

“Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, ‘Put your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and of the earth....’” Genesis 24: 1-3

“And when the time drew near that Israel must die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, ‘If now I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh, and promise to deal loyally and truly with me....’” Genesis 47: 29

As strange as it may seem today, in the early part of the twentieth century it was common for a male resident of Ocracoke Island to greet another male islander by placing his hand briefly on the other man’s inner thigh. There was never any sexual or sensual element to this gesture. It designated only slightly more intimacy than a handshake, and it was used exclusively among friends and neighbors. Although I witnessed this ritualized greeting many times as a young boy and teenager on Ocracoke Island during the late 1940s through the early 1960s, strangers were never greeted this way.

As Ocracoke became more accessible to the outside world, and with the development of a robust tourist industry, as well as increased marriages to people from off the island, this custom, understandably, died out.

By the late 1970s only a few island men continued to greet friends and neighbors this way. Today, less than a half century later, many islanders are not even aware of this unique gesture.

There is no way of knowing when or why this custom began on Ocracoke, but I suspect it had been common for many generations. Perhaps it was brought to the island by the earliest settlers, or was introduced by a shipwrecked sailor from some more exotic land. It is even possible that it was an early Native Americans custom. As with the Biblical patriarchs, placing a hand upon another’s inner thigh was surely a gesture indicating a level of mutual trust and confidence.

The Ocracoke greeting also had much in common with the present day and ubiquitous butt slap among athletes. This congratulatory gesture is a positive and enthusiastic communication technique between colleagues and friends, and, like the hand under a man’s inner thigh, not a sexual signal.

Sociologists and anthropologists have pointed out that oaths in many ancient cultures were accompanied by a man placing a hand upon the genitals (either his own, or on those of the

man he was swearing to). Scholars have long noted that biblical authors and other ancient writers often used “thigh” (and sometimes “foot”) euphemistically to refer to the genitals.

Furthermore, the etymology of the word “testify” illustrates the role that “placing a hand under one’s ‘thigh’ played in the swearing of sacred oaths in antiquity. The Latin word “testis” means “witness.”

Although the custom of male genital greeting is extremely rare in Western society, it is not unheard of in other human cultures or in other primate species. Robert M. Sapolsky, in his book, *A Primate’s Memoir*, describes males in a troop of baboons who engage in genital touch when they are getting along well. “Among male primates,” Spolsky writes, this means trust.” (p. 18)

In *Ethnographic Presents: Pioneering Anthropologists in the Papua New Guinea Highlands*, Ann McLean in her essay, “In the Footprints of Reo Fortune,” writes, “Fortune [anthropologist, and husband of Margaret Mead, who studied the natives of the Finintegu area of Papua New Guinea in 1935] was somewhat nonplused by some of the customs and behaviors confronting him. One such concerned the niceties of greeting. The precontact courtesy [prior to contact with Westerners] between persons in certain familiar relationships was by reference to and handling of the genitals. Essentially a prudish person, he records with obvious relief that he was only once put to this test.” (p. 44)

Most male residents of Ocracoke Island in the twenty-first century would be similarly nonplused if another islander reached a hand out to touch his inner thigh. There is no doubt that this custom has little chance of revival. It is sufficient merely to document a unique island gesture from a more innocent and less self-conscious era.