

American Ginseng: Fran Day Interview

Audio Transcription

[Guitar music in the background: “Southbound” by Doc and Merle Watson, from *Classic Mountain Songs from Smithsonian Folkways*]

Narrator: American ginseng, a plant renowned for its healing properties, and its value in China, grows native in Appalachia. The market for imported American ginseng in China means that growing ginseng is highly profitable, allowing struggling Appalachian families to get through tough times by using the knowledge of the land that has been passed down from generation to generation. To learn more about this rich history, we visited the Arrowmount School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to talk to Fran Day about growing up in Appalachia and digging ginseng with her stepfather.

Day: Well, my people are from East Tennessee. My mother, my father, my stepfather. My father died when I was six. The family has been in East Tennessee since right after the Revolutionary War. They were coal miners and farmers, and very poor people. We lived a subsistence existence. We made our own clothes. We grew our own food. We lived on top a mountain on a farm, and it was an interesting way to grow up. We didn't have running water and electricity. We lived in a house where you put rags and paper in the cracks to keep the bugs and the snakes from coming in.

But my stepfather had a coal mine, and when the bottom fell out of coal, the mines closed down. I was twelve years old, and we had to figure out some way to survive and bring in some cash money because in the '50s in East Tennessee, there weren't very many jobs. And almost nobody had a job. There were a few people who had jobs, but there were retired miners who were getting benefits. The mines had closed down by then, and they had a little pension or whatever. And those were the years of the “poor pathetic Appalachia.” And our family—my father died when I was six—and we had seventy dollars a month which had been his social security. But in a family where there were six children and two cousins and a maiden aunt and my mother and stepfather, that was not a whole lot of money.

So, being tied to the land, we were not like some people who could just move off and go north and work in the factories. So, my stepfather and I became bootleggers and ginseng diggers. My stepfather's family, they were mountain people. So, he knew a whole lot about the hills and the hollows. And, when it was time, we would go out and visit the different ginseng patches.

Narrator: Digging ginseng granted a source of income that got many Appalachians through difficult times, and could even provide a level of social mobility, but it is not a simple task. The profitability of ginseng makes it highly susceptible to poachers, and the plant needs to grow for years before it is viable.

Day: And so those were closely guarded *secrets*, because the people who were—relied on this as a part of their income wanted to make sure that the ginseng lived from year to year. So, we would go out, and we would go back into the parts of the Cumberlands. We would go, and we had to be very careful how we took the ginseng. You didn't take the oldest, strongest plants, because they had proven they could propagate. And you didn't take the newer ones because the roots were not sufficiently advanced, and you wanted them to grow and be healthy. You never took more than half of a patch. You never broke a root. You dug very, very carefully. Usually I used a fork and a spoon. And very, very carefully to make sure that you got the entire root.

And so we would visit these ginseng patches that my stepfather knew about and take the ginseng. And sometimes we would come back, because we never visited a patch successive years unless there were sufficient plants, to make sure that you could pick it again, you know, that you could dig it and be sure that it was still going to be good. But sometimes we would come back and a raider would have been through, and the patch would be gone. And as time went on, by the time I was fifteen, sixteen, and ready to graduate from high school, many of the patches had gone.

There were all kinds of things you had to look at, you know, that didn't grow according to the laws of humans. They grew according to the laws of ginseng. And some people would take the seed, but my stepfather never did. He was an interesting man. He could neither read nor write. But he knew the mountains. And he knew the flora and the fauna in a way that was almost instinctual.

[guitar music]