

DIGGING GINSENG

By
Donald Stevens

English 276
5:10 Wednesday
Mrs. Thomason
May 3, 1972

FOLKLORE AND FOLKLIFE COLLECTION
WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

1972 101

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE	TOPIC
1	Description of project
2	The Area Collected
3	The Informant
4-7	The Folklore
8	The Informant and His Tool
9	His Favorite Spot to Dig

Description of My Project

Digging ginseng is a hobby that has been passed down from generation to generation in many families living in the Kentucky, Tennessee, and Indiana area. To express briefly, it consists of a person going to a wooded area, generally in the late summer and fall, and finding the often rare ginseng plant. Once found it is taken for the roots, which are thoroughly cleaned and dried. Weighed on the dry basis, the roots are sold by the pound for a fairly good economical gain.

I became interested in ginseng digging around the age of twelve. My neighbor, the informant, made this his favorite hobby and as a youngster, eager for adventure, I tagged along. After two summers, we moved to where I live now, and my interest in ginseng digging was temporarily lost until this semester.

I recieved all of my information from Mr. Ashley, experiencing few problems. The only big problem I had was trying to locate a ginseng plant. After one weekend of lonely search, nature's power of cameflouge overtook me.

I've concluded that this is a great hobby for the out-of-doors people who enjoy plenty of exercise. Believe you me you'll get it. You can also earn a few dollars of the side.

There is still plenty of room for someone else to dig in, especially the aspect of selling and what the important uses are.

The Area Collected

All of the information I collected came from Mr. Ashley's home, located in a small southeastern Indiana town, known as Dillsboro. It was in the presence of his wife, Tomme and his youngest son, Jerry. Dillsboro is a small town with a population right around 1000. Its topography is similiar to the Bowling Green area being mostly flat in town and gently sloping hills outside. Mr. Ashley is the only person in town I know of that digs ginseng. The majority of the people are german decendents and irish with few coming from the Kentucky, Tennessee area, as where Mr. Ashley came from.

The Informant

Charlie Dean Ashley was born on February 15, 1915 in the small town of Glen Dean, Kentucky in Breckenridge Co. After living there with his parents for 31 years, he married and moved to Hardinsburg where he became a law officer of the state. Leaving this job in 1954, he started work with the Texas Gas Company. Shortly after he was hired, he was transferred to the Texas Gas Plant in Dillsboro, where he made his final home. He is Baptist by Religion and is believed to descend from the English.

Both of his sons, Charles and Jerry, never seemed to be too interested in digging ginseng. Their only interest was sports, which they became very good at.

Mr. Charlie Ashley, May, 72'
Dillsboro, Ind.- Dearborn Co.

Class "A" text

DIGGIN' GINSENG

Ques.- "Howdy Charlie, I wonder if you could give me some information about digging ginseng?"

Ans.- "I've been around it for a while and I could probably give ya the lo-down on it."

Ques.- "What does the plant look like?"

Ans.- "Well it's uh, i'ts uh plant and it comes up in spring. It's got uh, two, three, and four prongs. Each prong has got five leaves on it an right where your prongs come up they'll be a lil' stem come up there, that'll have a wad of seed on it bout the size of a dollar, and when they get ripe they're real red and really they reseed theirself. What I mean, the seeds fall off, they just comeback. Now them seeds that fall off like this year won't come up next year. It takes them two years fore they come back up again."

Ques.- "How tall are thay?"

Ans.- "Oh, they get about knee high, average."

Ques.- "Is there anything else that looks like them?"

Ans.- "They's not another plant in the woods that looks likem."

Ques.- "How long have you been digging them?"

Ans.- "I'd say bout forty-five years. Is that long nuf?"

Reply- "Longer than I've been around."

Info. reply- "And uh, what I mean, if you go in da' woods, if it's pasture you just as well go somewhere's else, cause

you ain't gonna find any, cause stock will eat it, when they won't eat nuthin else."

Ques.- "Who taught you how to dig ginseng or where did you pick it up at?"

Ans.- "Oh, from my Daddy. I guess I'se seven to eight years old, when he first took me out and showed me how to eye it."

Ques.- "What do you think is the best time to dig it?"

Ans.- "The best time to dig it is after the berries set on it. If ya dig it real early you lose so much weight, when the saps comin' up in the root, why whenever it dries, it just dries up to nothin'. Just usually wait til the berries set on it, before ya start diggin' it, then you don't lose so much weight. And late in the fall, that top will get real yellow, and there you can see it for a long ways, what I mean it's easier to find, an then you don't lose so much weight when that top gets yellow, because what'ch ya dig is, that's just about the weight you'll have."

Ques.- "So all you do is save the roots from it?"

Ans.- "Yea, just the roots. You gotta wash it, dryit, fore you are ready to sell it."

Ques.- "Where does most of it end up at when you sell it."

Ans.- "The main market for it is uh, China an Korea. Now I sell to a man up between Connersville and Rushville and he sells it to the jobber in New York and then they export to China an Korea. Now what they get out of it over there I don't know or I Don't know what they do with it over there, but here in the states some of these companies, thay make medicine out of it."

Ques.- "If it's any of my business I was wondering about how much you could sell it for."

Ans.- "For about the past ten-twenty years I've sold from between 32 and 42 dollars. The past 4 or 5 years I've been

gettin' round 40 dollars. That is 40 dollars a pound."

Ques.- "How many roots do you have to collect to get a pound?"

Ans.- "Usually the root dug right in the fall will weight right around four ounces. So you can see that 4-5 roots will generally get ya 30-40 dollars.

Ques.- "Does anybody raise this ginseng commercially?"

Ans.- "Yes, I read a piece in the paper 3 or 4 months ago about this farmer in Trimble Co. that raised it and in five years paid for his farm. They said that he paid \$60,000 off for that and still had plenty of money to get by on.

Ques.- "Will the commercial ginseng sell for the same price."

Ans.- "No, the domestic ginseng ain't near as good as the wild stuff and'll only sell for 20-25 dollars. I don't know why for sure, but I imagine the fertilize they use hurts or weakens 'em somehow."

Ques.- "Are there any stories or tales you've heard relating to ginseng?"

Ans.- "Yes, I've always heard that ther's a five-pronged plant from good sources, but I never heard or believed it in all my years of diggin' until 2 years ago, come July, when I walked up on 5 of them in this one lil' patch. I had to see 'em to believe them and I did.

Ques.- "What kind of a tool do you use to dig the plant with?"

Ans.- "A grubbin' hoe."

Ques.- "How do you like to dig ginseng?"

Ans.- "I guess If I didn't like it I wouldn't have dug it so long. AS I get older, it seems I dig less and less, and I ain't able to get around like used to be when I was young.

It's a great hobby and the good thing is, is that it pays off.

Mr. Donald Stevens
R. R. # 2
Dillsboro, Indiana
Dearborn Co.