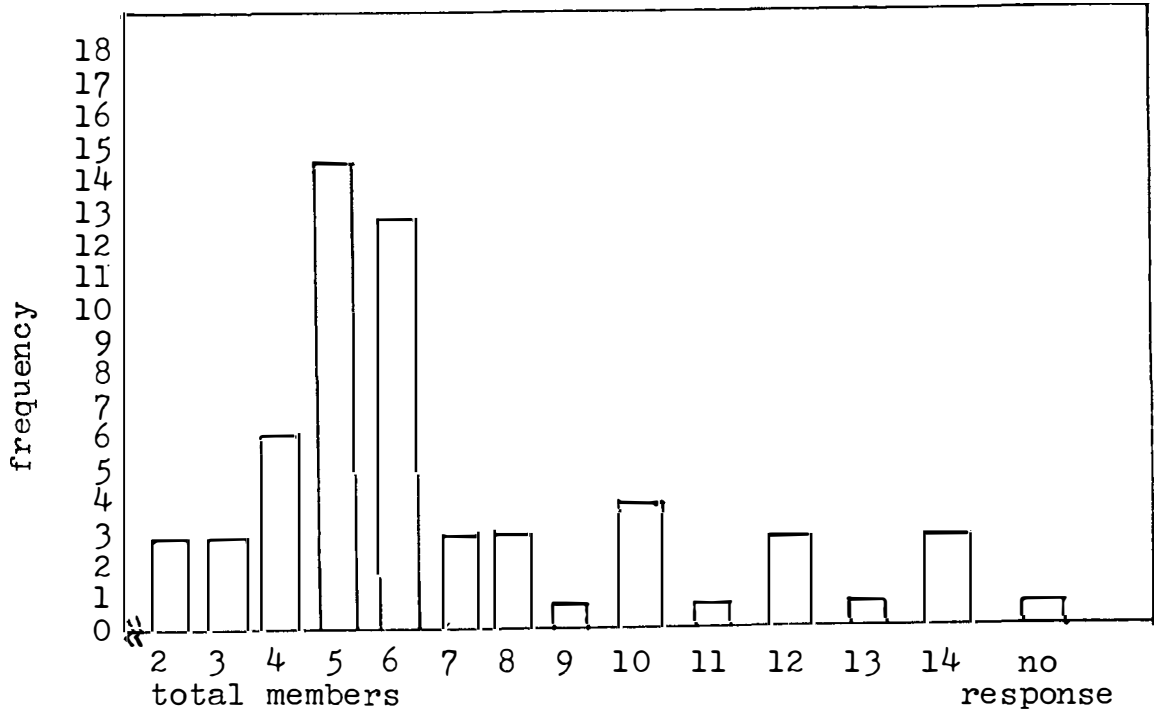


FIGURE 10

ADULT SAMPLE
SIZE OF IMMEDIATE FAMILY

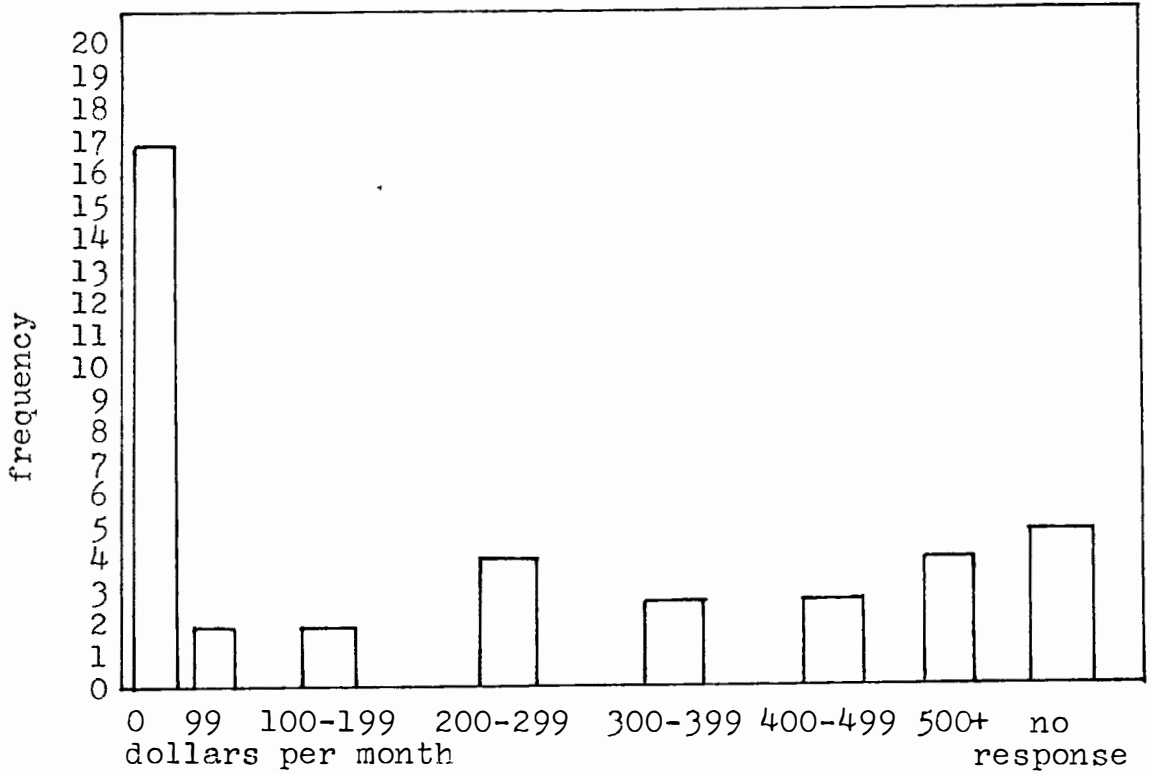


FIGURE 11

YOUTH SAMPLE
INCOME FOR A MONTH

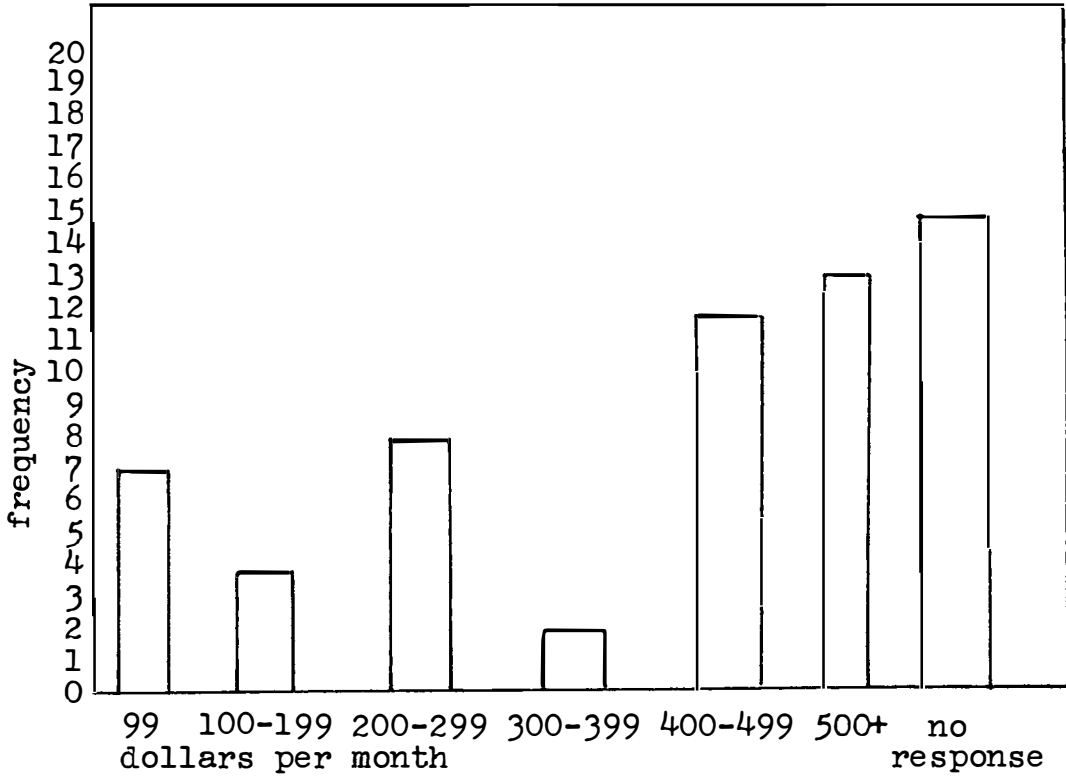


FIGURE 12

ADULT SAMPLE
INCOME FOR A MONTH

other hand, there were 21.3 per cent who made \$6000 or more. In the adult sample about 25 per cent did not respond to the question concerning income. There is a wide range of income within the churches. The working young people did not appear to have a better income than their parents. Ten per cent of the young people made over \$6000, but many will not be able to advance much farther because of their limited education. Many of the young people had gone to other states for work, so this could account for the low income of the young people.

Occupations. The occupations of the adults varied greatly: twenty-six housewives, ten laborers, six on pensions, three in trucking, two clerical and sales, one preacher, and six gave no response. In the youth sample, eighteen were students, four were secretaries, four were housewives, and the rest were varied; seven gave no reply. While there was some variation in the occupations, there would be little chance of advancement for the youth. They were limited just as their parents were, with the exception that the wives would be more able to work as they tended to have smaller families.

Services per week.

	None	1	2	3	4 plus	no response
Adults	4.9%	29.5%	37.7%	21.3%	4.9%	1.7%
Youth		7.5	22.5	45.0	20.0	5.0

One of the noticeable characteristics of the snake-handling cult was that most of them were in more than one service per week. In the adult sample 37.7 per cent attended two services per week, while 26.2 per cent attended three or more services per week. In the youth sample, 22.5 per cent attended two services, while 65 per cent attended three or more services. While this may have been loyalty to the church, the services provided a social function for them. Many of the young people were not allowed to attend movies, dances or other functions of the school or community. This was one of the acceptable forms of entertainment for them.

Miles traveled. Another factor which surprised the investigator was the amount of traveling they did to attend services.

Miles traveled	1-5	6-50	50 plus	no response
Adults	35.0%	31.2%	19.7%	13.1%
Youth	17.5	17.5	57.5	7.5

Many traveled great distances to be in the services. There might be a holiness church near their home, but they wanted to be free to worship God the way they felt. One man said he traveled over 20,000 miles per year.

Church attended as a child. The churches which they attended as a child are presented in figures 13 and 14. The adults attended the Baptist, Presbyterian, Holiness and

Methodist churches when they were children. 40 per cent of the adults attended the Baptist church, 18 per cent attended the Presbyterian, 13 per cent the Holiness, 7 per cent the Methodist, and the others attended other smaller churches. The young people have mainly been of the Holiness church: 57.5 per cent of the youth attended the Holiness church, 10 per cent the Church of God, 7.5 per cent the Baptist. This seemed to indicate that: (1) the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were not as emotional or revivalistic as they once were; (2) these churches were not reaching out to this class of people; and (3) the children of the snake-handlers were being raised in the Holiness church, but they had not received many converts from other churches. If this was true, they were depending upon their families to carry on their religion, but if they continue to move to other states and cities, there may be a further decline of this faith.

Parents in the Holiness church.

Parents in Holiness church:	Yes	No
Adults	34.4%	65.6%
Youth	85.0	15.0

This indicated that the denominational churches where the parents of the adults had emotional and revivalistic services did not reach these people. The young people's parents were in the Holiness churches, and the young

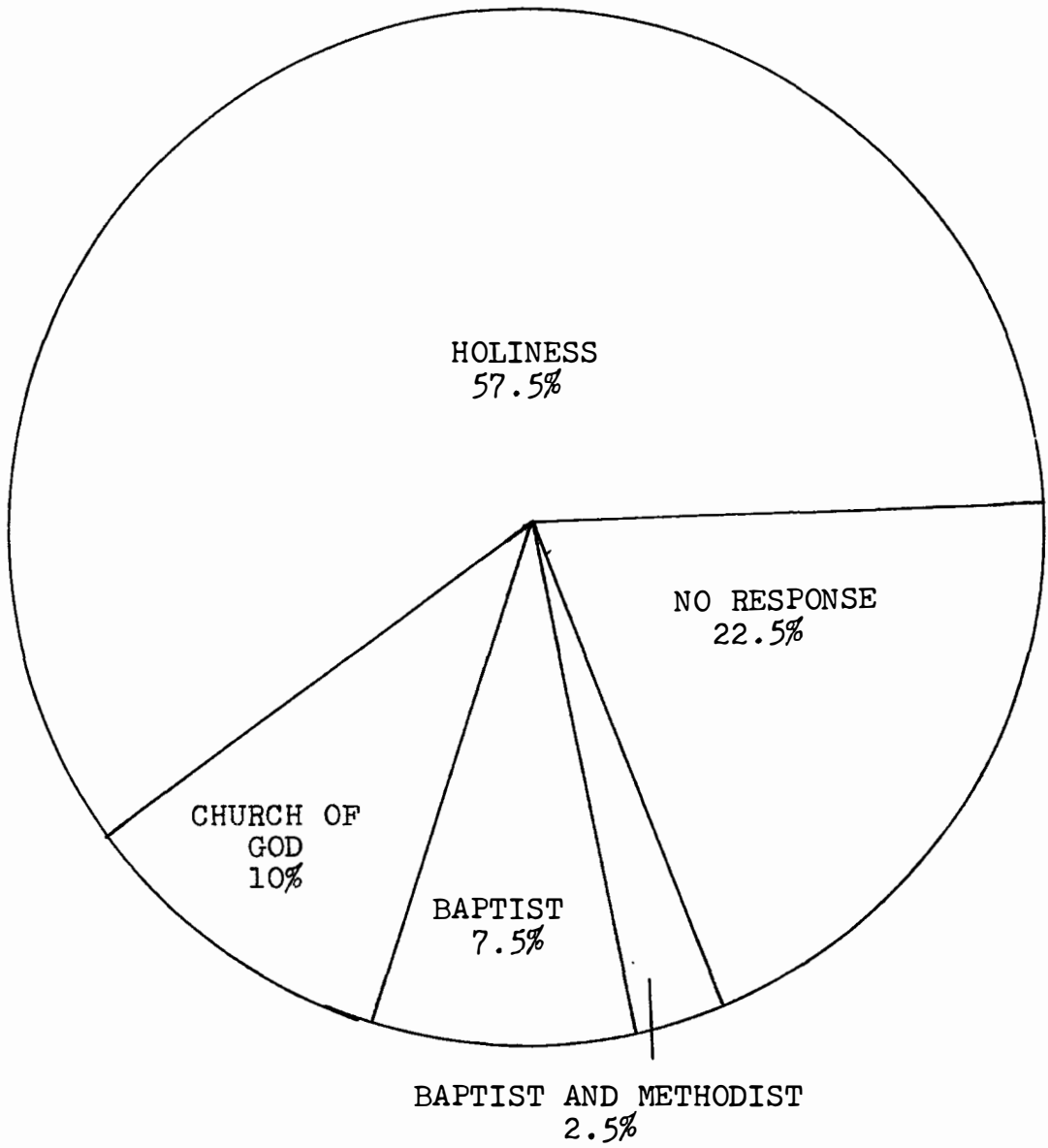


FIGURE 13
YOUTH SAMPLE
CHURCH ATTENDED DURING
CHILDHOOD

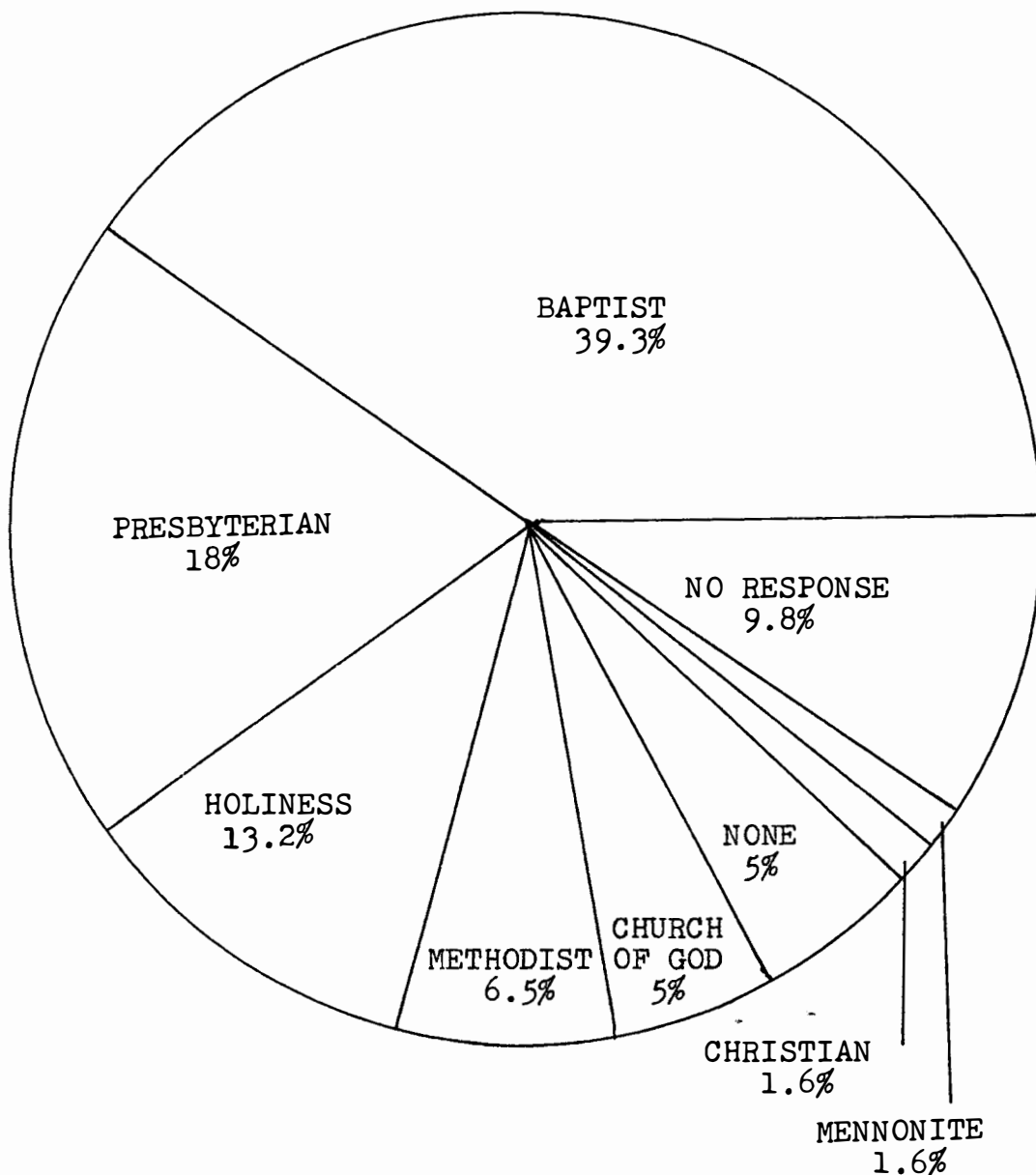


FIGURE 14
ADULT SAMPLE
CHURCH ATTENDED DURING
CHILDHOOD

people stayed with this type of service.

Holy Ghost Speaking in Tongues. This was a sign that a person had the spirit of God in him. The ages when they received this gift are cited in figures 15 and 16. There were 60.7 per cent of the adult sample who stated they had the Holy Ghost speaking in tongues. Of this number of adults, 41.0 per cent had it before they were thirty-one years old. In the youth sample, 47.5 per cent of them said that they had received the Holy Ghost. They had all received it before they were twenty years old. The youngest to receive it was a boy of nine.

Handling Serpents. As was stated earlier in the study, not everyone who attended a snake-handling church was a snake-handler. In the adult sample only 45.9 per cent had handled them, while 49.2 per cent had not, and 4.9 per cent gave no response to the question. In the youth sample, 52.0 per cent of them had handled snakes, while 37.5 per cent had not, and 10 per cent gave no response. It appeared that the children of the snake-handlers were socialized into the religion at an early age, and accepted this as part of their religious ritual. Of those who had handled snakes, very few had been bitten.

Bitten by snake	none	1	2-3	4-5	6 plus	no response
Adults (28)	18	3	3		4	
Youth (21)	12	1		2	1	5

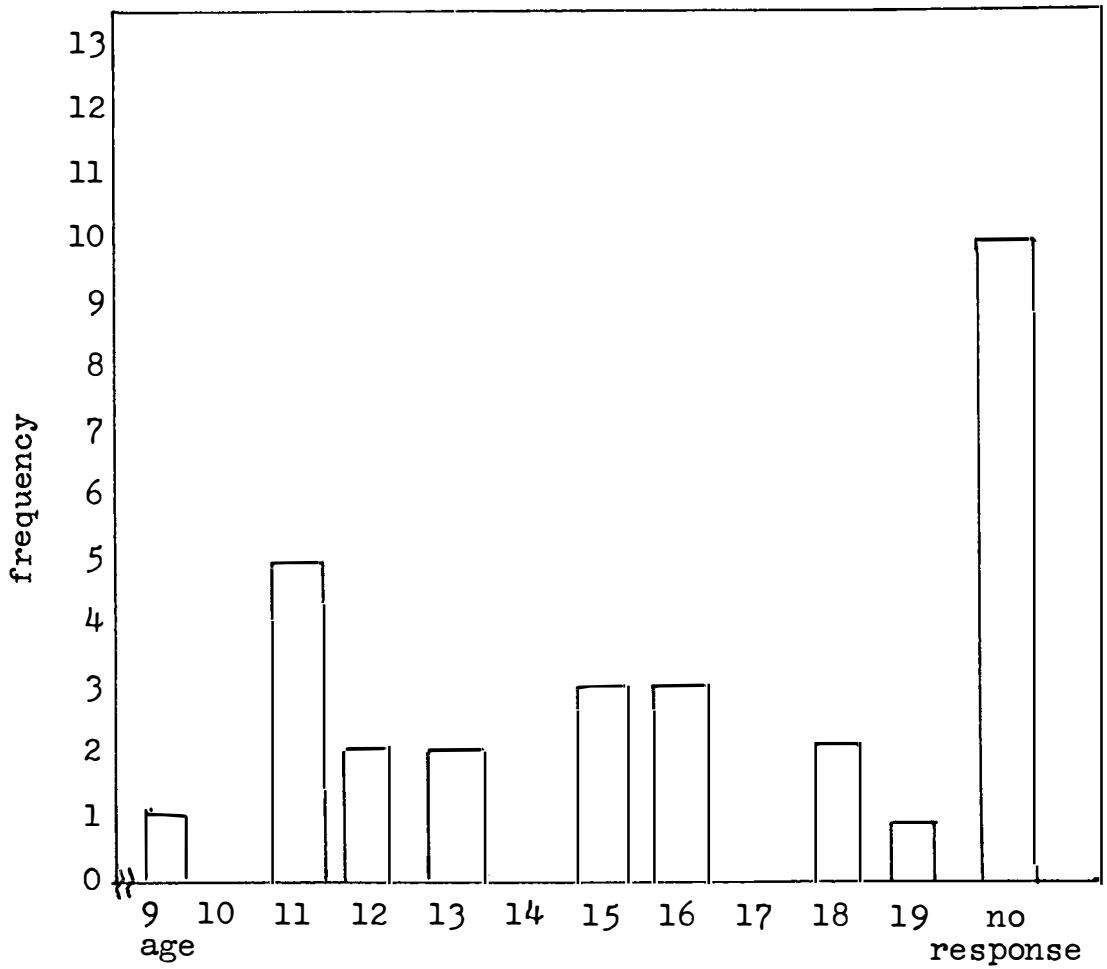


FIGURE 15

YOUTH SAMPLE
AGE RECEIVED HOLY GHOST
(11 did not have the Holy Ghost)

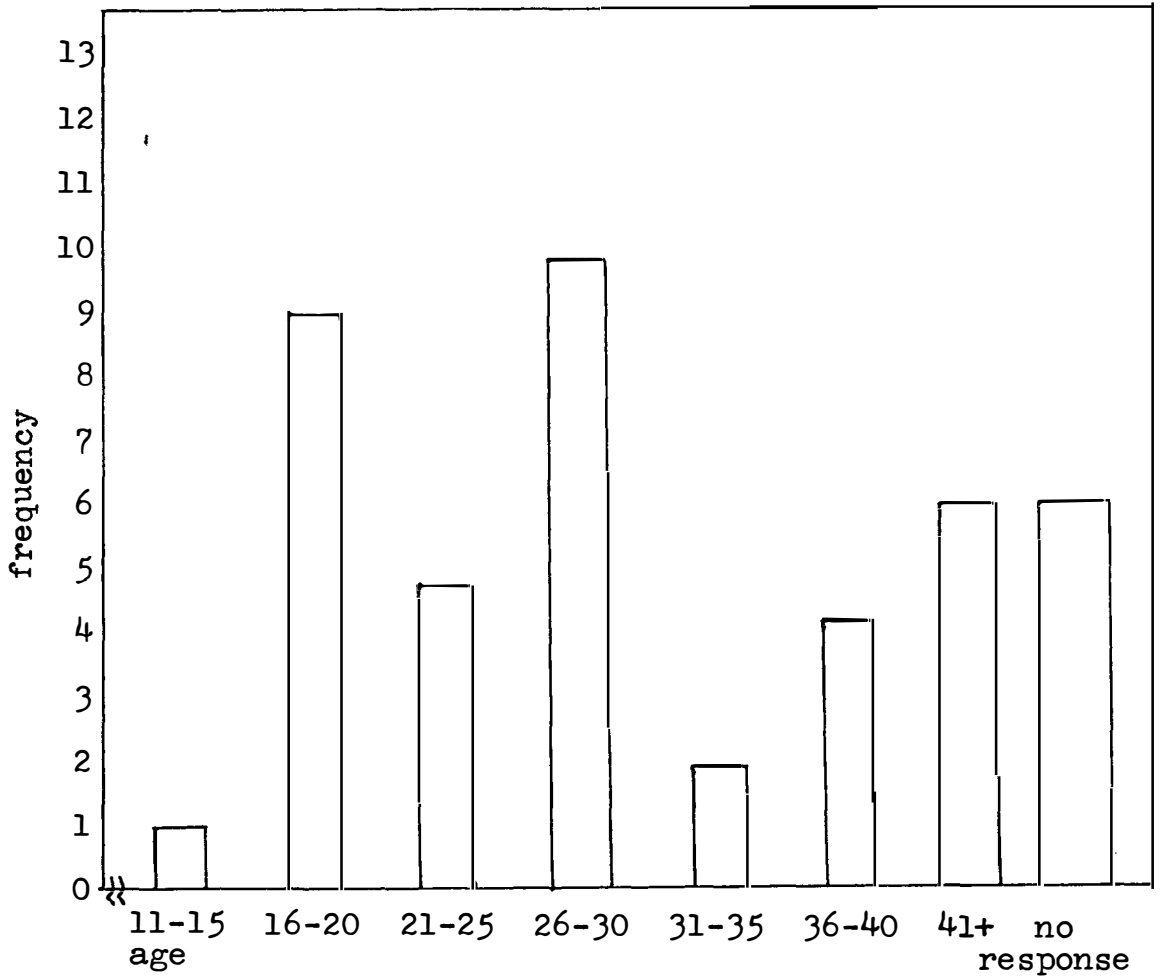


Figure 16

ADULT SAMPLE
AGE RECEIVED HOLY GHOST
(18 did not have the Holy Ghost)

There were some who had testified in services that they had been bitten ten or twelve times, and one man had been bitten thirty or more times.

The ages when the respondents first handled snakes varied. In the adult sample, 18.0 per cent were under thirty years old when they handled snakes, while all of the young people who handled them were under eighteen years old. The introduction of snake-handling in this area after World War II was the cause for the majority of the adults being older when they first handled them. The ages when they first handled serpents are presented in figures 17 and 18.

Some members were brought up in snake-handling families. This section showed the number of parents and siblings who were active in the church:

Fathers handled snakes:	yes	no	no response
Adults	6.5%	85.3%	8.2%
Youth	55.0	37.5	7.5
Mothers handled snakes:			
Adults	8.2	80.3	9.5
Youth	60.0	30.0	10.0
Siblings handled snakes:			
Adults	24.0	62.3	13.1
Youth	52.5	35.0	12.5

There was more response to the snake-handling where

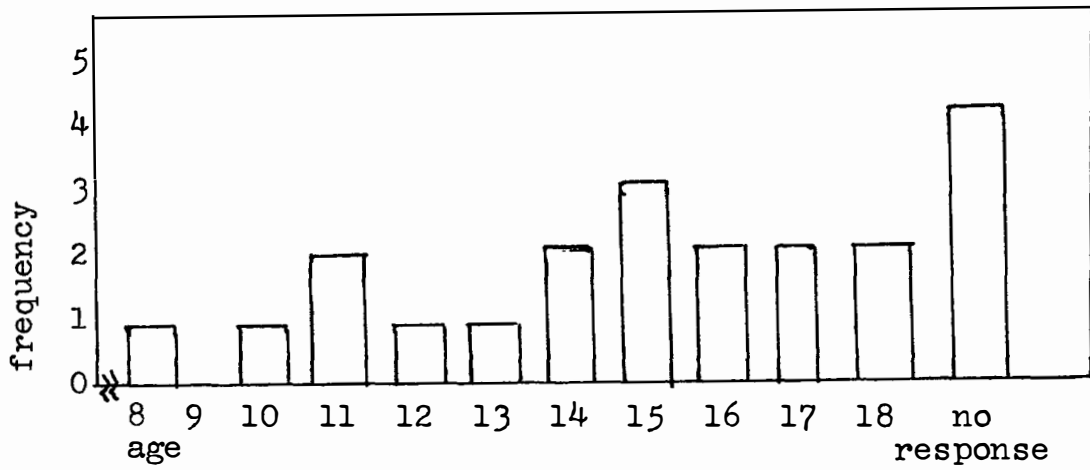


FIGURE 17

AGE WHEN YOUTH SAMPLE
HANDLED SNAKES
(15 never handled snakes)

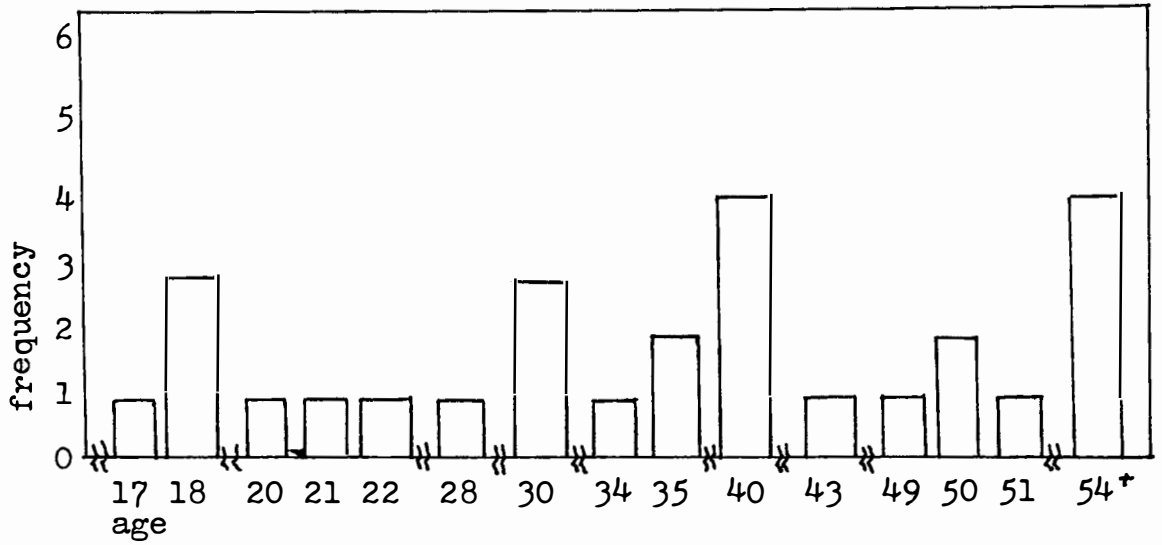


FIGURE 18

ADULT SAMPLE
AGE WHEN FIRST HANDLED SNAKES
(30 never handled them)

the parents and the family participated in the ritual. This was one of the reasons for the growth of it through the years.

Poison. Another ritual which was used by some of the members was the drinking of poison, usually strychnine. The investigator never saw any of this done during a service, but talked with those who have participated in this practice.

Poison	Yes	No	No response
Adults	22.9%	72.2%	4.9%
Youth	10.0	82.5	7.5

There were very few of the youth who drank any poison, and there did not seem to be much stress placed upon this act. They quoted Mark 16, which read, ".....and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them;" They were very precise about this. It was not a command, so most did not drink it. However, they felt if they were to drink any deadly thing, it would not kill them.

Comparison of religious attitudes and beliefs. This part of the study dealt with the questionnaire which was given to the churches in the Southern Appalachian region during 1959-1960. The same test was given to the four churches in the snake-handling cult in West Virginia and Durham, North Carolina. In the Southern Appalachian region the percentage distribution of sect-church scores for youth and adult respondents was:

	Youth	Adults
Sect and denomination type under 59	65.9%	66.4%
Church type 60 and over	34.1	33.6

The youth and adult respondents made up a sample of 1,978 church leaders, members and non-members involving 72 churches or 27 different denominations in 190 counties covering the mountain portions of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. There were 128 youth respondents between the ages of 14 and 25.¹²

In the snake-handling cult there were sixty-one adult respondents and forty young respondents. The figures in this chapter were the percentages in each of the categories.

The people were asked to check if they agreed, disagreed, or were undecided about the following statements concerning their religious attitudes and beliefs.

There is practically no difference between what the different churches believe.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adult			
Southern Appalachian	23.8%	68.3%	7.9%
Snake-handlers	12.5	77.5	10.0
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	28.5	66.0	5.5
Snake-handlers	11.5	82.0	6.5

¹²Earl D. C. Brewer, "Selected Tables Showing Some Characteristics of Youth and Adult Respondents Interviewed in the Southern Appalachian Region," (Atlanta, Emory University, 1959), p. 1 (mimeographed).

From these results the investigator saw that 16 per cent more of the young snake-handlers were certain there were differences between the beliefs of various churches. The adults, in comparison to the Southern Appalachia Region study, indicated that 9.2 per cent more of them thought that there was a difference. There was only a 4.5 per cent difference between the youth and the adults of the snake-handlers. This thought was brought out in sermons and testimonies, when the snake-handlers said they were the ones following the Bible. Brother Eskew said, "My dad said as long as you belong to an organization they'll put a yoke about your neck and you can't go noplace, do nothing. But I didn't believe him. Joined the Methodist church and they said not to go to the Pentecostal church, they'll tell you lies. Then joined the Pentecostal church and they said not to go around those snake-handling churches, they lead you astray. They're all of the devil."

A minister who is called is better than one who is trained.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	68.5%	17.8%	13.7%
Snake-handlers	91.8	3.3	4.9
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	64.3	19.8	15.9
Snake-handlers	80.0		20.0

There is a difference of 23.3 per cent of the adults

in the snake-handlers, and 15.7 per cent of the young snake-handlers who thought a person who was called was better than a trained man. During the sermons and testimonies, references were made about those ministers who were educated and did not have the spirit. The spirit was more important than the education. This followed their view of education, as many dropped out of school.

It would be wrong for a church member to have a job as a bartender.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	83.7%	12.1%	4.2%
	Snake-handlers	91.8	3.3	4.9
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	70.7	20.6	8.7
	Snake-handlers	72.5	15.0	12.5

There was an 8.1 per cent difference in the adults in this area. The snake-handlers felt that their whole lives should be holy, and this included their jobs. Many of them testified to the fact that they used to drink and smoke, but when they received the Holy Ghost, they gave up these practices.

The young people were about the same as those in the Southern Appalachian study. It appeared that the difference between the two was not significant. The youth in both studies were below the adult respondents. This could mean that they did not see the connection between their occupation and their religion, or that sin does not include this area.

There was a 19.3 per cent difference between the youth and the adults in the snake-handling cult.

All the miracles in the Bible are true.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults	Southern Appalachian	87.5%	3.5%	9.0%
	Snake-handlers	98.4		1.6
Youth	Southern Appalachian	92.1		7.9
	Snake-handlers	97.5		2.5

The snake-handlers were much more literal in their interpretation of the Bible. All but one person in the adult category, and one in the youth category said that all the miracles were true. Whatever they read in the Bible, they accepted. There was a 10.9 per cent difference between the snake-handling adults and the Southern Appalachian adults. The youth and adults of the snake-handlers were in agreement on this question.

A person should feel his religion before joins a church.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults	Southern Appalachian	83.9%	11.7%	4.4%
	Snake-handlers	73.8	14.7	11.5
Youth	Southern Appalachian	86.5	7.1	6.4
	Snake-handlers	50.0	22.5	27.5

One of the characteristics of the snake-handling

cult was that they did not believe in joining churches. They believed that having your name on a roll was meaningless, so they did not keep any records. They did believe that a person should feel or experience the Holy Spirit, and therefore, in that sense they believed that the above statement was true. While there were no formal rolls kept, there was a fellowship of the members of the snake cult which was very strong.

It is more important to live a good life now than to bother about life after death.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	73.3%	19.9%	6.8%
Snake-handlers	83.6	8.2	8.2
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	63.5	27.0	9.5
Snake-handlers	77.5	12.5	10.0

The snake-handlers adult sample showed a 10.3 per cent increase over the Southern Appalachian study. The snake-handlers youth showed a 14.0 per cent increase over those of the Southern Appalachian study. The sermons of snake-handlers emphasized the holy life here upon earth; they felt a person never knew when he was going to die, so he should always be prepared. They pointed out that the good life here meant to treat your fellow man in a Christian way. One of the sermons stated, "I don't believe that they can love God and hate their fellow men, and I

don't believe that they can fuss and fight with their wives." There is no way they can avoid this good life and the responsibility here upon earth. This does not negate their belief in a life after death in their thoughts.

A congregation should encourage the minister during his sermon by saying, "Amen."

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adult			
Southern Appalachian	63.3%	23.5%	13.2%
Snake-handlers	82.0	9.8	8.2
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	54.0	28.6	17.4
Snake-handlers	62.5	17.5	20.0

There was a lot of participation on the part of the congregation of the snake-handling cult. "Amen," "Praise the Lord," and shouting often accompanied any person who was singing, praying or preaching. This involvement was reflected in the almost 20.0 per cent increase of the adults in the study. While the adults were responsive in this manner, the youth were less likely to speak up during the service. They would sing and a few might testify, but very few said, "Amen," or "Praise the Lord." If a preacher did not get the response he thought he should, he would say, "Well, if you believe it, say 'Amen'."

* In church it is better for everybody to join in singing hymns than to listen to the choir sing.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	72.7%	10.4%	16.9%
	Snake-handlers	85.3	8.2	6.5
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	80.2	8.7	11.1
	Snake-handlers	85.0	5.0	10.0

From these results there was an indication that more of the adults in the snake-handlers believed in participation during the service. Most of the people sang, clapped their hands, or tapped their feet. The youth and the adults of the snake-handlers were about the same. One reason was the adults did not lose their youthfulness. An old man ran around the inside of the church to show his joy, and others would jump up and down during the singing of the hymns, rather than sitting back and enjoying the performance. There were very few spectators among the snake-handlers.

I think a person should make a personal testimony about his own religious experience before he joins a church.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	63.1%	25.1%	11.8%
	Snake-handlers	47.5	29.5	23.0
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	47.6	30.2	22.2
	Snake-handlers	32.5	32.5	35.0

Again, this question caused some confusion because snake-handlers did not believe people should join a church. Therefore, the answers to this question reflected this belief.

I think churches should have more revivals.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	73.8%	13.3%	12.9%
Snake-handlers	86.9	8.2	4.9
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	81.8	5.5	12.7
Snake-handlers	82.5	7.5	10.0

While there was a positive feeling for revivals in the adults and the youth, there were very few of them. There was only one revival during the two and a half years of this study.

I think we should emphasize education in religion and not conversion.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	29.8%	51.6%	18.6%
Snake-handlers	32.8	50.8	16.4
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	26.2	45.2	28.6
Snake-handlers	37.5	35.0	27.5

While there was not a noticeable difference in the responses of the adults, it was interesting that the youth of the snake-handlers had a higher percentage favoring

education than the Appalachian youth and both adults. There was no formal structure for education in the churches, such as Sunday school or training classes. One of the women at Scrabble Creek stated, "When I come to church it is like going to school, because I learn something new each time I come." In this sense, there was informal education taking place. It must be said that conversion was an important part in the life of their church, and each service attempted to convert some person.

I think success in one's chosen work is a mark of a good religious person.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	57.1%	34.0%	8.9%
Snake-handlers	75.4	9.8	14.8
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	47.6	41.3	11.1
Snake-handlers	52.5	30.0	17.5

The effect of their religion upon their lives was a sign that they were living a good Christian life. One of the most successful men in the cult had a Cadillac and money, which was an inspiration to others that a holy life could be successful. Many of them, however, were not that successful.

I wish a minister would preach more on the Bible and less on politics.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	90.1%	5.3%	4.6%
	Snake-handlers	100.0		
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	84.9	3.2	11.9
	Snake-handlers	100.0		

There was total agreement on the part of the adults and the youth of the snake-handlers that they wanted their sermons based on the Bible. Later in the questionnaire, it will be shown how this carried over into their social involvement within the community. While they desired biblical preaching, many of their sermons dealt with political issues, such as the freedom of the individual to speak and practice his religion the way he felt was right, the abolishment of capital punishment, and the equality of man.

I like the old time religion.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	75.2%	11.1%	13.7%
	Snake-handlers	85.3	8.2	6.5
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	67.5	7.9	24.6
	Snake-handlers	70.0	7.5	22.5

More of the adults in the snake cult wanted the old time religion, but snake-handling was not very old. The youth were more in agreement with the Southern Appalachian youth. Gadgets and gimmicks which other churches used to

lure people into their churches were scoffed at by the snake-handlers.

Heaven and hell are very real to me.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	86.2%	5.6%	8.2%
	Snake-handlers	91.8		8.2
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	89.7	3.2	7.1
	Snake handlers	87.5		12.5

In this question there was not much difference between the responses. In the minds of the majority of the snake-handlers, heaven was waiting as a reward for those who lived according to the Bible, and hell was waiting for those who did not. Testimonies by men and women were given in the snake-handling services. Some said they had seen hell in their dreams; to some it was an eternal pit of fire and suffering, and to others it was a wheel turning over and over with people roasting and begging for water.

Children should not become members of the church until they are old enough to understand about it.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	82.8%	12.0%	5.2%
	Snake-handlers	85.3	9.8	5.9
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	84.9	9.5	5.6
	Snake-handlers	52.5	37.5	10.0

Again the snake-handlers did not believe in joining a church. The adults thought it necessary that the children understand the practices and beliefs of their church, which included handling snakes. They were very cautious about their children. None of them were endangered during the service.

Testifying about one's personal religious experience should be a part of regular church services.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	41.8%	38.8%	13.1%
Snake-handlers	82.0	13.1	4.9
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	45.3	33.3	21.4
Snake-handlers	72.2	12.5	15.0

Testimonies were a regular part of the services and a 40.0 per cent difference was seen between the snake-handlers and the Southern Appalachian study. One of the expected activities was that people testified during the service.

I think a person who is not willing to follow all the rules of the church should not be allowed to belong.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	48.0%	39.5%	12.5%
Snake-handlers	45.9	41.0	13.1
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	38.5	41.3	19.8
Snake-handlers	32.5	35.0	32.5

There was little difference between the adults in the studies. The problem of joining a church had an effect on the answers to this question.

I think it is more important to go to church than to be active in politics.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	94.5%	2.2%	3.3%
Snake-handlers	96.8	1.6	1.6
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	95.2	1.6	3.2
Snake-handlers	95.0	2.5	2.5

In this question, there was no substantial difference between what the adults or the youth answered. All agreed church was more important than politics.

It is more serious to break God's law than to break man's law.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	96.9%	0.7%	2.4%
Snake-handlers	98.4	1.6	
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	95.2	2.4	2.4
Snake-handlers	97.5		2.5

From this indication, there was no question where either group stands. This had been discussed at length during the trips to North Carolina. Some of the snake-handlers said that the Bible told them to handle serpents,

and that they would go to jail if it was necessary. While many of them said this, they did not take the snakes where it was against the law.

I think every family should have family prayers or say grace before meals.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	96.7%	1.0%	2.3%
Snake-handlers	95.1	3.3	1.6
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	96.8		3.2
Snake-handlers	100.0		

There was a strong emphasis upon prayers and grace before eating. Evening prayers were said in the homes with everyone kneeling, and grace was said before every meal. During the trips to North Carolina, the members ate at the same table and had one person say grace before they ate.

I like to sign the old gospel songs, rather than the new hymns.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	58.2%	16.7%	25.1%
Snake-handlers	68.9	13.1	18.0
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	42.1	19.0	38.9
Snake-handlers	60.0	10.0	30.0

Most of the hymns which were sung at the services were old gospel songs.

I don't believe churches do enough about saving souls.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults	Southern Appalachian	73.8%	10.3%	15.9%
	Snake-handlers	86.9	4.9	8.2
Youth	Southern Appalachian	52.4	19.8	27.8
	Snake-handlers	82.5	5.0	12.5

There was a 13.1 per cent difference in the adults who felt that the churches should be more evangelistic about winning people to their faith. In the services, they talked about handling snakes, but the most important was to win a soul for Christ. The difference between the youth of the snake-handlers and the Southern Appalachian youth was 30.1 per cent where the youth followed the thinking of their parents.

I think a minister should preach without expecting to get paid for it.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults	Southern Appalachian	43.8%	48.6%	7.6%
	Snake-handlers	95.1	1.6	3.3
Youth	Southern Appalachian	43.6	37.3	19.1
	Snake-handlers	85.0	5.0	10.0

This was one of the big differences between the two studies. The snake-handlers believed that if a minister were paid by a church, he would be hampered by the members.

He would not be able to preach the way the spirit dictated. Most of them stated that they worked for their living and took nothing from the church, but rather paid into it.

I think religion should be taught in the public schools of the country.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	74.2%	16.7%	9.1%
	Snake-handlers	96.7	3.3	
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	90.0	5.0	5.5
	Snake-handlers	74.6	17.5	7.9

From the above, there was no question that they believed that prayers and religion should be taught in the public schools of the country. 22.5 per cent was the difference in the adults, and 15.5 per cent was the difference in the youth. The children accepted the teachings of their parents. They attacked the supreme court for taking prayers out of the public schools.

Christianity teaches that all men are equal in the sight of God.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults				
	Southern Appalachian	93.4%	2.7%	3.9%
	Snake-handlers	86.9	4.9	8.2
Youth				
	Southern Appalachian	93.7	1.6	4.7
	Snake-handlers	87.5	5.0	7.5

There seems to be a slight variation in the teaching and the response to this question. There is general agreement that all men are equal in the sight of God.

I think the church should sponsor recreation and play situations.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	68.1%	17.1%	14.8%
Snake-handlers	29.5	50.8	19.7
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	71.4	12.7	15.9
Snake-handlers	27.5	40.0	32.5

This was a belief that the church was not to be used for worldly or mundane pleasures. They did not see this. Shows, theater, television and other forms of entertainment and recreation were frowned upon. The investigator observed that the church service supplied a form of recreation. The sermons and testimonies provided drama; the snake-handling provided suspense. The dancing, singing and foot washing were all a change from the activities of the day, and all were acceptable forms of recreation for the youth and adults. They were refreshed after the service, and able to make it through another week.

In organization and practice the church today should follow the Bible literally.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	77.8%	12.3%	9.9%
Snake-handlers	73.8	8.2	18.0

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Youth	Southern Appalachian	73.0%	11.9%	15.1%
	Snake-handlers	57.5	7.5	35.0

Again there were those who said they didn't believe in organizations, but tried to live by what the Bible said.

I believe qualified persons of all races should be accepted into the membership of our churches.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults	Southern Appalachian	67.9%	21.9%	10.2%
	Snake-handlers	72.1	11.5	16.4
Youth	Southern Appalachian	62.7	21.4	15.9
	Snake-handlers	70.0		30.0

This again stated that there was an acceptance of all races, and that the children and adults of the snake-handlers felt this way toward them.

I think the church should spend more time on community improvements.

		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults	Southern Appalachian	71.7%	15.8%	13.5%
	Snake-handlers	47.6	26.2	26.2
Youth	Southern Appalachian	67.4	12.7	19.9
	Snake-handlers	22.5	42.5	35.0

The indication was that there was little concern

about the church in the role of community environment. They felt the church was for Friday, Saturday or Sunday night services, but most did not believe it should be involved in worldly activities.

A church member has a right to question the teachings of his church.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	93.0%	2.0%	4.7%
Snake-handlers	88.5	3.3	8.2
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	89.7	1.6	8.7
Snake-handlers	80.0	7.5	12.5

They had many questions about various scriptures and teachings. This comprised a large percentage of their discourse and search for truth. They frequently debated scripture with one another in the snake-handling churches.

I prefer a church where the choir members wear robes.

	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Adults			
Southern Appalachian	28.6%	49.1%	22.3%
Snake-handlers	1.6	78.7	19.7
Youth			
Southern Appalachian	23.8	46.8	29.4
Snake-handlers		72.5	27.5

This question was included because many of the snake-handlers originally had belonged to other churches. They wore no robes, and preferred singing by the entire congregation to that of choirs.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The services of the snake-handlers were very similar in style and content, but there were noticeable differences between the rural and urban ones. Longer services were conducted in the rural churches, there was more congregational participation, they handled the snakes longer, and there were consistently more people present. The rural people were more willing to share their thoughts in completing the questionnaires. Services in the urban churches were more formal than in the rural. They sang from hymnals, had shorter services, recorded their collection on the blackboard for everyone to see, no scoffers were present during the services, and they read the Bible more frequently and preached from the text which they read.

The snake-handlers did prove to be at the sacred end of Howard Becker's sacred-secular scale. The snake-handlers had a higher percentage of agreement that a congregation should be active in the service by testifying, supporting the minister with Amens, and singing songs. The questions which dealt with joining the church were not valid in this study because the snake-handlers did not believe in this. Questions about the Bible proved that the snake-handlers

were more literal in their acceptance of it than those of the Southern Appalachian study. The question of whether to follow the will of God or the will of the state also proved that the snake-handlers believed in the will of God more strongly than the Southern Appalachian group. They believed, however, that religion should be taught in the schools in our country. The two groups differed on the question of the church becoming involved in community improvements and community recreation. The snake-handlers did not think that the church should become involved in these areas. There was a thirty per cent difference between the two, with the snake-handlers being more concerned as a group about the salvation of souls than actual physical living conditions. The snake-handlers felt more strongly that persons of all races should be accepted into the churches. This belief was supported in their actions and in their sermons.

The youth of the snake-handlers thought that there was a greater difference in the beliefs of various churches than the youth of the Southern Appalachian group. The emphasis upon congregational participation was again reflected in their answers. They thought that the people should testify, sing, and in other ways participate in the service. The questions which dealt with joining a church again caused a difference of opinion with the snake-

handlers. The young people did not believe a person should join the church. There was more emphasis on preaching about the Bible and less on political issues. They were also strong in their agreement that the church should not become involved in community improvements and recreation. While this was reflected in their answers, the church did provide a form of entertainment and recreation for the young people and adults. They felt that it was more serious to break the laws of God than those of the country.

In all the questions there was a closer percentage of agreement between the young people in the snake-handlers and the Southern Appalachian study than between the adults.

The difference between the young people and the adults of the snake-handlers again proved that the young people were slightly changing their views from those of their parents. The difference in the percentage varied, but the youth were consistently lower than their parents and adults. The questions on which the young people had a higher percentage were the following: there should be more emphasis upon education and not conversion in the churches; that prayers and grace should be said in families; that all men are equal in the sight of God; and more of the young people disagreed that the church should spend more time on community improvement. The views of the young people are changing, but they still continue in their practice of

snake-handling.

There is still much work and research to be done in this area. The investigator would recommend a follow-up of the young people when they move from their home communities; as to the churches they attend and if their religious attitudes change. There are also questions about why some who were previously active in the snake-handling movement have discontinued this practice. If research could be done in the individual homes in the rural communities and the urban, it would be helpful in the understanding of these people and the changes which take place in their families and community.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

PICTURES OF CHURCH SERVICES



FIGURE 19

MINISTER PREACHING



FIGURE 20

LOCAL CONGREGATION ILLUSTRATING THE YOUTH AND ADULTS SITTING TOGETHER; THE LONG HAIR AND THE LONG DRESSES WHICH THE WOMEN WEAR; AND PICTURES OF SNAKE-HANDLING HANGING ON WALL



FIGURE 21

YOUTH IN A CHURCH SERVICE

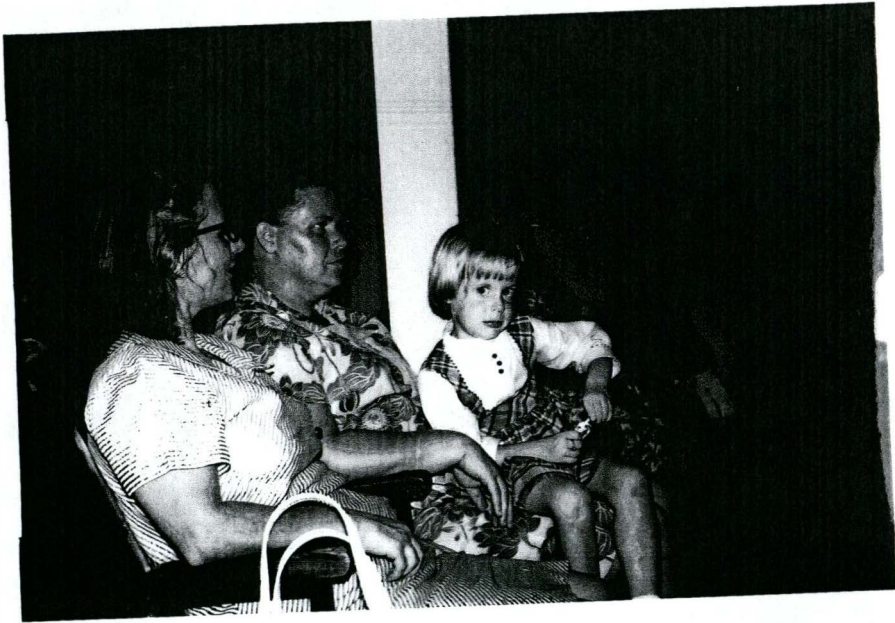


FIGURE 22
MOTHER AND CHILD



FIGURE 23
SOME INSTRUMENTS USED DURING A SERVICE



FIGURE 24

FAMILIES OFTEN SING SPECIAL NUMBERS DURING A SERVICE



FIGURE 25

YOUNG MAN IN A TRANCE



FIGURE 26

HANDLING OF SNAKES BY THE OLD AND THE YOUNG

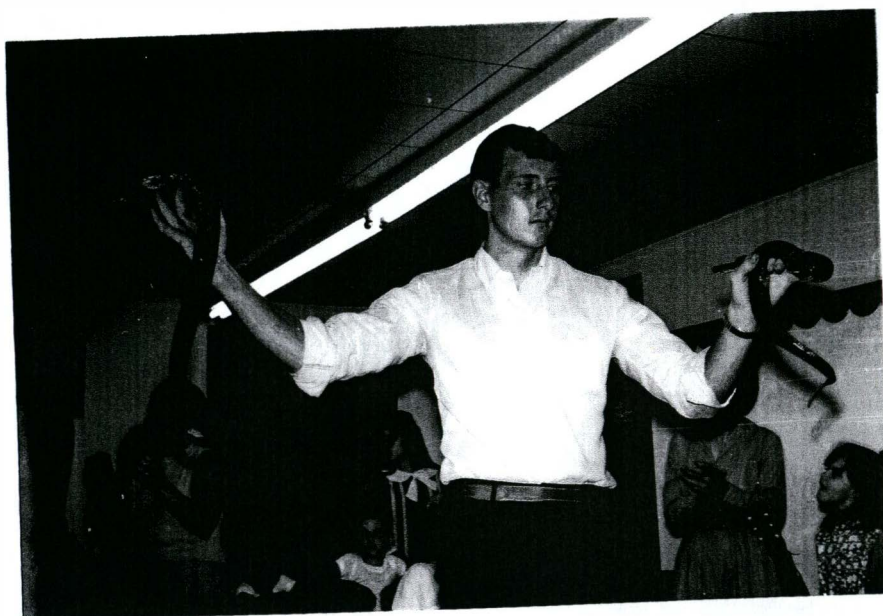


FIGURE 27

THE CHILDREN OBSERVING THE SNAKE HANDLING

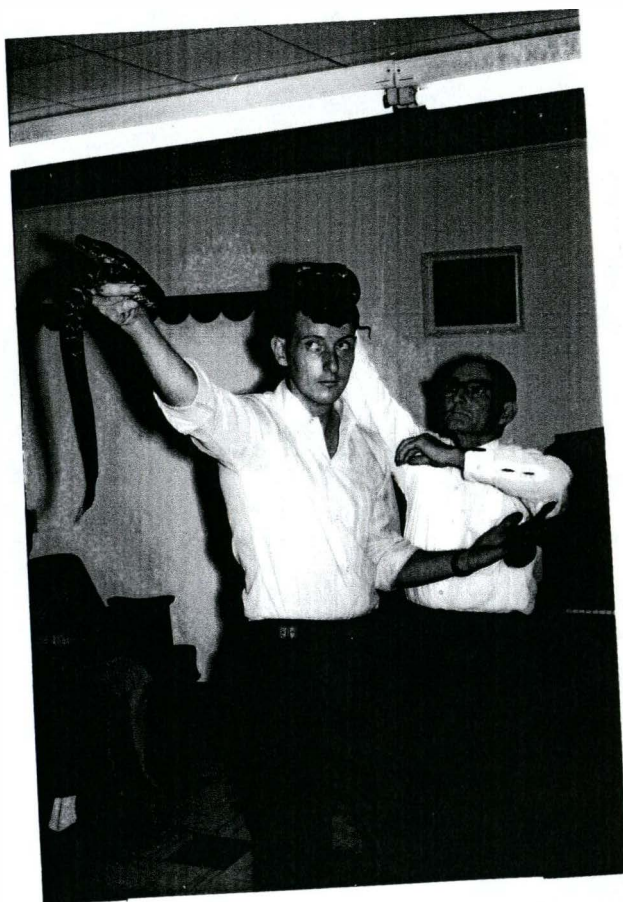


FIGURE 28

A SNAKE USED AS A CROWN DURING A SERVICE



FIGURE 29

SOME PERMIT SNAKES TO CRAWL UNCONTROLLED ON THEIR ARMS



FIGURE 30

MEN AT THE FRONT OF A CHURCH; WATER BUCKET WITH COMMON GLASS



FIGURE 31

THE HOLY DANCE. NOTE DEFORMED HAND FROM SNAKEBITES



FIGURE 32
GATHERING TO HEAL A YOUNG MAN



FIGURE 33
THE YOUNG MAN FELL TO THE FLOOR DURING THE HEALING

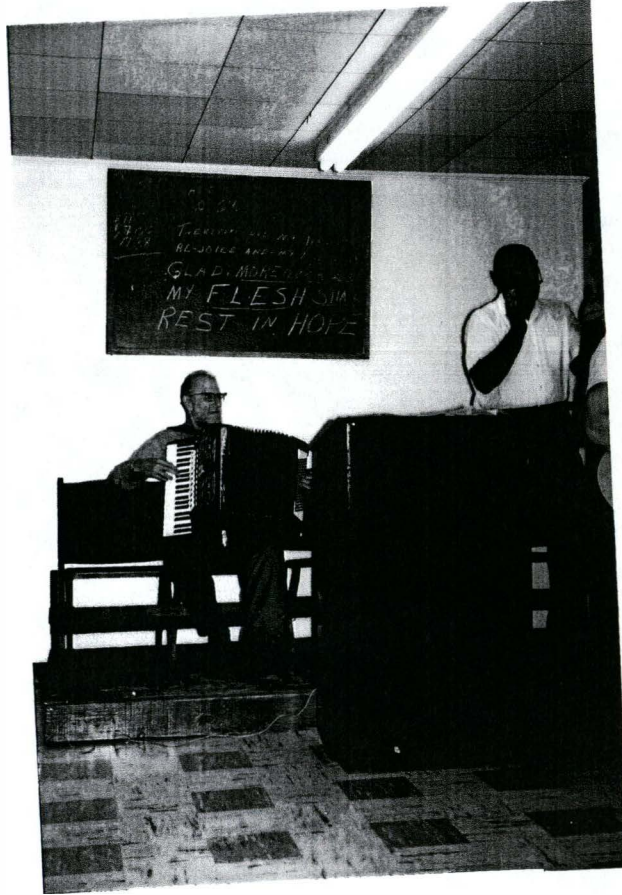


FIGURE 34

THE URBAN CHURCH WHERE THE OFFERING IS RECORDED ON BLACKBOARD



FIGURE 35

BURNING BUSH TABERNACLE IN NORTH CAROLINA



FIGURE 36

FATHER AND DAUGHTER IN HOLY DANCE



FIGURE 37

SECOND GENERATION SNAKE-HANDLER

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE GIVEN TO SNAKE-HANDLERS

Dear Friend,

As part of my work at Marshall University, I am writing a paper about your religious beliefs and practices. In an effort to better your religion, may I ask you to take a few minutes of your time to answer the questions on the following pages. Please do not sign your name to the questionnaire. All of your information will be handled in a confidential manner. I hope that the results will provide a better understanding of your religion for other people.

I would appreciate your co-operation in answering the questionnaire and returning it to me as soon as possible.

Thank you so very much for your help.

Sincerely yours,

Kenneth Ambrose

A QUESTIONNAIRE ON
RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

Family background:

Date of birth?_____Sex?_____

Number of brothers and sisters in your family?_____

Father's occupation?_____Mother's occupation?_____

What was the last grade of school you completed?_____

Are you still attending school?_____

Are you now married, widowed, divorced, separated, or never married?_____

Date of marriage?_____Number of children?_____

What is the source of your income?_____

What is the range of your monthly income? (Check one)

Under \$99__100-199__200-299__300-399__400-499__500+__

What is your present occupation?_____

Religious Life:

How many church services do you attend during a week?_____

About how many miles do you travel to attend services during a week?_____

What church did you attend when you were a child or a young person?_____

Were your parents in the holiness church?_____

How old were you when you received the Holy Ghost speaking in tongues?_____

Do or did you handle serpents as part of your religious belief? _____

About how old were you when you first handled the serpents? _____

About how many times have you been bitten by the serpents? _____

Does or did your father handle serpents? _____

Does or did your mother handle serpents? _____

Do or did your brothers or sisters handle serpents? _____

Have you ever drunk any poison as part of your religious belief? _____

Please check if you agree, disagree, or are undecided about the following statements.

Example:

Agree Disagree Undecided I believe that there is a God.

- | <u>Agree</u> | <u>Disagree</u> | <u>Undecided</u> | |
|--------------|-----------------|------------------|--|
| 1. | | | 1. I think there is practically no difference between what the different churches believe. |
| 2. | | | 2. A minister who is "Called" is better than one who is trained. |
| 3. | | | 3. I think it would be wrong for a church member to have a job as a bartender. |
| 4. | | | 4. All miracles in the Bible are true. |

- | <u>Agree</u> | <u>Disagree</u> | <u>Undecided</u> |
|--------------|-----------------|---|
| 5. | | 5. I think a person should feel his religion before he joins a church. |
| 6. | | 6. I think it is more important to live a good life now than to bother about life after death. |
| 7. | | 7. I feel that a congregation should encourage the minister during his sermon by saying "Amen." |
| 8. | | 8. In church, I think it is better for everybody to join in singing hymns than to listen to the choir sing. |
| 9. | | 9. I think a person should make a personal testimony about his own religious experience before he joins a church. |
| 10. | | 10. I think churches should have more revivals. |
| 11. | | 11. I think we should emphasize education in religion and not conversion. |
| 12. | | 12. I think success in one's chosen work is a mark of a good religious person. |
| 13. | | 13. I wish ministers would preach more on the Bible and less on politics. |
| 14. | | 14. I like the "old time" religion. |
| 15. | | 15. Heaven and hell are very real to me. |

Agree Disagree Undecided

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| 16. | | 16. Children should not become members of the church until they are old enough to understand about it. |
| 17. | | 17. Testifying about one's personal religious experience should be a part of regular church services. |
| 18. | | 18. I think a person who is not willing to follow all the rules of the church should not be allowed to belong. |
| 19. | | 19. I think it is more important to go to church than to be active in politics. |
| 20. | | 20. It is more serious to break God's law than to break man's law |
| 21. | | 21. I think every family should have family prayers or say grace before meals. |
| 22. | | 22. I like to sign the old gospel songs, rather than the new hymns. |
| 23. | | 23. I don't believe churches do enough about saving souls. |
| 24. | | 24. I think a minister should preach without expecting to get paid for it. |
| 25. | | 25. I think religion should be taught in the public schools of the country. |
| 26. | | 26. Christianity teaches that all men are equal in the sight of God. |

Agree Disagree Undecided

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| 27.
_____ | 27. I think the church should sponsor recreation and play activities. |
| 28.
_____ | 28. In organization and practice, the church today should follow the Bible literally. |
| 29.
_____ | 29. I believe qualified persons of all races should be accepted into the membership of our churches. |
| 30.
_____ | 30. I think the church should spend more time on community improvements. |
| 31.
_____ | 31. A church member has the right to question the teachings of his church. |
| 32.
_____ | 32. I prefer a church where the choir members wear robes. |

APPENDIX C

HOWARD BECKER'S SACRED-SECULAR THEORY

In his book, Modern Sociological Theory, Howard Becker discussed the sacred-secular value-system which was a continuum existing within a society. The continuum ranged from the holy to the normlessness. It was not the purpose of this appendix to discuss the theory in full, but merely to demonstrate that the snake-handlers are at the sacred end of the continuum.

The snake-handlers were not at the extreme end of sacred where their behavior would be dictated to them, but they did have many of the holy qualities in their lives. They were controlled by proverbs which they heard in their services and in their homes. There was a reluctance to change in their culture. Many did not have a television, nor would they let their children attend movies, dances, or athletic events at the high schools. Their reluctance to change was not as strong as that of the Amish people, but the resistance was stronger than the rest of the Appalachian culture.

There was a willingness to die for their religion and their way of life. They were faced with this possibility at each service. There was also a loyalty to their members where they would do all within their power to help.

