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EDITOR'S NOTES

Many Thanks!

Heartfelt thanks to all the members of the folklife community who have provided support and encouragement to the American Folklife Center during the past several years and taken time to write to their members of Congress on our behalf. Through the leadership of Mark Hatfield and
continued on page 23

Cover: Three generations of women who ginseng together, Horse Creek, West Virginia: Carla Pettry with her daughter Natalie and her mother, Shelby Estep, holding their seng hoes. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

American Ginseng and the Idea of the Commons



Randy Sprouse, of Sundial, holding up a three-prong plant while ginsenging in Tom's Hollow. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

By Mary Hufford

The Sundial Tavern, known up and down Coal River as "Kenny and Martha's," is a mom-and-pop-style beer joint on Route 3, in Sundial, West Virginia, just north of Naoma. Retired coal miner Kenny Pettry and his wife, Martha, now in their sixties, have been the pro-

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prietors for nearly thirty years. The bar's modest facade belies the often uproarious vitality of its evenings. On weekend nights the music of Hank Williams, Bill Monroe, and Dolly Parton flows from the jukebox to mingle with the haze of cigarettes, the clangor of pinball, the crack and clatter of pool, and the jocular talk and teas-

ing of friends from neighboring hollows and coal camps.

Like many taverns, the Sundial Tavern is a dynamic museum of local history, its walls covered with photographs, artifacts, and trophies that register local perspectives on national events, the triumphs of patrons, and the passing of eras. Among the items dis-

played are photos of Dolly Parton (who is Martha's second cousin), an ingenious trigger-and-funnel mechanism for planting corn, and a souvenir cap that registers the present struggle of the United Mine Workers for survival on Coal River. On another wall hangs a photograph of John Flynn, a beloved science writer and forest advocate, deemed one of the three best pool players on Coal River. He spent many nights here talking, sympathizing, arguing, joking, and shooting pool. He died in March of 1996 and is buried not far

There's an art to ginsenging now, but once you learn it, you never forget it.

*Ed Cantley,
Rock Creek, West Virginia*

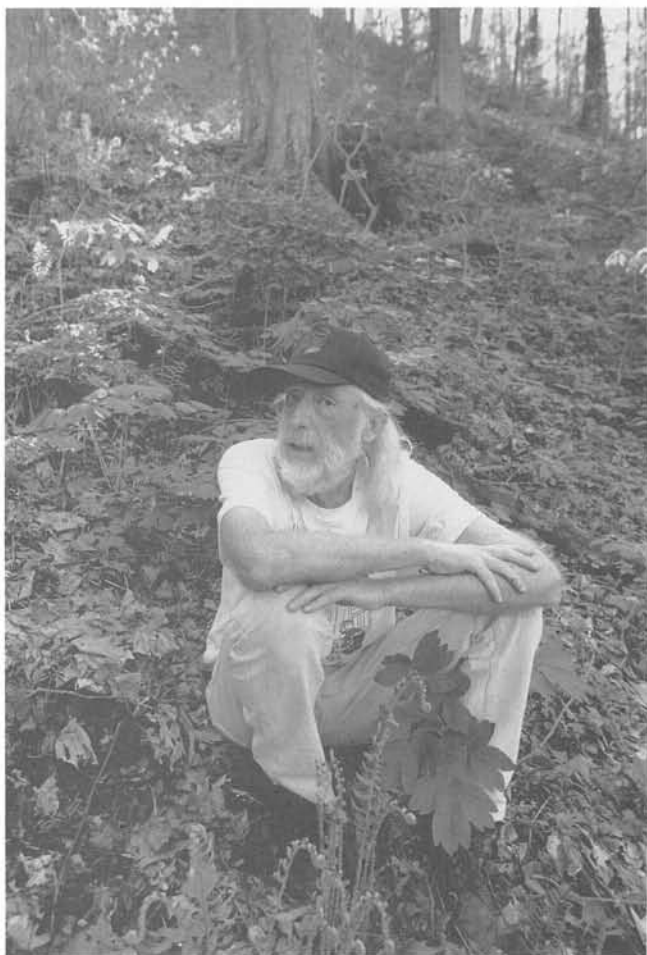
from Sundial in his family cemetery on Rock Creek, the hollow he was born in fifty-seven years ago.

Tucked into the display on the wall behind the bar is a set of framed and laminated leaves.

Most people would be hard put to identify this specimen, but for many of the tavern's regular patrons it represents an extraordinary trophy and object of desire: the stalk from a rare six-prong ginseng plant, *Panax quinquefolia*.

Above the large specimen is a lesser but still remarkable five-prong. The display speaks to the high status accorded to ginseng in life and thought on Coal River.

Diggers call it "seng," and on Coal River the passion for seng runs deep. In 1994, the most recent year for which figures are available, the state of West Virginia exported 18,698 dry pounds of wild ginseng root from its fifty-five counties.¹ Though ginseng grows wild throughout the mountain state, more than half of the wild harvest came from eight contiguous counties in the state's southwestern corner (Kanawha, Boone, Fayette, Raleigh, McDowell, Wyoming, Mingo, and Logan). "It's always been like that," said Bob Whipkey, who monitors the export of ginseng for the state's Division



Science writer and forest activist John Flynn, in the Julie Holler above his homeplace on Rock Creek, a year before an aneurysm claimed his life. He became well known in the seventies and eighties for his investigative reporting on environmental issues, especially acid rain. Flynn's collaboration with Mary Hufford, which began in 1992, resulted in the Center's Appalachian Forest Folklife Project. This documentary project on culture, community, and the mixed mesophytic forest received partial funding from the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Community Folklife Program, administered by the Fund for Folk Culture. Photo by Terry Eiler



John Flynn's 1966 Pontiac was a familiar sight on Coal River. Wesley Scarbro, a citizen science volunteer from Rock Creek, inherited the vehicle, which now goes by the name "Mr. Flynn." Photo by Lyntha Eiler



Leaves from five- and six-pronged ginseng plants displayed as trophies at the Sundial Tavern. Randy Sprouse found the five-prong and William Pyle found the six-prong. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

of Forestry. "There are more diggers there because of the culture. People there grow up gathering herbs and digging roots."

Because of wild ginseng's limited range and extraordinary value (diggers are averaging \$450 per pound for the dried wild root) the federal government has been monitoring the export of ginseng (both wild and cultivated) since 1978. Of nineteen states authorized to export wild ginseng, West Virginia came in second, behind Kentucky, which certified 52,993 pounds. Tennessee came in third, with 17,997 pounds. In 1994 these three contiguous states certified more than half of the 178,111 pounds of wild ginseng reported among nineteen states.²

The Commons

There is a story in these figures of a vernacular cultural domain that transcends state boundaries. Anchoring this domain is a geographical space—a de facto commons roughly congruent with two physiographic regions recognized in national discourse. One is the coal fields underlying the ginseng, most of which are controlled by absentee landholders. The other is the mixed mesophytic forest, known among ecologists as the world's biologically richest temperate-zone hardwood system.

This multi-layered region is increasingly the focus of debates pitting the short-term economic value of coal and timber against

the long-term value of a diverse forest system and topography. Because the social and cultural significance of the geographical commons is unrecognized in national discourse, it is particularly at risk. As Beverly Brown points out in writing about the rural working class in the Pacific northwest, the widespread loss of access to the geographical commons occurs in tandem with a shrinking "civic commons."³

This loss of access is one effect of the privatization and enclosure of land that for generations has been used as commons. Rural populations with uncertain employment have typically relied on gardening, hunting, and gathering for getting through hard times. Over the past decade, processes of gentrification, preservation, and intensified extraction of timber and minerals have eliminated the commons in which communities have for generations exercised fructuary rights. However, this exercise is motivated by something that goes beyond the prospect of economic gain.

Ginseng provides a case in point. Dollar for pound, ginseng is probably the most valuable renewable resource on the central Appalachian plateaus.⁴ A linchpin in the seasonal round of foraging, ginsenging is also essential to a way of life. "I'd rather ginseng than eat," said Dennis Dickens, eighty-five, of Peach Tree Creek. "Every spare minute I had was spent a-ginsenging."

"If you can't go ginsenging," said Carla Pettry, thirty, of Horse Creek, "it totally drives you crazy."

Ginseng's etymology and economic value both come from China and neighboring countries, where the root has long been prized for conferring longevity and vigor of all sorts on its users. The term *ginseng* is an Americanization of the Chinese *jin-chen*, meaning "manlike." The Latin term *Panax quinquefolia* alludes to

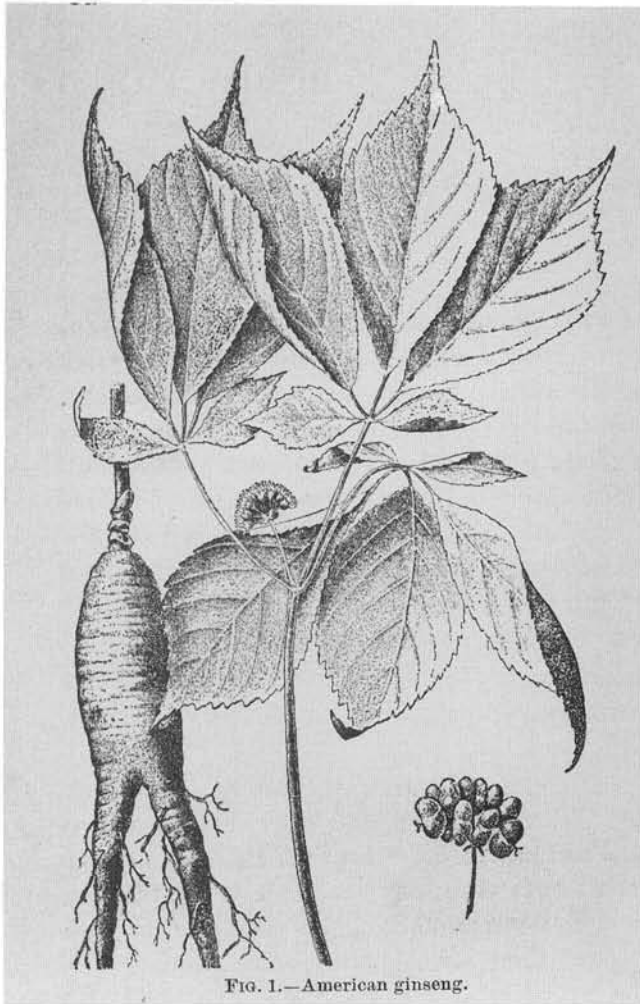


FIG. 1.—American ginseng.

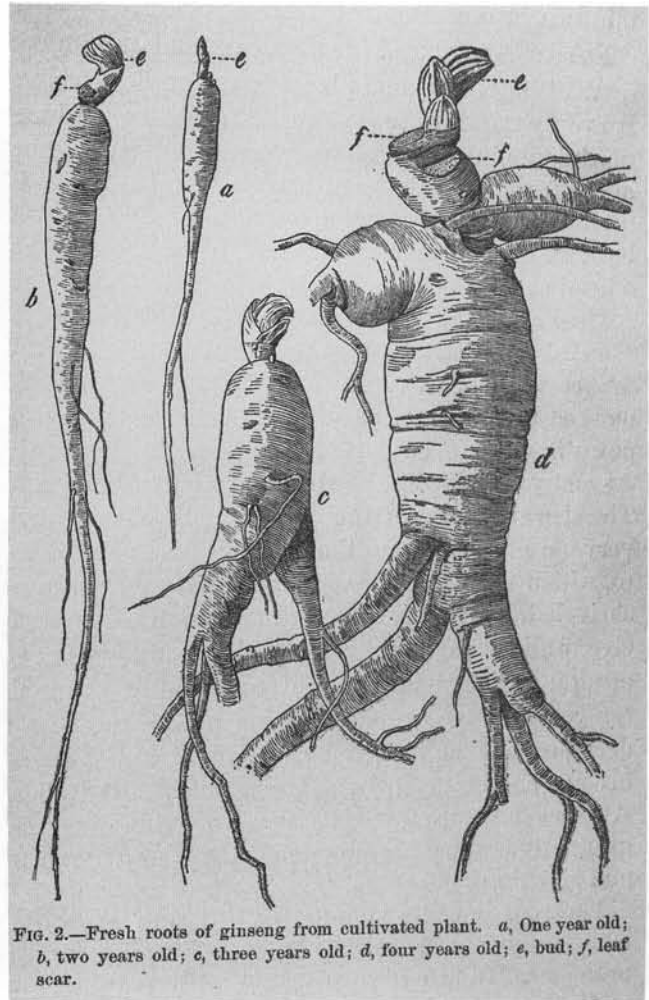


FIG. 2.—Fresh roots of ginseng from cultivated plant. a, One year old; b, two years old; c, three years old; d, four years old; e, bud; f, leaf scar.

American ginseng, *Panax quinquefolia*. The term *ginseng* derives from the Chinese word pronounced “jin-chen,” meaning “man-like.” The Latin term alludes to the plant’s function as a panacea, and its five-whorled leaves. Drawings from U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin 16, 1898

the five whorled leaves on each branch and the plant’s function as a panacea. The active ingredients in the fleshy, humanoid root are ginsenosides, chemical compounds celebrated for their capacity both to stimulate and soothe. Whether ginsenosides in fact warrant such claims is a matter of continuing controversy among scientists and physicians.⁵

According to Randy Halstead, a Boone County buyer, “stress rings,” which give the wild root its market value, are linked with a higher concentration of ginsenosides. Nearly impossible to reproduce in cultivation, stress rings are produced as the root pushes through soil just compact enough to provide the right amount of resistance. The ancient, humus laden

soils in the mixed mesophytic forests of Tennessee, Kentucky, and southern West Virginia are ginseng’s ideal medium. “The most prolific spreads of wild ginseng,” writes Val Hardacre, in *Woodland Nuggets of Gold*, “were found in the region touched by the Allegheny Plateau and the secluded coves of the Cumberland Plateau.”⁶ Through centuries of

interaction with this valuable and elusive plant, residents of the plateaus have created a rich and elaborate culture, a culture of the commons.

Historical Background

The history of human interaction with ginseng lurks in the language of the land. Look at a

I'll tell you what's dying here: the concept that the forest itself was open. . . . It didn't dawn on me until a couple of years ago when that began to change, that concept that the Native Americans had, that the land was like air or water—who could own it?

*Doug Stover,
Mullens, West Virginia*

detailed map of almost any portion of the region and ginseng is registered somewhere, often in association with the deeper, moister places: Seng Branch (Fayette County), Sang Camp Creek (Logan County), Ginseng (Wyoming County), Seng Creek (Boone County), Three-Prong Holler (Raleigh). The hollows, deep dendritic fissures created over eons by water cutting through the ancient table land to form tributaries of the Coal River, receive water from lesser depressions that ripple the

“but not like in the swags there.”

“You just go in the darker coves,” said Wesley Scarbrough, twenty-five, who grew up on Clear Fork, “where it just shadows the ground so it’ll be rich for ginseng.”

Occupying higher and drier ground are sandstone “camping rocks,” formed on the bottoms of ancient seas. These natural ledges have sheltered people hunting and gathering in the mountains since prehistoric times, and during centuries of corn-woodland-pastureland agriculture such ledges shel-

“Did you ever hear tell of Charlie Rock?” asked Woody Boggess, of Pettry Bottom. “That’s a famous place.”

“I’ve camped out many a night under Charlie Rock,” said Randy Sprouse, of Sundial. “People used to live under Charlie Rock two or three months at a time, camp out and dig ginseng.”

The harvesting of ginseng (as well as other wild plants) flourished within a system of corn-woodland-pastureland farming. Crucial to this system was re-



The upper elevation slopes and ridges, like those rising away from Peach Tree Creek and Drew’s Creek, have long served as a de facto commons. Names bestowed on every indentation register the seasonal exercise of fructuary rights since the late eighteenth-century. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

slopes. These depressions are distinguished in local parlance as “coves” (shallower, amphitheater-shaped depressions), “swags” (steeper depressions, “swagged” on both sides), and “drains” (natural channels through which water flows out of the swag or cove). The prime locations for ginseng are found on the north-facing, “wet” sides of these depressions. “Once in a while you’ll find some on the ridges,” said Denny Christian,

tered stock as well. Named by early settlers who came to stay, sites like Jake Rock, John Rock, Turkey Rock, Crane Rock, and Charlie Rock served as bases for ginsenging expeditions.

“My granddad and all them used to go and lay out for weeks, ginsenging,” said Kenny Pettry. “A rock they stayed at, they called it the Crane Rock, and they stayed back in under that. They’d be gone for weeks ginsenging.”

course to a vast, forested commons rising away from the settled hollows. Though nineteenth-century patriachs like “Mountain Perry” Jarrell homesteaded portions of it, the mostly unsettled higher elevation ridges and slopes supplied the community with essential materials and staples: wood for fires, barns, fences, homes, and tools; coal for fuel; rich soil for growing corn, beans, and orchards; nuts, herbs, mushrooms, berries, and



The face of John Rock, a sandstone "camping rock," inscribed with local history. More than fifty years ago, Covey Turner etched his initials on it with a carbide lamp while on a ginseng expedition with his buddies and their dogs. The road connecting Drew's Creek to this site was recently closed for coal mining. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

game, an open-range for hogs and cattle, and spaces for anonymous stills. Because of the abundant supply of tree fodder (wild nuts and fruit) the central Appalachian plateau in the nineteenth century furnished some of the best pastureland in the country. A seasonal round of plying the commons is registered in many of the names for swags and coves: Walnut Hollow, Paw-Paw Hollow, Beech Hollow, Red Root Hollow, Sugar Camp Hollow, and so forth. During the turbulent early decades of industry the suppressed civic commons survived in lofty thickets where miners met in secret to organize their union.

As practice and concept, the commons is ancient, pre-dating the idea of private property,⁷ which began exerting pressure on local commons in England at the time of the Norman Conquest. Since then history has been marked by recurrent efforts to enclose the commons for use by wealthy non-local interests.⁸ In England the social and environ-

mental effects of such use included irreversible deforestation, degradation of soils and water, homelessness, and the emergence of the world's first industrial working class.⁹

What happened in the late nineteenth century on Coal River and throughout the plateaus may be viewed as an episode in the continuing history of transnational appropriation and enclosure of the commons. Throughout central Appalachia, newly formed land companies surreptitiously subverted the system of the commons, taking out deeds on its unclaimed portions, offering small amounts of money and the

right to continue using the surface resources in exchange for mineral rights.¹⁰ Hence, despite the flurry of "quit claim deeds" and "deeds in ejectment" on record for the early decades of the century, the condition of exile imposed on some people by those transactions has only gradually been realized. In the aggregate, whatever the terms of individual transactions, access to the land for fructuary uses like hunting, gathering, and farming has tempered the negative effects of corporate domination over the past century.¹¹

Before the development of a wage-labor economy, ginseng was the most reliable source of cash income on Coal River. "The whole economy was built up around ginseng," said Quentin Barrett, of Beckley. "They had a few eggs and chickens, but most of it was—the



Quentin Barrett, Beckley, West Virginia. Photo by Lyntha Eiler



Randy Halstead, owner of "Randy's Recycling" in Peytona, buys and sells ginseng. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

whole crew would go out and hunt ginseng in the fall."

"That's all my grandma used to do, years ago, she'd ginseng," recalled Shelby Estep, who now ginsengs with her daughter and granddaughter on Coal River Mountain. "That's the way she bought the kids clothes. She had twelve."

Around the export of ginseng a class of entrepreneurs emerged who would buy the ginseng from diggers and get it to the metropolitan centers to trade for goods that could not be produced locally. In 1871 Quentin Barrett's grandfather, R.E. Barrett, began trading merchandise for ginseng from his store on Dry Creek. "Just about his only source of cash was from ginseng sales," said Bob Daniel, R.E. Barrett's great grandson, "The people would come out of the hollows in the fall and sell him their

ginseng and they would buy their shoes and salt and staples and so forth and he in turn sold it to exporters in New York or a broker, and that sent some cash dollars back here."¹²

Fortunes and political careers were built on ginseng in the nineteenth century. Daniel Boone on a bad day lost two tons of the root when the barge carrying it sank in the Ohio River. Ginseng money helped build the fortune of John Jacob Astor as well as the political career of an early senator from California, according to a story Quentin Barrett called a "ginseng tale."

"There was an old man at Madison, over on Little Coal River," said Barrett,

speaking of his great-grandfather. "His name was Griffin Stallings. And he was a wheeler and dealer. He was wealthy. So he puts up a store at Whitesville and he buys all the seng at Whitesville, and he buys all the seng at Madison and puts up another store somewhere toward Logan up in the head of Pond Fork.

"So he buys all the seng coming and going. So come fall, he's ready to ship it. How do you get your seng to market? Only place you could sell it, really a big bunch, was Philadelphia or Cincinnati or someplace like that. So he loads up his hired man, the wagons, and takes all the seng down to Huntington, puts him on a boat. The hired man was supposed to take all this seng, a year's supply of seng and sell it and bring the money back. He never saw the hired man again. He never got it back.

"Well, after the Civil War was over, he had a boy [Joel], and the boy was a high-ranking man in the Confederate army and so his son ran for office. Along about that time, he got elected, he goes to



Opened by R.E. Barrett in 1871, the Charles Jarrell Store at the mouth of Dry Creek is the oldest commercial establishment in Raleigh County. "Just about [Barrett's] only source of cash was from the sale of ginseng," said Bob Daniel, Barrett's great-grandson. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

Washington. And the first man he ran into was a senator from California, and that senator from California was the hired man who'd left with his daddy's ginseng!"¹³

During the first half of the twentieth century, ginseng continued to infuse cash into the scrip-driven economy of the coal camps. "My dad was a coal miner when the union was organizing," said Randy Halstead. "He was involved in that, so a lot of times he was out of work. So you send ten children to school, and working now and then, you had to make money whatever way you could. We would dig ginseng to buy our school clothes and buy our books so we could go back to school in the fall."

In the coal boom of the 1990s, when the coal industry no longer depends much on a resident population, many roads leading into the commons have been gated off. Ginseng nonetheless contributes a vital piece to an economic patchwork that includes recurrent outmigration to find temporary employment, odd jobs, fishing, flea-market work, and raising produce.

"Ginseng's getting rare because so many people's out of work and so many people's digging it," said Randy Sprouse, who was himself unemployed at the time.

Joe Williams, who ginsengs with Randy, disagreed. "I'd say most of the people that ginseng are people that works. They just love to ginseng. I miss work to go ginsenging."

"What do you like about it that you'd miss work for it?" I asked him.

"Well, it's really something to find a big old stalk of seng. That's what you're looking for. Five prongs. If you'd ever get into it, you'd like it."

Stalking the Wily Seng

Though in biological terms ginseng is properly flora, in the

ginsengers' world it behaves like fauna. Ginseng is not merely "harvested," it is "hunted," and rare six-, seven-, and eight-prong specimens are coveted like twelve-point bucks. There is an agency assigned to ginseng unparalleled among the many plants valued on Coal River. "It hides away from man with seeming intelligence," wrote Arthur Harding in a 1908 manual for diggers and cultivators.¹⁴

"You never know where you're going to find ginseng," said Ernie Scarbrough, of Rock Creek.

Seng is a verb as well as a noun. "I senced in there, and senced in there, and senced in there," reported Cuba Wiley, of Peytona, "and I didn't find any." In stories about ginseng the plant appears unbidden, almost like a quarry sneaking up on its stalker. "I was standing there looking around," said David Bailey, of Stickney, "and there was a big four-prong

brushing my britches legs before I looked down and saw it."

"Now a lot of times," said Joe Williams, "you'll walk up, be standing there, and look right down at your feet and it'll be there."

Ginseng's uniqueness is much-vaunted. "It's the most beautiful plant in the woods," said Randy Halstead. "Especially when it changes its color and it's got the seed on it." In spring ginseng sends up a stem that branches into stalks, each terminating in a cluster of five-toothed leaflets. The older the root, the more stalks, or "prongs," it sends up.¹⁵ A cluster of yellow-green flowers, scented like lilies of the valley, appears in spring and matures through the summer into the bright red "pod of berries" that ginseng diggers look for in fall.

In late September ginseng begins to turn an opalescent yellow,



Dennis Dickens, Peach Tree Creek. Photo by Lyntha Eiler



Joe Williams, digging ginseng in Tom's Hollow.
Photo by Lyntha Eiler

utterly distinctive to diggers. "That is a different color to any other yellow," said Dennis Dickens. "You can spot that."

On a warm day in September photographer Lyntha Eiler and I are clambering around on the near-perpendicular slopes of Tom's Hollow near Whitesville. Joe Williams, of Leevale, selected this site because it contained popular and sassafras growing on the "wet side" of the mountain. "You don't find it where oaks are at," he says. He peers out through the columns of maples, hickories, sourwood, black gum, walnut, poplar, and sassafras, searching for brilliant red berries and the distinctive yellow of ginseng.

Slung over Williams's shoulder is a bag for carrying ginseng, and in his hand he carries a "seng hoe." Seng hoes are essentially double-bladed mattocks modified to serve as walking sticks. You cannot purchase one. On Coal River seng hoes are produced by remodelling implements made for other purposes.

Taken as a collection, seng hoes register in concentrated form a pool of experiential knowledge attached to the commons. "They used to take old mine picks when they'd wear out and cut them off at the blacksmith shop," said Mae Bongalis, eighty, of Naoma. "They make a good one."

Herman Williams, of Clear Fork, has adapted a fire poker for use as a seng hoe. Ben Burnside's is made, like his father's, from a recycled automobile spring. A popular model generally has an axe blade for cutting, and a mattock blade for digging. Its long handle serves as a

walking stick, and a weapon to be wielded in self-defense against copperheads and rattlesnakes.

"It's real light," said Shorty Bongalis. "Something you can carry through the woods."

"It's light," said Randy Sprouse, "to beat the weeds."

Brandishing his seng hoe, Williams calls out in jest, "Here Mr. Four-Prong!"

Ginseng is notoriously unpredictable. It does not send up a stalk every year.¹⁶ Added to this is the appetite for ginseng shared by deer, pheasants, groundhogs, squirrels, and other small birds and mammals, which consume stalks and berries, unwittingly conserving the plant both by hiding the roots and serving as agents of dispersal. Thus theories of where to look for this seemingly peripatetic plant flourish.

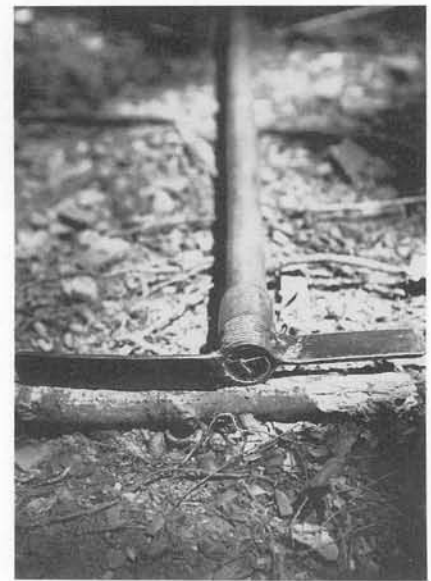
"Everybody's got a different way of fishing," said Randy Halstead. "You know: 'My bait works.'"

Vernon Williams sings in "the roughest, wildest, snakiest places"

he can find. Denny Christian looks around "sugar trees" (*Acer saccharum*) and black walnut.

"If you look under the right tree," said Ernie Scarbrough, "you might find a stalk of seng. There's trees I go for yet, ginsenging. . . sugar maples and black gum, whenever you can find one. And the hickories. Squirrels is in the hickories, and they eat the ripe ginseng berries. So it makes a lot of ginseng around the hickories."

Ginseng orders the landscape around itself, providing a basis for identifying related flora. Look-alike plants like sarsaparilla and cohosh have been given nicknames like "fool's seng," "he-seng," and "seng pointer." "The



Randy Sprouse's seng hoe. The head can be twisted to mimic a hen turkey.
Photo by Lyntha Eiler

reason why they call it 'seng pointer,'" said Randy Halstead, "it's got three branches, one goes this way, one this way, and one goes straight out this way, and the old people would say that one would be pointing towards the ginseng plant. Of course it probably is somewhere within a hundred miles out in front of it, but that's how that got started. They like the same kind of a place to grow."

Halstead said experienced dealers can tell which county a root came from because differences in soil conditions produce roots that are bulby like pearl onions, or elongated like carrots. "Now in this area we have dark, richer, loose soil, and the ginseng grows longer, like a carrot. But you get into some of the neighboring counties with clay soil, it's real bulby because the ginseng can't push down into the dirt."

Dealers can also tell at a glance whether a root is "wild" or "tame." "Wild" seng exhibits "stress rings" from pushing through wild soils. "Loosening the soil causes the roots to grow rapidly," explained Randy Halstead. "What makes the roots valuable is the ringiness, the rings that's on the ginseng."

Pausing for breath in Tom's Hollow, Joe Williams finds a four-prong, topped with a "pod of berries." Flailing away at its base he discovers to his chagrin that someone else has already taken the root, adhering to the local practice of replanting the stalk attached to the dog-legged rhizome pocked with stem scars. "That's called the 'curl,'" says Williams, carefully reinstating it. "I usually put maybe two joints of it back. It's a better way of keeping it going than the berries. . . . I'll come back here some year and get another root off of that."

Other strategies for conserving ginseng include scattering seeds where ginseng is known to grow, snipping the tops off of "five-leaves" and "two-prongs" so that less scrupulous diggers won't find them until they are bigger in future years, and transplanting young plants to sites closer to home where they can be monitored.¹⁷



Ginseng drying in a window. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

Many residents on Coal River propagate wild patches of ginseng in the woods surrounding their homes. "We didn't exactly cultivate it," said Dave Bailey. "See our back porch went up to here, and then up here was the woods. Me and my brother, we just got some of it and we set it, to see if it would come up next year, and when it did, it accumulated and accumulated, and whenever I got married and left, why the whole back of that hill was ginseng."

Left to its own devices, ginseng simply sheds the seeds for gravity to deliver downslope. Consequently, one mode of tracking ginseng is to look uphill from any "five-leaves" or immature plants for the big progenitor. "I've done that many a time," said Dave Bailey. "You go up the hill, you come to a little flat area and if there's any seng growing there you always look above it for a big one."

Giles the Seng Man

One of the more famous buyers who infused cash into the economy during the boom-and-bust period of coal was "Giles the Seng Man." Diggers generally sell ginseng to centers that recycle scrap metal and broker other non-woody forest products like moss, mayapple, bloodroot, cohosh, and golden seal. During the thirties, forties, and fifties much of the ginseng on Marsh Fork was bought by "Giles the Seng Man," remembered for his woolly aspect and bibbed overalls, and his annual trek along the roads tracing the tributaries of the Coal River's Marsh Fork.

"There used to be a gentleman," Denny Christian said. "Old Man Giles, they called him. The Seng Buyer. And he wore bibbed overalls. Had no vehicle, no horse, nor nothing. He always come in a-walking. Every fall he would make his rounds. And I'd senged that summer with my grandpa, and old man Giles, he came through."

"He was a legend," said Jenny Bonds, quilting with the women who gather weekly on Drew's Creek.

"Nobody knows where that old man come from," said Mabel Brown, "and nobody—"

"—knows where he went," Jenny finished. "He'd just walk by in his big old overalls and strut, strut by."

"Old Man Giles many a time come to our house," Dave Bailey remembered. "He'd keep change in his pocket. Wore overalls, had a gray beard and an old hat and here's the way he'd walk, you know." Here Bailey demonstrates Giles' inimitable strut. "He'd say 'Hubert, you got any seng?' And Dad would get wood all the time,



Jenny Bonds and Nancy Jarrell, of Drew's Creek. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

go out in the woods cut a little timber, if he found seng he'd dig it. He'd have a handful dry, maybe fifty cents worth."

"Do you remember Giles the ginseng man?" I asked Dennis Dickens.

"Tommy Giles?" said Dennis Dickens. "I remember him well. I used to sell to him. He was originally from Germany, I think. Someone told me that they got him as an alien and kept him in prison through the war. I know he wasn't around here through the war. He was a great big man, black beard, and he always walked. Somebody'd stop and ask him, 'Want a ride Mr. Giles?' . . . 'No, I'm in a hurry, I'll just walk!'"

Seng Talk and Ginseng Tales: Conjuring the Commons

For seng aficionados, the ongoing prospect of ginseng makes the mountains gleam with hidden treasure. "It's like catching a big fish," said Randy Halstead. "You're out here all day and you find this big fish, and you know it's everybody's desire to catch this

big fish in the lake. You find this big enormous plant and you know everybody that's out there digging, this is the one that they'd like to find. So you get an adrenalin rush when you find them, and when you find a big one it's like showing off your daily catch. You

bring it in and say, 'Look what I found today.'"

"You can't get out and dig it for the money," said Joe Williams. "It's like looking for Easter eggs. You're always looking for the big one. If I found one eight ounces, I believe I'd quit."



Woody Boggess, of Pettry Bottom, in the ramp patch he planted behind his home in Pettry Bottom. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

"The one that boy brought in up at Flats weighed a pound," said Randy Sprouse.

"I'd like to have seen that one," said Williams.

"It was a monster," Sprouse emphasized.

"That's what you get out for," Williams mused. "Always looking for the big one."

On Coal River, ginseng plays a vital role in imagining and sustaining a culture of the commons. Among the means of keeping the commons alive is talk about ginseng: where to hunt it, its mysterious habits, the biggest specimens ever found, and the difficulties of wresting the treasure from an impossibly steep terrain shared by bears, copperheads, rattlesnakes, and yellow-jackets. The ability and authority to engage in this discourse is indeed hard won.

Over generations of social construction in story and in practice, places on the commons accrue a dense, historical residue. Every wrinkle rippling the mountains has been named for people, flora, fauna, practices, and events both singular and recurrent: Beech Hollow, Ma Kelly Branch, Bear Wallow, Board Camp Hollow, and Old Field Hollow. "I guess there must have been a newground in there at one time," said Ben Burnside, of Rock Creek, alluding to the old-time practice of clearing woodland to grow corn and beans.

Overlooking the valley from its giant tightly crimped rim, places like the Head of Hazy, Bolt Mountain, Kayford Mountain, the Cutting Box, Chestnut Hollow, and Sugar Camp anchor realities spun out in a conversation that Woody Boggess videotaped in Andrew, West Virginia. In one exchange, Cuba Wiley and Dave Bailey conjure and co-inhabit a terrain so steep that seng berries would roll from the ridge to the hardtop.

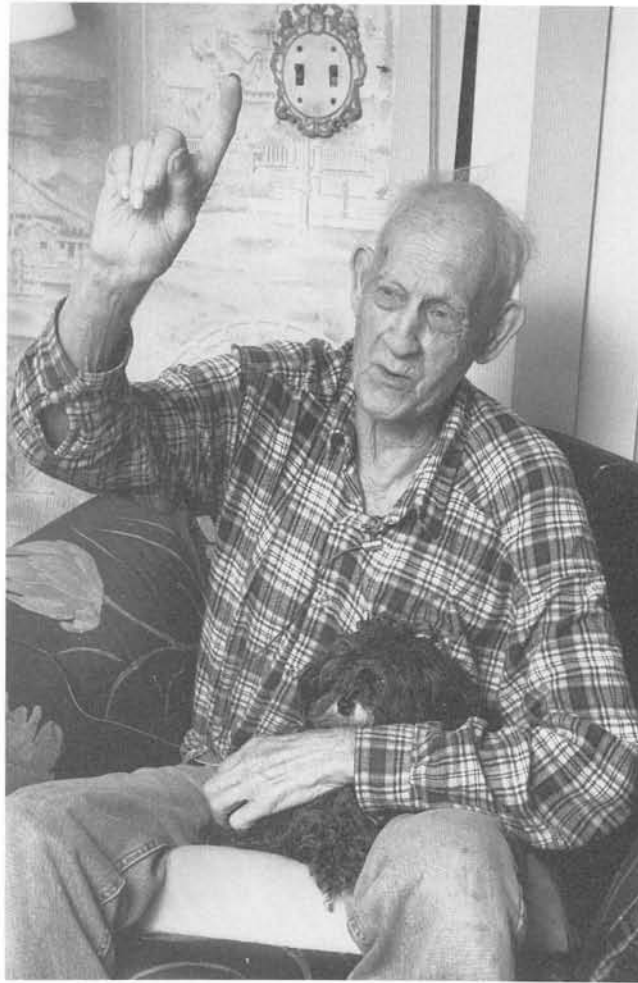
"You know where the most seng is I ever found up in that country?" asked Cuba Wiley. "I'm going to tell you where it was at.

You won't believe it."

"Chestnut Holler, I'll bet you," guessed Dave Bailey.

"I found one of the awfullest patches of it, left-hand side of Chestnut Holler," Cuba continued. "I never seen such roots of seng in

and I have really found the seng in there. One time me and Gar Gobel was in there, and Clyde would start up the mountain, and we just kept finding little four leaves, all the way up the mountain.



Cuba Wiley, of Andrew. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

my life, buddy. And where I found all my seng, the good seng, come right this side of Clyde Montgomery's, and come down that first holler, and go up that holler and turn back to the right. Buddy it is steep."

"Going toward the Cutting Box?" asked Dave Bailey, referring to a place named for a mining structure.

"I senged that through there," said Cuba, "from there to Stickney,

"Gar says, 'Cuba there's a big one somewhere. It seeded downhill.' We senged plumb to the top of the mountain, Cutting Box, got on top, and that old big nettleweed was that high, Gar had him a big stick, was hunting for the big one. Right on tip top the mountain, directly beneath them, it was about up to my belt, buddy. It didn't have such a big root on it, and I still wasn't satisfied. Gar, he dropped over the Cutting Box, and

I still searched around up on top, parting the weeds, and directly, I found them about that high [indicates a height of about three feet], two of them right on top of the mountain. It was so steep, [the berries] rolled plumb down next to

he heard from his brother. "You remember that time Bud and French Turner was . . . up there sawing timber for Earl Hunter? Remember Bud telling you about that? He said he was sawing that big tree. Thought it was a buckeye. And

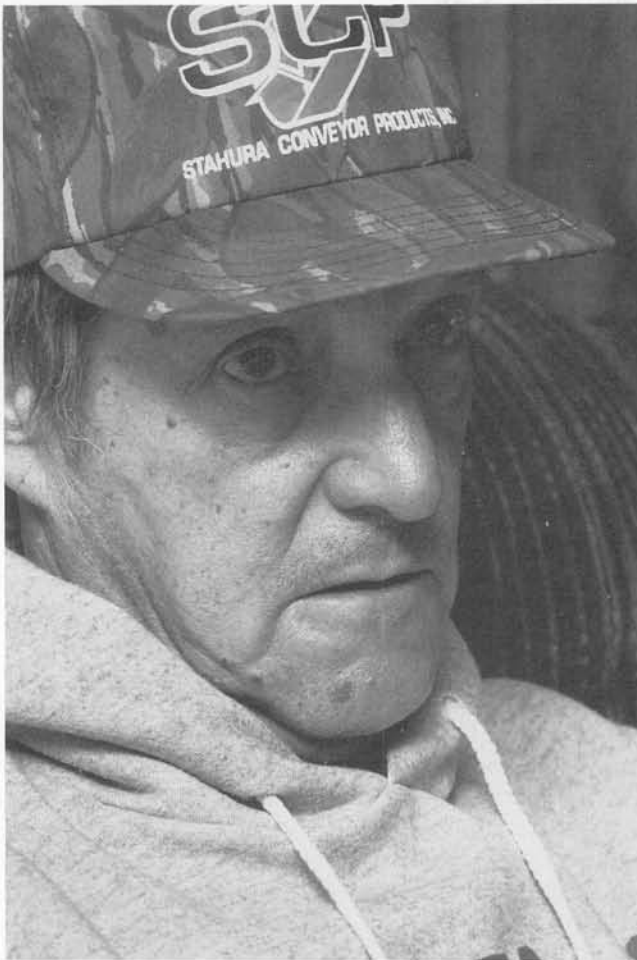
Through narrative the commons becomes a public space, its history played out before audiences who know intimately its spaces whether they have been there together or not. Inhabiting the commons through practice and narrative confers social identity and makes a community of its occupants. "I work in construction," wrote Dennis Price, forty, of Arnett, on a petition to document the cultural value of the mixed mesophytic forest. "But really I consider myself a ginsenger."

In the realm unfolded through ginseng stories and other tales of plying the woods, the commons becomes a proving ground on which attributes of courage, loyalty, belonging, stamina, wit, foolishness, stewardship, honesty, judgement, and luck are displayed and evaluated. Collective reflection on what it means to be a ginsenger gives rise to reflection on what in fact it means to be human. It is through such a process that the geographic commons nurtures a civic commons as a forum for consensus and dissent.

Ginseng and the Future of the Commons

"Understanding the commons and its role within the larger regional culture," writes Gary Snyder, "is one more step toward integrating ecology with economy." Environmental policy, focussed too narrowly on physical resources, loses sight of the web of social relationships and processes in which those resources are embedded and made significant. "They're taking our dignity by destroying our forest," as Vernon Williams, of Peach Tree Creek, put it.

Williams was referring to the landscapes taking shape on the plateaus during the present coal and timber boom. Since 1990 the state has permitted tens of thousands of acres in southern West Virginia for mountaintop removal



David Bailey, of Stickney. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

the hard road, buddy. I got more seng in there than any place I ever senged in that part of the country. It's steep, buddy."

"It's rough too, ain't it?" said Dave Bailey.

"It's rough, buddy," Cuba agreed. "But I swear I dug some good seng in there, buddy. And I dug some good seng in Sugar Camp."

Cuba's amazing account reminds Woody Boggess of a tall tale

stuff like tomatoes started hitting him in the head."

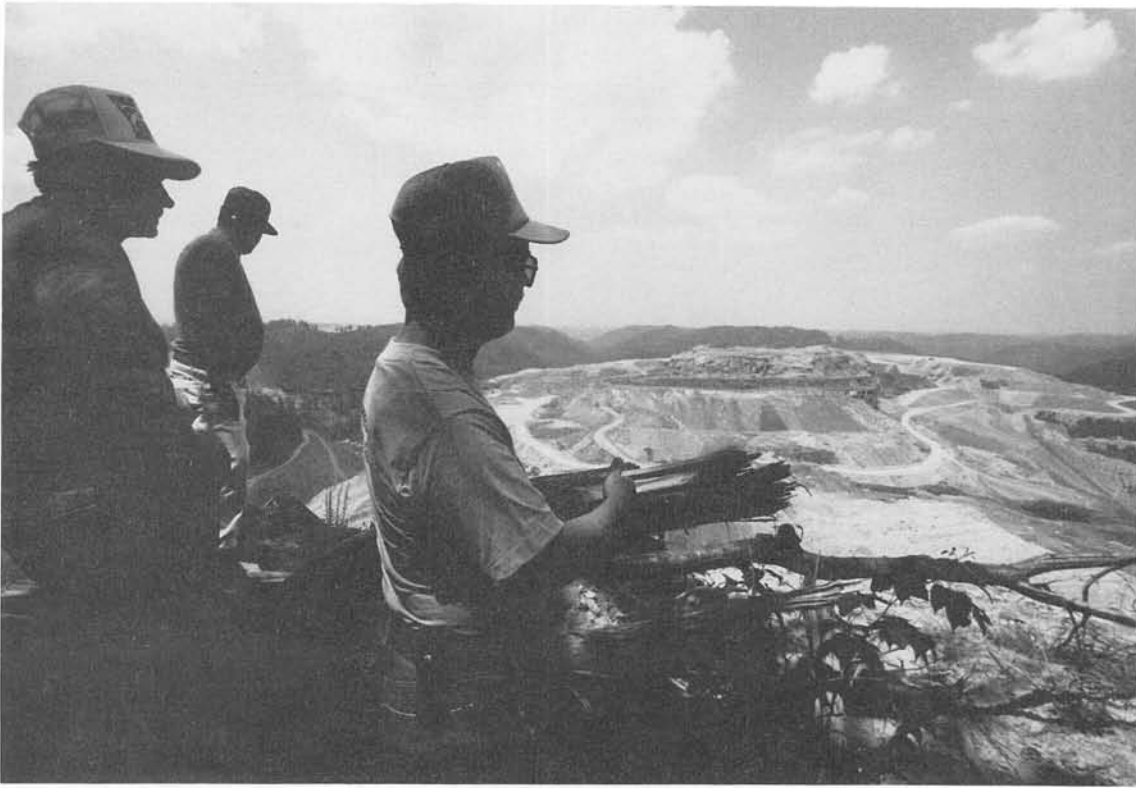
"It was seng berries," laughed Dave.

"It was seng berries," Woody dead-panned.

"Said it was big as tomatoes," said Dave, still chuckling.

"Boy, that was some stalk of seng," allowed Cuba, his eyes twinkling.

Such stories conjure the commons as a rich social imaginary.



Relatives gathered for a Stanley Family reunion on top of Kayford Mountain survey an eleven-mile-long mountaintop-removal project on Cabin Creek. "I've senged that mountain many a time," said an unemployed coal miner. "No one will ever seng there again." Photo by Lyntha Eiler

and reclamation. Mountaintop removal is a method of mining that shears off the top of a mountain, allowing the efficient recovery of multiple seams of coal.¹⁸ When the "topped" mountains are rigorously reclaimed under the terms of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977, the rich soils essential to ginseng and hardwood cove forests are gone, and with them the multigenerational achievement of the commons.

What is missing in the environmental debate is any recognition of the commons and its critical role in community life. Such recognition, not unusual in the countries of Europe, could reopen portions of the civic commons that is suppressed in environmental planning by an unwieldy and inaccessible process of technical assessment. For instance, a slurry pond that fills the evacuated hollow of Shumate's Branch was permitted on the grounds that there were no

endangered species, no historic artifacts (with the exception of a cemetery, which was relocated), and no prime farmland (despite a history of subsistence farming at least three generations deep). With that testimony, the commons specified in Cuba Wiley's narratives was quietly erased.¹⁹

In the social imaginary shaped by narrative on Coal River, ginseng, commons, and community life are inseparable, yet there are presently no means available for safeguarding that relationship. A standard recourse, declaring ginseng an endangered species, would clearly be culturally destructive, since it would make a vital cultural practice illegal. Wild ginseng in fact would seem to merit federal protection not because it is endangered but because within its limited range it is integral to the venerable social institution of the commons.

Ginseng may be a powerful tool

for resolving some very thorny dilemmas. A touchstone for economic, cultural, and environmental interests, ginseng provides a tangible link between ecology and economy. Given ginseng's predilection for native hardwood forest and rich soils, national recognition of its cultural value would be a way to begin safeguarding both a globally significant hardwood forest and the cultural landscape to which it belongs.

Notes

1. Since 1978 the U.S. Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service has tracked the certification of ginseng for export under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Ginseng is listed in Appendix II.

2. Ginseng can be cultivated, and in fact cultivated ginseng



A slurry pond constructed on Shumate's Branch. "Slurry," the fine wet refuse from the coal cleaning process, is stored behind a dam engineered out of the coarse refuse. Though the dams are highly regulated, slurry has been elsewhere linked with severe flooding and "blowouts." "There's a saying around here," said one storekeeper. "We fear the river above more than the river below." In the foreground is the Marsh Fork Middle School. Photo by Lyntha Eiler

comprises more than 90 percent of American ginseng exports (ASPI Bulletin 38). However "tame seng," as diggers call it, commands an average price of thirty dollars a pound. That sector of the industry is concentrated in Wisconsin, which in 1994 certified more than 1,000,000 of the 1,271,548 pounds reported nationally.

3. Brown, Beverly. "Fencing the

Northwest Forests: Decline of Public Access and Accustomed Rights," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (spring 1996), pp. 50-52.

4. According to a study directed by scientist Albert Fritsch, who heads the Appalachian Center for Science in the Public Interest, the Chinese market alone will bear 12 billion dollars worth of ginseng annually. "Ginseng in Appalachia," *ASPI Technical Series 38* (Mt.

Vernon, Kentucky: Appalachia-Science in the Public Interest, 1996). To provide a basis for comparison, according to the West Virginia Mining and Reclamation Association in Charleston, West Virginia, the coal industry meets a direct annual payroll of 1 billion dollars for the state of West Virginia.

5. *Ibid.* "Though ginseng is commonly prescribed by physicians in Asia and Russia for a number of ailments, Western medicine has been skeptical of the herb. In the United States it is illegal to market ginseng for medical purposes because it has not been tested by the Food and Drug Administration. Instead, it is marketed as a health food or with vitamin supplements."

6. Hardacre, Val, *Woodland Nuggets of Gold*. New York: Vantage Press, 1968: 56

7. Beryl Crowe writes that "the commons is a fundamental social institution that has a history going back through our own colonial experience to a body of English common law which antedates the Roman conquest. That law recognized that in societies there are some environmental objects which have never been, and should never be, exclusively appropriated to any individual or group of individuals." "The Tragedy of the Commons Revisited," in Garret Hardin and John Baden, eds. *Managing the Commons* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1977).

8. Gary Snyder's brief history of the six hundred year struggle in England highlights the historical depth of contemporary issues. Wool corporations, an early form of agribusiness, played a role in fifteenth-century enclosures. Snyder writes, "The arguments for enclosure in England—efficiency, higher production—ignored social and ecological effects and served to cripple the sustainable agriculture of some districts." "Understanding the Commons," in

Environmental Ethics, eds. Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993: 227-31.

9. Snyder, pp. 228-29.

10. Consequently, according to a study by the Appalachian Landownership Task Force, roughly 80 to 90 percent of the land is controlled by absentee owners. See *Who Owns Appalachia? Land Ownership and Its Impact*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. For more detailed documentation of the often illegal means of land acquisition, see David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the West Virginia Coal Fields*, and Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*. An abundance of stories persist in oral tradition on Coal River about how the company "took" the land.

11. Paul Salstrom argues that this use of the land for farming and hunting ultimately subsidized the coal industry. Compensating for depressed wages, it kept the union out of southern West Virginia longer than in other areas. *Appalachia's Path To Dependency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994). See also David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press) 1981: 37-38. Two local land companies have publically accounted for the recent enclosures by citing instances of lawsuits brought against them by persons injured while gathering wood on "the property."

12. Among the figures published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture from 1858 to 1896 the highest number of pounds exported from the United States was 630,714 in 1863; the lowest was 110,426 in 1859. The total for the thirty six years was 13,738,415. No official records were kept by state or county in West Virginia. "American Ginseng: Its Commercial History, Protection, and Cul-

tivation," *Bulletin Number 16*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1896: 16-17.

13. According to records compiled by Janet Hager of Hewett in Boone County, Joel Stallings became an attorney following his service as a confederate captain during the Civil War and was then elected to the state legislature. Tradition holds that, on a trip to Washington, Stallings encountered Senator James Thompson Farley of California (Democrat, 1879-85), and recognized him as the hired man who never returned. The *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* states that Farley made his way from Albemarle County, Virginia, to California via Missouri.

14. Harding, Arthur, *Ginseng and Other Medicinal Plants*. Boston: Emporium Press, 1972 (reprint of 1908 original).

15. "Our data show that on an average a one-pronged plant will be 4.5 (plus or minus 1.6) years before it develops a second prong, that a two-pronged plant will be 7.6 (plus or minus 2.4) years before developing a third prong, and that a three-pronged individual will average 13.5 (plus or minus 3.3) years before adding a fourth prong." Walter H. Lewis and Vincent E. Zenger, "Ginseng Population Dynamics," *American Journal of Botany* 69:1483-90, 1982, p. 1485.

16. Diggers and dealers observe that because ginseng does not send up a stalk every year, it is impossible to calculate precisely the age of a given specimen or to assess the extent of the population. "Some of this wild ginseng could be thirty or forty years old," said Randy Halstead. "If every plant would come up one year it would be plentiful. You have maybe 50 percent of it that'll germinate each year. If it gets in a stressful situation, it sheds its top." Research by Lewis and Zenger on cultivated ginseng found 10 percent of the

population to be dormant in a given year.

17. Such seng is termed "woods grown," and if properly set may bring top dollar. "If it looks wild," said Halstead, "it sells for wild."

18. The present boom is an effect of the Clean Air Act of 1990, which set acceptable levels for sulphate emissions from coal-fired facilities and increased the national demand for the low-sulphur bituminous coal found in the region.

19. Because the region's low-sulphur coal has to be washed to come into compliance with the Clean Air Act, valleys must be found for storing the "slurry"—fine, wet, black refuse from the coal cleaning and separation process. To contain the slurry, towering impoundments are built at the mouths of hollows out of the coarse refuse. A similar structure collapsed on October 30, 1996, near Pennington Gap, Virginia. See Spencer S. Hsu, "Rural Va. Coal Field Accident Turns Streams Black, Chokes Thousands of Fish," *The Washington Post*, November 1, 1996, B4.

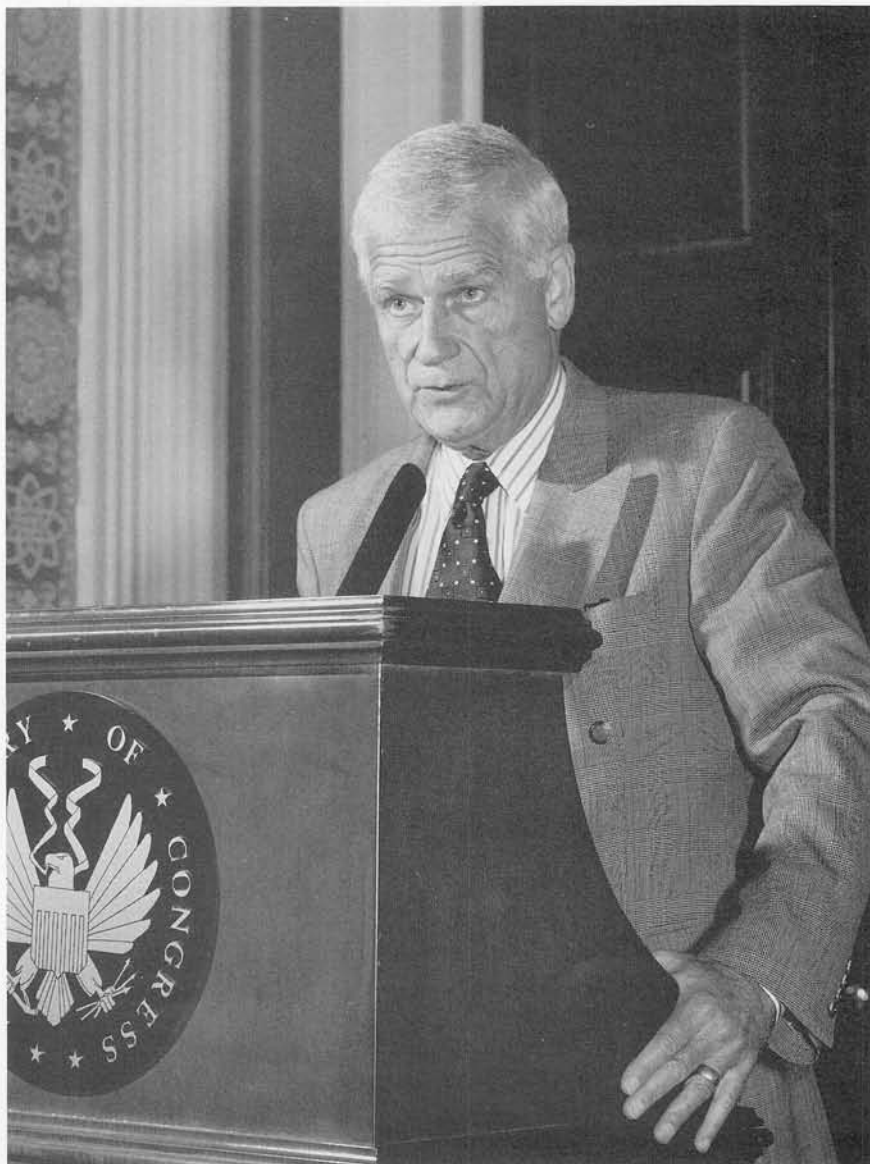


American Folklife Center Celebrates Twenty Years

Story by Craig D'Ooge
Photographs by Larry Glatt

Approximately two hundred invited guests assembled in the north curtain of the Library of Congress's Jefferson Building, September 18, 1996, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the American Folklife Center. The Gospel Pearls opened the event with a song called "Speak to My Heart," an appropriate theme song for the evening as one speaker after another expressed heartfelt support for the Center. Folklife Center staff were stationed at tables displaying the collections of the Archive of Folk Culture and explaining the many programs and projects that have served the congressional mandate of the Center's legislation to "preserve and present American folklife."

Librarian of Congress James H. Billington welcomed the guests and said he wanted to "reaffirm both my personal and our institutional commitment to fostering and supporting the mission of the American Folklife Center." In his remarks he called the Center "one of our strongest and most effective programs since its inception" in 1976. Only two days before the celebration, the President signed the Legislative Branch Appropriations Act for 1997, which included a clause authorizing the Center through 1998. This took place only after earlier proposals to downsize the Center and fold it into the Library as a division or move it to the Smithsonian Institution were withdrawn. A sustained round of



Senator Mark Hatfield addresses the assembled guests at the twentieth-anniversary celebration of the American Folklife Center, September 18, 1996.

applause answered the Librarian's statement that now was the time to begin the task of seeking permanent authorization for the Cen-

ter. Since it was founded, the Center has been periodically reauthorized for periods of up to three years at a time.



Folklorist Archie Green reminisces about his work in lobbying for the creation of the Folklife Center, while Librarian of Congress James H. Billington looks on.

The Librarian then introduced Senator Mark O. Hatfield (R-Oregon), one of the sponsors of the original legislation to establish the Center. Senator Hatfield also was instrumental in obtaining the Center's most recent authorization. In his remarks, he shared his views on the importance of rounding out our understanding of history through the first-person narratives of persons whose daily lives flesh out historical periods, citing the diaries of women who traveled the Oregon Trail and the observations of Samuel Pepys, whose diary provides a detailed record of life in seventeenth-century London.

What might be called the legislative utility of folklore was exemplified in a story Senator Hatfield told about how opposing views on a piece of legislation came to be resolved. In the midst of a heated debate, he was invited by Senator



The Gospel Pearls, from Washington, D.C., opened and closed the celebration. On display behind the group is the winning quilt in the "1996 All-American Quilt Contest" sponsored by *Good Housekeeping* and Coming Home, a division of Lands' End. The quilt was made by Candy Goff of Lolo, Montana. Photographs of the contest entries and accompanying material have been donated to the American Folklife Center.



Lindy Boggs, former trustee of the Folklife Center, accepts the thanks of celebration guests for all her many contributions to the Center and to American folk culture.



Stephen Wade demonstrates his skill as a "banjo dancer." Wade has made a theatrical career telling stories and playing tunes he discovered in the Archive of Folk Culture.

Robert C. Byrd (D-West Virginia) to come in on a Saturday and listen to his recordings of West Virginia fiddle tunes. And, Hatfield said, "I believe that this time we spent together, preparing our minds and our hearts to negotiate, helped us to resolve the issue by injecting a piece of our common heritage into our discussion."

Judith McCulloh, chair of the Board of Trustees of the American Folklife Center, and Jane Beck, president of the American Folklore Society, presented Senator Hatfield with a basket of sample publications and recordings produced by the Center and by

folklife organizations all over the United States. McCulloh also read the following resolution:

"For his dedication to the nurture of American culture at the grassroots through the preservation and presentation of American folklife; and for his signal contributions to every stage of the American Folklife Center's development, from conception through birth and into the challenges of maturity; the Board of Trustees of the American Folklife Center and the Executive Board of the American Folklore Society, on behalf of all citizens who value American folklife, offer their heartfelt gratitude to Senator Mark Hatfield, whose vision and steadfast support make him a friend of folklife forever."

Craig D'Ooge is a public affairs specialist at the Library of Congress.

First Parsons Fund Recipient Visits Library

The first recipient of an award from the Parsons Fund for Ethnography in the Library of Congress was Julia C. Bishop, Ph.D., a folklorist from Sheffield, England. Julia Bishop used the award to travel to Washington, D.C., for the

period of August 11-27, 1996, to consult the original materials in the James Madison Carpenter Collection, which is located in the Archive of Folk Culture.

The Carpenter Collection consists of manuscript materials,

sound recordings, photographs, and drawings that document British and American folk music and dance and British ritual drama. The bulk of the material was collected between 1928 and 1935 by James Carpenter during field work



At the American Folklife Center, Julia Bishop shows materials from the James Madison Carpenter Collection to Peggy Parsons, whose late husband, Gerry, established the Parsons Fund for Ethnography in the Library of Congress. From left to right: Judith Gray, chair of the Parsons Fund Committee; Bishop; Alan Jabbour, director of the Center; and Parsons. Photo by James Hardin

in England and Scotland. James Madison Carpenter (1889-1984) was born in Booneville, Mississippi; studied at the University of Mississippi and at Harvard; and taught at Duke, William and Mary, and Greensboro College.

Julia Bishop is working on an index to the ballad tunes in the collection and came to the Library in order to check the transcriptions on microfilm against the originals. She was also able to listen a few of the original cylinder recordings and discovered that they were of higher quality than the Center's reference copies, which were made

from the disc copies Carpenter had made himself from his original Dictaphone cylinders.

Bishop says that several publications will result from her work with the Carpenter Collection: (1) a biographical study of Carpenter and the context of his collecting work and an article on the Child Ballad tunes in the collection, for a special issue of *Folk Music Journal* devoted to the Carpenter Collection; and (2) an index to the Child ballad tunes in the collection.

The Parsons Fund makes awards to individuals or organiza-

tions in the private sector to facilitate their work with the ethnographic collections of the Library, and in particular the Archive of Folk Culture. Persons who would like further information should write the Center, to the attention of the Parsons Fund Committee. Persons who would like to make a contribution to the Parsons Fund to support such research and projects should make their checks payable to the Library of Congress Trust Fund Board, with Parsons Fund for Ethnography written on the memo line.

New Prices for Center Publications

The American Folklife Center offers a number of finding aids, pamphlets, and other publications free of charge, including single copies of *Folklife Annual* 1985, 1986, 1987, and 1990. Call or write the Center for a complete list. In addition the prices have been reduced on a number of for-sale publications, as follows:

GROUSE CREEK CULTURAL SURVEY: INTEGRATING FOLKLIFE AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION FIELD RESEARCH (1988) by Thomas Carter and Carl Fleischhauer. \$5

OLD TIES NEW ATTACHMENTS: ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOLKLIFE IN THE WEST (1992) by David A. Taylor and John Alexander Williams. \$15

PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN FRAKTUR: A GUIDE TO THE COLLECTIONS IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (1988) by Paul Conner and Jill Roberts. \$5

QUILT COLLECTIONS: A DIRECTORY FOR THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA (1987) by Lisa Turner Oshins. \$10 (softcover); \$15 (hardcover)

Send orders to the Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Washington, D.C. 20540-4610. Include check or money order payable to the American Folklife Center. Price includes postage and handling.

EDITOR'S NOTES from page 2

others in Congress, the Center was reauthorized through 1998. See page 19.

In the American Grain

Mary Hufford's account of West Virginia ginsengs is a portrait of classic Americana. Personal initia-

tive, individual enterprise, and a delight in the activities of daily life characterize the men and women Hufford interviewed as part of the Center's Appalachian Forest Folklife Project. See page 3.

Support Ethnographic Research

The Parsons Fund for Ethnography supports the work of persons

from the private sector who wish to use the ethnographic collections of the Library of Congress, and particularly those in the Archive of Folk Culture. The Center would be grateful for contributions to the fund, which facilitate folklife research and projects, and are tax deductible. A report on the first award from the fund appears on page 22.



At the twentieth anniversary celebration of the American Folklife Center, Judith McCulloh (left), chair of the Center's board of trustees, and Jane Beck (right), president of the American Folklore Society, presented a resolution of gratitude to Senator Mark O. Hatfield, retiring chairman of the Joint Committee on the Library and an original sponsor of the legislation that created the Center in 1976. See page 19. Photo by Larry Glatt

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