

# Introduction

## From “Roots and Herbs” to “Crude Botanical Drugs”

In locating her laboratories in different parts of the world, nature selected, as one of them, a vast wilderness in the mountainous region which one day was to be the southeastern United States. Here, in what is now southern Virginia and North Carolina, there gradually developed through the ages a wonderful flora, influenced by the tropics on one side and the bracing climate to the northward, of which perhaps some six hundred or more species have had medicinal application. Out of this Blue Ridge section of the Southern Appalachian System now comes 75 per cent of North America's contribution to the drug supplies of the world.

—Henry C. Fuller, *The Story of Drugs*, 1922.

HENRY WEBB SCANNED THE GROUND FOR PLANTS AMONG THE forested mountainsides surrounding the picturesque hamlet of Valle Crucis on the Watauga River. It was 1873 and, as in every other spring, the forest floor of this spot in northwestern North Carolina was decorated in a colorful carpet of wildflowers and herbaceous plants. Trilliums, trout lilies, Solomon's seal, blue cohosh, black cohosh, and dozens of other plants grew in the shade of Fraser magnolias, chestnuts, striped maples, sugar maples, beech, buckeye, and basswood trees. Webb may not have known every species of mountain flora, but he knew the ones that brought good prices at Henry Taylor's store down in the valley. The ultimate prize was ginseng, but it was becoming harder to find, so he settled for the lower-valued mayapple, bloodroot, angelica, and jack-in-the-pulpit, which everyone referred to as Indian turnip.<sup>1</sup> Webb referred to

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them collectively as “roots and herbs,” and he could certainly use the bartering power these plants offered. Like everybody else’s life in the Watauga Valley, Webb’s had been severely disrupted by the war-torn 1860s. In 1870, pushing sixty years old, he had moved residences at least three times during the previous decade, married a wife half his age, had a son, and moved again to Valle Crucis, where he found work as a farm laborer. However, his wages alone did not provide his family with any measure of comfort. So he dug the roots of the medicinal plants that abounded in the mountains. From 1873 to 1876, he used \$23.50 worth of roots to buy corn, sugar, tobacco, fishhooks, leather, and other necessities.<sup>2</sup> It may not have been much, but it was all the store purchases he made from Taylor during that time.

At his store in Valle Crucis, Henry Taylor collected a variety of roots and herbs from customers like Webb. He had done so for more than two decades. At least once every fall, “Uncle Henry,” as he was affectionately called by the people of the valley, loaded up a wagon with his peculiar produce and hauled it down the mountain to sell. Before the war, he took his roots to a store near Wilkesboro owned by Calvin Cowles, exchanging them for goods that he hauled back up the mountain to sell in his own store. After the war, he started taking his roots and herbs to George W. F. Harper in the Piedmont town of Lenoir. Although it was not his entire source of revenue, the trade in native medicinal plants helped Taylor weather the post-Civil War depression when cash was scarce. In 1883, he opened a new store with a new partner, W. W. Mast, operating it until he died in 1899. In 1913, Mast purchased Taylor’s interest, and the store became known as Mast General Store. There are now ten Mast General Stores scattered around the southern mountains.

George W. F. Harper, a veteran of the Confederate Fifty-Eighth North Carolina Infantry, returned from the Civil War to revive his father’s store in Lenoir. Domestic demand for roots and herbs had grown since the war, and Harper eyed profits in purchasing roots and herbs from storekeepers like Taylor and selling them to wholesalers in New York, Boston, St. Louis, and Cincinnati who would, in turn, sell them to druggists, patent medicine makers, and pharmaceutical manufacturers. The roots and herbs that Harper and his competitors obtained from rural Appalachians eventually made their way into drugstores, physicians’ offices, traveling medicine shows, and ultimately human bodies across

the United States. As these roots, leaves, berries, flowers, barks, and seeds were abstracted from their mountain environment and entered the webs of exchange that scattered them to distant markets, they became known as “crude botanical drugs,” or sometimes just “crude botanicals.”

Harper found an eager buyer for his crude botanicals in Boston wholesaler Gardner S. Cheney. A mason in Boston before the war, Cheney had enlisted in a Massachusetts artillery company five days after President Lincoln’s call for troops on 15 April 1861, and crossed Burnside’s Bridge at Antietam. After the war, he jumped with both feet into the wholesale drug trade, forging a partnership with a former Harvard Shaker named Elisha Myrick to form Cheney and Myrick. Despite their divergent allegiances during the war, Cheney and the ex-Confederate Harper found common cause in the botanical drug trade. From 1867 to 1869, Cheney purchased nearly \$10,000 worth of crude botanicals from Harper, far more than any other buyer. In the summer of 1869, the two spent a week botanizing and trout fishing in the Watauga Valley.<sup>3</sup>

Webb, Taylor, Harper, and Cheney formed one of many supply chains established in the wake of the Civil War that would turn the Southern Appalachian bioregion into the United States’ largest supplier of medicinal plants to global markets. Stimulated by the Civil War and its aftermath, the pharmaceutical industry in the United States entered a period of rapid expansion and consolidation, and demand for crude botanicals skyrocketed. Consequently, between 1865 and 1900, root digging and herb gathering became a general occupation in some mountain communities. One observer claimed that more than forty thousand people gathered roots and herbs for one wholesale herb dealer in Western North Carolina alone during the height of the botanical drug boom in the 1880s.<sup>4</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, according to one US Department of Agriculture estimate, the region supplied some three-quarters of all the native medicinal plants sold commercially in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Unmatched before or since, this botanical drug boom left a lasting impression on Appalachian communities.

On a basic level, this is a story about humans, plants, and mountains. While scholars have long known that Appalachian people engaged in root digging and herb gathering, this is the first monograph dedicated to the topic.<sup>6</sup> This book digs into the roots (pun intended) of the unique relationship between the Appalachian region and the global trade in

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medicinal plants to explain how and why the region became so integral to the trade. Re-creating the ecologies of root digging and herb gathering, it explores how the trade functioned on the ground, how that experience changed over time, and how the burgeoning commercial relationship influenced the region's land use, social relations, culture, economy, and ecology. While the trade involved hundreds of different kinds of plants, this book focuses primarily on a select handful of the most commonly traded, including mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), lobelia (*Lobelia inflata*), and pink lady's slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*). The star of the book, however, is American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolium*). Ginseng was one of the first Appalachian herbs traded on a global scale, and it remained the most lucrative and sought-after throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, any understanding of the botanical drug trade in Appalachia must begin and end with ginseng. This book does just that.

On another level, this is a story of capitalism through the lens of a commodity.<sup>7</sup> By exploring the supply-chain dynamics of this trade, from the global context down to the local, this book presents a view of capitalism from the bottom up. And it is a different view than offered by most commodity studies. One significant characteristic that distinguished Appalachian roots and herbs from many other commodities was that they were not entirely privatized. Even as they stimulated the development of the early pharmaceutical industry, and even as elsewhere in the United States farmers had begun to supply botanical drug markets with plants cultivated on private farms, Appalachian roots and herbs were not raised in gardens prior to the twentieth century. Due to ecological, economic, and cultural factors, they remained what I call “commons commodities”—commodities harvested from the commons.

Never firmly codified in American law, the commons was a socially constructed institution comprised of overlapping use rights that governed access to unimproved interstitial spaces between improved areas of the landscape.<sup>8</sup> These rights—a feature of many rural areas in nineteenth-century America—were established by custom through both explicit and tacit negotiations among residents of a community. In many Appalachian communities, local custom dictated that the forested mountainsides were open to virtually all members of the district to obtain game, fish, livestock forage, firewood, honey, berries, fruits, greens,

maple syrup, feathers, and medicinal plants, among many other resources. In effect, these resources comprised a species of property widely acknowledged as belonging to the harvester or gatherer rather than the landowner. Council Main, who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s in the Pottertown (now Tamarack) community of Watauga County, not too far from where Henry Webb harvested roots in the 1870s, explained the commons to an interviewer in 2005: “Back when I was little, you used to go anywhere and get [roots], and nobody would say nothing to you. That was the way of life, you know. If I found something on your land, I could get it. Or if they found it on ours, they could get it. You didn’t have these ‘no trespassing’ signs. . . . The tops of the mountains were just for everybody.”<sup>9</sup> These resources were often consumed at home, but enough extralocal markets existed for them that they could also provide commons users with access to the broader consumer economy. The commons custom made the postwar botanical drug boom possible at the same time that the botanical drug boom reinforced the commons custom in the mountains.

The concept of commons commodities can enhance our understanding of both capitalism and commodification in intriguing ways. Scholars who have examined the history of single commodities tend to reinforce a similar narrative: about how commodification fueled the development of industry and science, enclosed the commons, strengthened private property regimes, restructured ecological communities, and led to the accumulation of capital and the exploitation of labor. Commodification, in short, created and reinforced systems of inequality.<sup>10</sup> The story of roots and herbs, however, does not conform to this standard narrative. In the late nineteenth century, root diggers became an important part of the supply chains of some of the earliest and largest pharmaceutical companies, and yet they were remarkably free to engage with the market on their own terms. In this case, the market did not supplant the commons. It reinforced it. In her insightful study of the Matsutake mushroom pickers of the Pacific Northwest, anthropologist Anna Tsing has found a similar anomaly. Both the mushroom pickers and Appalachian root diggers operated within the framework of capitalism. That is, both were (are) mobilized by global markets and contributed to the concentration of capital that defines capitalism. However, the forces that brought these products to market did not lead to the rationalization of

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labor and nature. They resisted the conditions of the plantation. They refused to be scaled up. They have their own story. Tsing calls this “salvage capitalism” and defines it as a system in which “lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced.”<sup>11</sup> As Tsing contends, the concept of salvage capitalism can broaden our perspective regarding alternative forms of capitalism. Indeed, if we pay closer attention to the peculiarities of individual markets and the human and nonhuman communities that supplied crude botanicals, we can see another way in which Appalachian communities structured their relationships with global economic systems. And it stokes the imagination.

This story also broadens our understanding of one of the oldest and richest veins of Appalachian scholarship: the transition to capitalism in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> This discussion grew out of the War on Poverty in the 1960s as part of a national debate regarding the origins of the region’s poverty. Talking back to those who blamed Appalachian people themselves for their poverty, scholars such as Harry Caudill and Ron Eller began to argue that Appalachia’s poverty could be traced instead to the uneven or exploitative ways in which the region was incorporated into the capitalist economy. While scholars have disagreed over when the transformation began and the role that mountain people themselves played in it, most agree that the transformation from subsistence farming to industrial wage work at the end of the nineteenth century was chaotic and destabilizing, creating inequality, dependency, and poverty.<sup>13</sup> The story of the root and herb trade serves as a reminder that the specific impacts of the region’s capitalist incorporation depended on the ecology of a particular commodity’s production. Indeed, the production of medicinal plants for the pharmaceutical industry had very different impacts on human and nonhuman communities than the production of coal, timber, tobacco, or virtually any other extractive or agricultural product. This story also suggests that we must pay attention to the enclosure of the commons as a key causal factor in the region’s transition to capitalism. Scholars have identified demographic pressures, adverse federal policies, depressed agricultural markets, and exploitative land-purchasing practices as the most important reasons why mountain communities transitioned away from agrarian independence. However, Steven Stoll has recently brought much-needed attention to the role of commons enclosure in undermining the

ecological base of subsistence communities.<sup>14</sup> The story of the rise and decline of the root and herb trade illuminates one way in which commons enclosure contributed to the erosion of this agrarian world and accelerated the shift toward the wage-earning economy.

This book benefits from increased attention to the history of commons and common rights over the past twenty years. A lively debate regarding fence laws in the late nineteenth-century South has enriched our understanding of the southern livestock range as one iteration of common rights.<sup>15</sup> And historians examining localized contexts elsewhere have found evidence of such commons in the early republican Low Country, in the Great Dismal Swamp region in the mid-nineteenth century, in the Georgia Upcountry in the late nineteenth century, and among New Yorkers around Adirondack Park in the late nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Although they look at different types of resources, these scholars all identify a similar commitment to popular access to certain undeveloped resources. Stephen Aron refers to “rights-in-the-woods,” suggesting that these were a powerful cultural force in late eighteenth-century Kentucky.<sup>17</sup> Christine Keiner has also found such rights among Chesapeake watermen’s claims to oyster beds in the early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Appalachian scholars have long known of the existence of this informal system of use rights, but Kathryn Newfont’s *Blue Ridge Commons*, which itself took a page from folklorist Mary Hufford’s work, applied the term *commons* and demonstrated that it could be a valuable analytical lens to explore the region’s history of land use.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Newfont’s scholarship, in many ways, laid the groundwork for this book.

A full history of such commons is difficult to uncover. It requires exploring that hard to reach space between the letter of the law and its enforcement, between the hegemonic system of private property and the informal systems that governed daily use. And it requires tight focus on local contexts and careful reading of primary sources. Often, commons users did not articulate their ideas unless they were threatened with enclosure. There were always tensions between those who wanted to limit access to the commons and those who wanted right of entry to it, and that tension bubbles up into the historical record from time to time. Little by little, scholars are piecing together the history of the American commons, revealing that it was much more widespread and powerful than once imagined.

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Because it features some of the most significant commons commodities, the root and herb trade can provide a rare window into how the commons functioned and the purposes it served. Four broad claims, woven throughout the pages that follow, reveal insights into the history of Appalachia and the commons. First, the commons served as *both* an important social safety net for the landless and land poor in times of distress and as a preferred mode of production. Many root diggers were small farmers who relied on roots and herbs to supplement their farm production. Some were young, just starting out as independent producers, and needed the extra source of bartering power to purchase goods or pay their taxes. Some were devastated by the economic impacts of the Civil War and used roots and herbs to avoid the poorhouse and feed their families. Yet the commons was not solely an avenue of last resort. For others, it was an alternative to both the agricultural and industrial economy, a financial means of supporting a life dependent on hunting, fishing, and gathering. Cherokee Indians relied heavily on selling ginseng and other roots as a way to maintain their traditional land-use practices. Some Euro-Americans also preferred digging roots to hoeing corn or working for wages, and they engaged in this activity specifically to resist the pull into these types of labor. Thus, whereas some mountain people fell back on the commons during hard economic times, they also pursued it as preferred alternative to prevailing modes of production. These dynamics changed over time and were frequently in tension with one another.

Second, the commons was not a static institution. It was a historical institution, subject to change over time as markets evolved and use rights were negotiated and renegotiated. One of the changes detailed in this book is the shifting class dynamics of the commons over the course of the nineteenth century. Whereas root digging and herb gathering had been mostly a part-time activity of small farmers prior to the Civil War, it became more often a full-time occupation after the war. As the mountain economy struggled, and markets for more plants opened, men and women specialized in hunting roots and herbs, putting different pressures on the commons and creating different tensions within communities. Due to these changes, the Appalachian gathering commons underwent a significant renegotiation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars have given some attention to the closing of

the open range and the game and fish laws passed in the late nineteenth century, but the enclosure of the medicinal plant commons has received virtually none. This enclosure took place at different times in different communities, and it unfolded in a variety of forms. Rooted in tensions within communities that emerged during and after the Civil War, pitting landowners and part-time commons users against full-time diggers, this enclosure movement blossomed with a wave of state laws that strengthened landowners' rights to the wild-growing plants on their property. Focused primarily on ginseng and other lucrative roots, this movement often manifested itself in the literal enclosure of plants within fences, but it took other forms as well. The loss of markets for some specific plants in the mid-twentieth century indirectly aided the enclosure movement and effectively ended much of the root digging and herb gathering in Appalachia.

Third, as medicinal plant populations declined, some diggers adapted by adjusting their habits and values, thus ensuring that the struggle for conservation would play out across time and space at a grass-roots level. Thus, this book provides something of a corrective to the (in) famous claim of biologist Garrett Hardin. In his 1968 essay in the journal *Science*, "The Tragedy of the Commons," Hardin offered a grim assessment of the fate of nature in a commons. "Picture a pasture open to all," he wrote. Each herdsman in this hypothetical pasture, acting in his own self-interest, would gradually increase the size of his herd, thereby consuming more of a particular resource (in this case grass) until it collapsed. Hardin was making the Malthusian point that the pressures of population growth on the resource base has no technical solution and therefore requires a reorientation of Americans' laissez-faire culture. However, the message that has resonated with academics ever since was his assumptions about the commons. Those resources are destined for collapse, he implied, because users lack necessary incentives to conserve them. "Ruin is the destination towards which all men rush, each pursuing his own interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons," he wrote. "Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."<sup>20</sup>

Hardin's work has stimulated tremendous interest in property regimes and resource use, and academics and resource managers remain deeply divided over his thesis. Philosophical conservatives saw this warning as an argument for privatization, whereas liberals and many conser-

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vation biologists used it to champion greater state management of common resources. Moreover, critics challenge Hardin's basic thesis by asserting that his open-access pasture was a rhetorical invention, not an actual commons. Thus it did not account for contingencies such as market forces or the ability of commons users to mobilize cultural forces to mitigate overuse. Scholars have shown that rural peoples around the world have developed viable commons systems that effectively conserve resources.<sup>21</sup> Economist Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel Prize in economics in 2009 for her work on human behavior and common-pool resources in which she points out the many alternative systems that exist for limiting commons harvests without relying on either privatization or state management. She argues that models explaining the inevitable collapse of commons resources do not take enough consideration of local context.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, local context matters. This book suggests that a more complicated set of factors contributed to the eventual decline of the root and herb commons. Not all root diggers were always motivated by maximizing profits, and not all carelessly exploited their resource. While it is difficult for the historian to tell if there was ever a time when the gathering commons was effectively managed on a local level for sustainable yields, it is safe to say that some tried to adjust their practices to adapt to declining populations of roots and herbs. This history suggests that the cultural forces of exploitation and conservation were constantly in tension with one another, and they interacted with other factors, such as population growth, class dynamics, and market demands, to shape the way the commons changed over time. In short, this book injects historical contingency into the discussion of commons use.

The fourth theme highlights how the commons in general and root digging in particular informed popular perceptions of mountain people. While scholars have thoroughly deconstructed Appalachian stereotypes—from moonshiners and “hillbillies” to feudists and Unionists—root diggers have not yet received any scholarly attention. From the 1860s through the 1910s, newspaper reporters, magazine writers, missionaries, and novelists created a distinct mythology surrounding the root diggers and herb gatherers of Appalachia. They were most often called “sang diggers,” or “sangers,” epithets based on the colloquial term for ginseng, “sang.” Despite the fact that they were enmeshed in the supply chains of one of the most significant growth industries of the last 150

years, in the hands of these writers, they became the most backward of all mountaineers, totally isolated from the main social, cultural, political, and economic currents sweeping the nation. The commons and mountaineers' relationship to it thus formed an important component of the broader hillbilly stereotype that continues to inform popular perceptions of the region.<sup>23</sup>

These four themes unfold here in a roughly chronological narrative that begins in the 1710s when American ginseng was first commodified. Chapter 1 explores the evolution of the ginseng market in China and how ecological and political factors led to the discovery of ginseng in Canada in 1716. It also focuses on how the first ginseng boom of the 1750s shaped the experiences of both Native Americans and Euro-American settlers along the borders of Iroquoia. Chapter 2 follows the ginseng boom into the Ohio Valley and the mountains of West Virginia and Kentucky, where it facilitated the Euro-American settlement of the region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Over the course of the antebellum era, ginseng was incorporated into rural communities' seasonal subsistence patterns, which depended on both the forest and the farm. By the 1850s, it had surpassed skins and furs as the most commonly traded forest product.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus away from ginseng and examines the creation of markets for a wide variety of other Appalachian plants. Sectarian challenges to medical orthodoxy and the rise of patent medicine and pharmaceutical manufacturing in the 1840s and 1850s stimulated demand for indigenous plants to be made into medicines. Calvin Cowles of Wilkesboro, North Carolina, was one of the first to link Appalachian plants to these burgeoning markets, and by the outbreak of the Civil War, he had established a trade network that stretched from country stores on the Blue Ridge to manufacturers in the midwestern and northeastern United States as well as in Europe. Chapter 4 charts the emergence of Southern Appalachia as the nation's premier botanical drug-exporting region and the role the Civil War played in stimulating it. The decades following the war witnessed the rise of some of the largest wholesale botanical drug dealers in the nation, if not the world, and most of them were located around the southern mountains.

The next two chapters bring the focus to the forests of Appalachia to detail the local dynamics of the post-Civil-War root and herb boom.

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Chapter 5 makes the case that the economic depression that settled on the region after the war made root digging and herb gathering an attractive alternative to the agricultural economy, and many people fell back on the forests to make ends meet. In the process, roots and herbs shaped class and gender dynamics across the landscape and led to the rapid depletion of ginseng populations. Chapter 6 explores the social tensions that the postwar root and herb boom engendered and the many efforts undertaken by local landowners and commons users to conserve that most illustrious of all roots, ginseng. Beginning in the 1870s, the commons system that supported the gathering of medicinal plants underwent a significant renegotiation as landowners worked to curb common rights, a process that continues today.

This book's final chapter explores the growth of the sang-digger myth, the role it played in shaping outside perceptions of Appalachia, and the functions it served for a rapidly modernizing nation. Another form of literary exploitation, the myth originated inside Appalachian communities by mountain elites who wanted to distance themselves from their more rural neighbors. Writers, journalists, and missionaries took it to a national audience, for whom it served as a commentary on civilization and savagery and the proper relationship between nature and culture. The stereotypes achieved the same purpose for mountain life as the enclosure movements. They undermined a way of life that depended on the farm and forest commons by further delegitimizing the commons in the eyes of the national community.

These deeply held prejudices both within and outside Appalachia have contributed to an overall dearth of reliable historical sources on the region's root diggers and herb gatherers. The commerce in roots and herbs was not consistently documented by any government agency or trade association until the second half of the twentieth century. While export data can provide some loose parameters for the trade dating back to the 1790s, they are not reliable for re-creating the scale and extent of the trade in any given locale. Moreover, nineteenth-century economic boosters were not interested in discussing the trade as an important industry going forward. In the rare instance in which they promoted ginseng, for example, as a potentially lucrative commodity, they almost always championed privatization as the path forward. The commons played no role in regional boosterism. It was something to be overcome,

to be enclosed and privatized, so that the region's economic future could be realized. Foraging was too closely associated with "savagery." Local historians writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries touted their counties' railroads, factories, banks, and other measures of capitalist "progress." They rarely mentioned roots and herbs. Those writers and journalists who did describe the region's root diggers were more interested in feeding mountaineer stereotypes. For the mountain "elite," root digging was an aspect of mountain life to be ridiculed or ignored.

Telling this story, therefore, requires overcoming this bias in the historical record. It involves creative use of an eclectic collection of sources culled from the holdings of state and university libraries, local history museums, and country stores in five states. It includes diaries, correspondence, newspapers, and census records as well as ecological and anthropological studies. This story relies most heavily on business records from mountain merchants, Piedmont wholesalers, northern pharmaceutical manufacturers, and patent medicine makers. In total, I examined some sixty-five store ledgers and daybooks that document the business carried on at roughly thirty-four different establishments. Geographically, they range within Appalachia from northern West Virginia to southwestern North Carolina and outside the region from New York and Philadelphia to Boston. Temporally, they range from the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth century. The availability of these sources has imposed some limitations. Some time periods and geographic areas are more fully represented than others. For example, ledgers from East Tennessee and eastern Kentucky are decidedly lacking, and there are far more ledgers available from the late nineteenth century than the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, as the first comprehensive history of the botanical drug trade, this book breaks new ground where furrows did not exist.

In the interest of full disclosure, I come from a family of root diggers and herb gatherers. My grandmother and her siblings grew up digging sang, mayapple, and bloodroot in the forests of Pike County, Kentucky. Their grandfather (my great-great-grandfather), John U. Greer, learned to hunt sang in those mountains from his father in the 1870s and later taught his son and grandchildren how to find it. After Consolidation Coal Company opened up the Elkhorn Coal Fields in the 1910s and built the company town of Jenkins, Greer refused to work in the

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mines like his sons and continued to dig ginseng in the mountains. By all accounts, it was one of his favorite things to do.

I saw my first ginseng plant in July 1996 on a mountainside along Beefhide Creek near the border of Pike and Letcher Counties. I was fifteen years old and visiting Kentucky for our biennial family reunion when my cousin Paul Randy Osborne pointed it out behind the barn on my family's property. On a hike, I might have walked right past it, but Paul Randy had been watching that plant all season, waiting for it to produce berries so he could dig it and sell it to the dealer in Jenkins. Despite having hiked through countless forests in the mountains near my home in North Georgia and Western North Carolina, I had never seen this elusive plant outside of a field guide. Some years later, Paul Randy told me with bitterness that he had built up his patch of ginseng over several years only to have his plants dug up and stolen. Surprisingly, the thief did not hide his deeds. When Paul Randy confronted him, he admitted, "I just couldn't help myself. It was such a pretty patch of sang." It was yet another episode in the struggle over the ginseng commons.

I did not grow up digging roots, but thanks to the stories I heard from my grandmother and the rest of my family, I took to hunting roots in historical archives as a graduate student. In telling this story, I aim to shine light on family history as well as regional and American history.