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BEFORE ME, AFTER ME, THROUGH ME:
STORIES OF FOOD AND COMMUNITY IN EASTERN KENTUCKY

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Mississippi

Abigail Huggins

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

This text contextualizes and presents twenty-three oral history interviews conducted in Eastern Kentucky during the summer of 2016 as a part of a Master of Arts thesis in Southern Studies. The interviews were conducted with people specifically connected to food, farming, and community activism in and near Letcher County, Kentucky. The interviews explore such topics as: past and present food traditions, seed saving, gardening, farming, food preservation, herbalism, local food systems, food access, youth, theater arts, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and Appalachian identity. This document complements an online collection of oral history excerpts created as an audio documentary portion of the overall project.

DEDICATION

This work is lovingly dedicated to Valerie Ison Horn who introduced me to folks throughout Letcher County and Greta Fields who offered kind hospitality and interesting conversation during my time there.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people who shared their insights and stories, both formally and informally, but especially: Glenn Brown, Helen Cooper, Gwen Johnson, Mable Johnson, Evelyn Kincer, John Craft, Greta Fields, Dock Frazier, Shane Lucas, Don Maggard, Debbie Adams, Colette Quillen, Bennett Quillen, Maggie Bowling, David Fisher, Daryl Royse, Harry Collins, Shad Baker, Valerie Ison Horn, Carol Ison, Brandon Jent, Alexia Ault, Devyn Creech, Sara Estep, and Kendall Bilbrey. I would also like to acknowledge the people who helped connect me to folks as I explored possibilities of an oral history project centered in Appalachian foodways including Lora Smith, Ethan Hamblin, Jenny Williams, Mae Humiston, Ivy Brashear, Jacob Mack-Boll, Kate Fowler, and Janet Kincer.

I am grateful for professors and staff at the University of Mississippi who have supported this project from its infancy and through its ongoing evolution including Catarina Passidomo, Andy Harper, Simone Delerme, Jessie Wilkerson, Katie McKee, Margaret Mairead Gaffney, and Sara Wood. And, I offer deep appreciation for my fellow Southern Studies students who encouraged this process throughout with their questions, insight, and humor.

Of course, I must also thank the people that came before me: especially Jan Mayberry Huggins and Dennis Huggins for their constant encouragement of education and their mothers: Avie Lee Huggins and Grace Frank Mayberry, who passed on the importance of a full table and spirit of curiosity, respectively.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMI – Appalachian Media Institute

CANE - Community Agricultural and Nutritional Enterprises, Inc.

CFA – Community Farm Alliance

KFTC – Kentuckians for the Commonwealth

MACED – Mountain Association for Community and Economic Development

MCHC – Mountain Comprehensive Health Corporation

STAY – The Stay Together Appalachian Youth Project

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING APPALCHIAN FOODWAYS THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

Rooted in oral history as a method, with attention to foodways, Appalachian Studies, and audio documentary, this thesis presents voices from Eastern Kentucky, as gathered through interviews conducted in and near Letcher County during the summer of 2016. This project began with a curiosity about past and present food practices in Appalachia, specifically farming, gardening, seed saving, preservation, ritual, and economic opportunity. Noticing a growing community of farmers, chefs, food activists, and scholars throughout the region, I began exploring the possibility of oral history based research of Appalachian foodways. The Appalachian Food Summit, which has been hosting annual gatherings since 2014, was instrumental in my initial connections. The Food Summit's mission is: "Honoring our past, celebrating our present, supporting a sustainable food future."¹ Indeed, in reflecting upon this past year's gathering, Ivy Brashear, a young Appalachian leader from Perry County, Kentucky, wrote:

¹ "Appalachian Food Summit," *Grow Appalachia*, accessed December 7, 2016. <https://growappalachia.berea.edu/afs/>

An entire regional history of migration and economic transitions can be told through our foodways. It's only fitting that we are now rediscovering ourselves through food – that greatest of equalizers – out of which we are attempting to mold one brick of our more solid economic foundation for the future.²

This trilogy of awareness – of past, present, and future – emerged among interviewees throughout my research. This interconnectedness across time was wisely expressed by Brandon Jent during our interview: “I want something that was important to people before me to be important to people after me, through me.”³ Oral history work can naturally evoke nostalgia for the past, as narrators reflect upon their lives. However, beyond reminiscing, interviewees for this project also illuminated their active contributions to their families, work, and communities in the present and their commitment to creating a viable and vibrant region for future generations.

Appalachian food has received national press as “the next big thing in American regional cooking” in a Washington Post article profiling chefs who are embracing cuisine with roots in Appalachian heritage ingredients.⁴ In an article that warns against fetishizing, yet considers Appalachian Foodways - specifically fried chicken and waffles - as an entry point for contemplating complexities of place and region, Elizabeth Engelhardt remarks:

[I]f we do this together, and if we do this right—by which I mean subtly, embracing all the

² Brashear, Ivy. “Appalachia is a borderland: Lessons from the third annual Appalachian Food Summit.” *Renew Appalachia*, September 20, 2016.

<http://www.appalachiantransition.org/appalachia-is-a-borderland-lessons-from-the-third-annual-appalachian-food-summit/>.

³ Brandon Jent, interview by Abby Huggins, July 18, 2016.

⁴ Black, Jane. “The next big thing in American regional cooking: Humble Appalachia.” *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/the-next-big-thing-in-american-regional-cooking-humble-appalachia/2016/03/28/77da176a-f06d-11e5-89c3-a647fcce95e0_story.html?utm_term=.2d09eab29e71

complications, not sinking into the easiness of the expected, the stereotypical, or the narratively seductive adventure—Appalachian foodways might be the best location from which to talk about the food stories and cultures we have inherited and enjoy, and from which we speak to one another. From this perspective, Appalachia is southern. It is American. It is global. It is glorious in all its complications...⁵

In *Victuals*, a recent travelogue, recipe collection, and history of Appalachian food, Ronni Lundy writes “about present-day people and places across the southern Appalachian Mountains and the ways their stories link to the past. It’s about the foods they make and eat, the gardens they grow, the lives they create. It’s a book full of recipes and a book full of voices.”⁶ Lundy’s book shows a dynamic and colorful Appalachia that many Appalachians are proud of. It evokes conversations of sustainable food systems as a part of transitioning economies. More than a celebratory cookbook, *Victuals* addresses history, diversity, community, economics, and land use through the lens of food. Lundy quotes Lora Smith on the value of food as common ground in polarized spaces. Lora, who wears many hats including Appalachian Food Summit board co-chair and farmer with her partner Joe Schroeder at Big Switch Farm in Egypt, Kentucky, expresses the role food can play in bridging past, present, and future in Appalachia. As people relate to one another around food traditions, conversations can lead to visions of food as a part of diverse and sustainable economies. Lora reflects:

⁵ Engelhardt, Elizabeth S.D. “Appalachian Chicken and Waffles: Countering Southern Food Fetishism.” *Southern Cultures* 21, no. 1 (2015): 80-81.

⁶ Lundy, Ronni. *Victuals: An Appalachian Journey, with Recipes*. (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2016), 16.

In my own experience, communities in the coalfields have been sharply divided... But people still unite around food, because food taps into much deeper values. So while no one wants to talk about extractive industries, water, the uncertain economic future, people love to talk about food: a homegrown tomato, fresh corn, the seeds you saved from your mamaw's garden, where a pawpaw tree is on your uncle's homeplace. Food creates this healing space where we can come together and talk about issues of sustainability and our future in a different way.

Everyone back home is proud of their garden or their granny's garden and that holds real value for people. The value of being able to produce our own food is something I believe Appalachians really want to hang on to. And that could provide the opportunity for local economic development and innovation as we navigate through some uncertain times ahead.⁷

Thus, I began this project of story collecting with food. I listened to tales of bean seeds saved for generations, family gardens, traditional Sunday dinners, putting food up for the winter, wild foraging, and the challenges of growing for market or owning a restaurant. I heard visions about the possibilities of food – of canning facilities, of reclaiming abandoned mine lands for growing fruits and nuts, of collaboration among farmers, of increasing production to respond to greater demand for fresh fruits and vegetables, of making food accessible and a part of inclusive community spaces. And similar to Lora Smith's insights, I heard about food as a way of bringing people together who might not normally interact. In discussing Grow Appalachia, which supports vegetable growers and organizes canning classes among many other activities, Valerie

⁷ Ibid, 296.

Horn shared, “there may be a former coal operator - and I use this example because it sticks out - and Sierra Club and they're deciding how much spices to put in their pickles together. And otherwise, those two people normally would not cross and they would normally not be working on a project together, and I like seeing that happen.”⁸

Some interviews deviated from food. As folks recommended other folks to interview, I found myself talking with activists and artists that didn't necessarily connect food as a major part of their personal narrative. Kendall Bilbrey, coordinator of The STAY (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) Project cautioned against romanticizing Appalachian food and culture to the neglect of community diversity:

And, it can't just be the same cutesy white people playing banjos and fiddles and making apple pies and shit. That's not everything. That is a big part of it. It's a cool part of it. I'm saying, I love to eat apple pie, I have a banjo sitting right there. But, it's like, it's not who our whole community is. And so, the more spaces that we can create that acknowledge that and create that space for someone else, I think that is what we have to do to be able to create a brighter and more inclusive future.⁹

So while this project began with food and remains largely about food, it also transcends food. More than anything, what threads this project together is the power of story and the value of voice in expression of joys, challenges, passions, hopes, and communities. The perspectives gathered during this project hold both individual and collective meaning. All of these voices intersect at a particular moment within the Southeastern Kentucky region of Appalachia, including Letcher, Harlan, Perry, Leslie, and Clay counties. Yet, the voiced experiences of

⁸ Valerie Horn, interview by Abby Huggins, August 4, 2016.

⁹ Kendall Bilbrey, interview by Abby Huggins, June 28, 2016.

narrators are far from homogenous. At times complementary, at other times contradictory, these interviews illuminate complexities of history, work, activism, and vision among the narrators. In these stories, there is both a deep awareness of heritage and a call not to be stuck in nostalgia for or blind to the oppressions of the past. There is traditional agrarian kinship and non-traditional embrace of chosen families. There are legacies of resilient ancestors and challenging family dynamics. There is optimism for future generations and an uncertainty of how the region will transition into new economies. These testimonies offer a variety of ways people contribute to their communities through farming, seed saving, neighborliness, food justice, creativity, community theater, LGBTQ+ advocacy, political organizing, and regional movement building. Many narrators demonstrate hope for communities where young people will have choice, opportunity, responsibility, and voice and express a determination to be a part of creating a region that is more fair, just, and open to diversity.

This collection of narrators' stories, reflections, and visions largely makes up the body of this thesis. The introduction gives context of place and discusses methods, philosophies of approach, scope, and limitations. It also explains how this project is organized in both written and documentary presentation. The body of the text centers in oral history excerpts from interviews, organized into three themes: Sharing Food and Heritage, Raising Food and Opportunity, and Growing Community and Justice. The conclusion reflects upon emergent themes with a sensitivity not to overgeneralize. The Appalachian region has long been stereotyped, categorized, and othered as a "strange land and peculiar people" through literature, film, and societal attitudes.¹⁰ The region continues to face both degrading and nostalgic

¹⁰ See Shapiro, Henry D. *Appalachia on our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1978); Satterwhite, Emily.

characterizations that ignore the complexities of economics, globalization, race, gender, sexuality, and environment. While this thesis draws commonalities among narrators, it does not claim to speak for the whole of Southeastern Kentucky or Appalachia or the South. This project documents the stories people chose to share in a certain moment in a certain place with a certain interviewer: me. Together, the repetitions, contradictions, individual experiences, and collective insights offer glimpses into the foodways, labor, and community care expressed by people in this specific context.

This work remains steadfast to belief in the power of people to speak for themselves. At its heart, this project hopes that the voices of the people who so graciously chose to tell about their lives and communities will be valued, appreciated, and heard. To collect stories is a precious thing. The responsibility of passing them on in a way that is true to their narrators is great. This project represents my best attempt to present these voices within the limitations and opportunities in my role as a Southern Studies Master of Arts student. As Helen Lewis, a scholar-activist and grandparent of the Appalachian Studies movement has said, “I guess our last word is stories are important. It’s important who names people and places, who tells the story, who constructs the history, who uses it and why, and how important it is that we keep revising, inventing, constructing, and deconstructing our history for our own survival.”¹¹

As stated, this project emerged from a simple interest in conducting oral history work with people connected to food. The idea evolved throughout its process and continues to, even in

Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Fiction since 1878. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Herb E. Smith, *Strangers and Kin: The History of the Hillbilly Image, Film*, directed by Herb E. Smith (1984; Whitesburg: Appalshop).

¹¹ Lewis, Helen Matthews, *Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia*, ed. Patricia Beaver and Judith Jennings (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 186.

its final stages. While attending Dumplin’s and Dancin’, a heritage food and dance weekend, at Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, Kentucky, I struck up conversations with folks connected to intersecting worlds of food and story.¹² I was curious to know what story collecting projects might be happening in the region. It was there that I learned about the Community Farm Alliance’s Breaking Beans Project, which documents the stories of farmers in Eastern Kentucky and has become a regular radio show on the local radio station, WMMT.¹³ It was also there that I spoke with Lora Smith, who welcomed my interest and put me in touch with folks who put me in touch with more folks. I spoke with people connected with farming, food study, food preservation, food access, gardening, seed saving, as well as documentary arts and oral history. The process of learning about various food efforts throughout the region felt like following bread crumbs - cornbread crumbs, beaten biscuit crumbs – each idea and person pointing me in the direction of the next.¹⁴ Eventually, I talked with Valerie Horn, who is connected with intersecting food initiatives in Letcher County including the Grow Appalachia program and Letcher County Farmers Market. Grow Appalachia is a regional network of sites that offer resources and support for home gardeners and market growers.¹⁵ The Letcher County Farmers’ Market is growing in its efforts to create a healthy, accessible community space.¹⁶ The

¹² Huggins, Abby. “Dumplin’s and Dancin’ in Appalachia,” *Southern Foodways Alliance*, December 17, 2015, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/dumplins-and-dancin-in-appalachia/>.

¹³ “Breaking Beans,” *Community Farm Alliance*, accessed December 7, 2016. <http://cfaky.org/category/breaking-beans/>.

¹⁴ For an explanation of the historic connotations of cornbread and beaten biscuits in the Kentucky mountains, see Engelhardt, Elizabeth S.D. *A Mess of Greens Southern Gender & Southern Food*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

¹⁵ “Grow Appalachia,” accessed December 7, 2016. <https://growappalachia.berea.edu>.

¹⁶ “Letcher County Farmers Market,” accessed December 7, 2016. <http://www.letchercountyfarmersmarket.com>.

combination of farmer advocacy and food access was an intriguing place to begin. Valerie's openness for me to come to Letcher County and willingness to introduce me to people throughout the community was an inspiration and catalyst for what follows.

In addition to the food initiatives happening in Letcher County, I was also drawn to the presence of the documentary arts organization Appalshop,¹⁷ the music events at Cowan Creek Community Center,¹⁸ as well as young activists involved in organizations such as The STAY (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) Project.¹⁹ Letcher County is also the home of Greta Fields, my generous host and the aunt of my friend Carrie Fields, who generously offered me a place to stay for the summer of my research.

Letcher County, located along the Virginia border in Southeastern Kentucky, like many surrounding counties in Central Appalachia, has been heavily impacted by the boom and decline of the coal industry. Ronald Eller's texts *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers* and *Uneven Ground* both offer thorough historical analysis of the impact of extractive industries on political economy and environment in Appalachia.²⁰ In recent times the Appalachian coal fields have been portrayed in the national media as both a place of hopeless poverty²¹ and a region where people are working on innovative economic transition efforts beyond the mono economy of

¹⁷ "Appalshop," accessed December 7, 2016. <https://www.appalshop.org>.

¹⁸ "Cowan Creek Mountain Music School," accessed December 7, 2016. <http://cowancreekmusic.org>.

¹⁹ "The STAY Project," accessed December 7, 2016. <http://www.thestayproject.com>.

²⁰ See Eller, Ronald D. *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982); Eller, Ronald D. *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

²¹ Lowrey, Annie. "What's the Matter with Eastern Kentucky?" *The New York Times*, June 26, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/magazine/whats-the-matter-with-eastern-kentucky.html?_r=0.

coal.²² Historically, the Appalachian region has been othered, romanticized, and looked down upon as an isolated, poor place and people of the past. Texts such as Henry Shapiro's *Appalachia on our Minds* and Emily Satterwhite's *Dear Appalachia* speak to the literary and social construction of Appalachian otherness throughout history. Appalachian exceptionalism could be considered a microcosm of Southern exceptionalism. As Ronald Eller notes in the forward to *Back Talk from Appalachia*:

Always part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty, and hopelessness once associated with the South as a whole. No other region of the United States today plays the role of the "other America" quite so persistently as Appalachia.²³

Eller's statement introduces a compilation of essays, edited by Dwight Billings, Gurney Norman, and Kathrine Ledford, that counter hillbilly tropes by identifying the roots and motivations of Appalachian stereotypes, giving voice to Appalachian writers and scholars' personal experiences, and identifying examples of regional agency and activism. Preceding *Back Talk*, Stephen Fisher's *Fighting Back in Appalachia* elucidates efforts of resistance in the region through grassroots citizen groups, labor struggles, and activism rooted in culture, class, and

²² Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. "Beyond Coal: Imagining Appalachia's Future" *The New York Times*, August 17, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/18/us/beyond-coal-imagining-appalachias-future.html>.

²³ Ronald D. Eller, forward to *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*, ed. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), ix.

gender equality.²⁴ A more recent ensemble of essays from Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith, *Transforming Places*, examines the challenges and opportunities of activism in an increasingly globalized region, as related to environment, urbanization, arts, youth, women's rights, immigration, multi-issue platforms, and statewide organizing.²⁵ Other theoretical texts, such as John Gaventa's *Power and Powerlessness* and Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee's *The Road to Poverty*, examine Appalachian resistance and poverty, identifying the complexities of relationships between outside powers and internal agency.²⁶ Environmental activism, specifically mountaintop removal, has appeared in recent creative fiction coming from the region, such as Robert Gipe's *Trampoline* and Silas House and Neela Vaswani's *Same Sun Here*.²⁷ Together, this literature speaks to the complicated history, oppressions, and various forms of resistance that are a part of the Appalachian mountains. In a paper presented at the Appalachian Studies Conference in 1980, Appalachian educator and activist Helen Lewis, together with Myles Horton of the Highlander Center, said:

In Appalachian Studies, we must not limit our programs to the exotic, romantic Appalachian cultural history. It is important to develop pride in the region's rich heritage, but it is also important to see Appalachia as a part of a worldwide process of development

²⁴ Fisher, Stephen L. *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

²⁵ Fisher, Stephen L. and Barbara Ellen Smith, *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

²⁶ See Gaventa, John. *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1980); Billings, Dwight B. and Kathleen M. Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁷ See Gipe, Robert, *Trampoline*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015); House, Silas and Neela Vaswani, *Same Sun Here*. (Somerville: Candlewick Press, 2013).

and change. We must deal with economic and political questions and build an understanding of what is happening in the region and how it is related to the global economic system.²⁸

Lewis and Horton's call for a balance between honoring heritage and existing in changing and connected world still holds relevance in Appalachia today. The coexistence of traditional understanding with evolving cultures, economies, and politics emerged from the interviews I conducted in Eastern Kentucky. Even in light of the limitations of my own research, this thesis argues for the presence of many Appalachias and many Eastern Kentuckys - just as there are many Souths²⁹ - that share complex histories, spaces, challenges, and opportunities. In an increasingly polarized national climate, a willingness to see the diversities and continue to coexist and support one another in community is essential.

Reflecting upon my approach and methodology, I connected with potential narrators in various ways. I spent time at the farmers' market, getting to know vegetable growers, many of whom allowed me to visit their land and interview them. I spent time with people who worked for Grow Appalachia, who then put me in touch with friends, relatives, and colleagues. The interviews used in this project were conducted among people I was getting to know in the community, or who had been introduced to me by someone in the community. Early on in the process, it became clear that I aimed to interview people based on relationships. I did not seek out a certain set of people, but let connections build as naturally as possible within the limitations

²⁸ Lewis, Helen Matthews, *Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia*, ed. Patricia Beaver and Judith Jennings (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 118.

²⁹ See Bibler, Michael. "Introduction: Smash the Mason-Dixon! Or Manifesting the Southern United States," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 131, no 1 (2016).

of time and place. In doing so, I developed a collection of stories from folks who fall into what Elizabeth Engelhardt calls the “broad middle,” a breadth of everyday people who exist in between the extreme ends of societal classifications, often underemphasized in the southern story.³⁰

With an interest in oral history, I did not approach interviews with a rigid set of questions or an argument to prove. As I interviewed narrators, I started by asking them to introduce themselves and tell me about where they were raised and the people who made up their community, offering follow up questions as needed. Beyond that, interviews were largely narrator driven, based on what people considered important to share. Narrators who have lived longer tended to reflect more upon their life histories and past experiences. In general, younger narrators were more likely to speak about their present work and communities. Interviewees of various ages shared their hopes for the future.

My initial understanding of oral history practice came through participation in a short course in oral history at the Center for Documentary Studies in Durham, North Carolina. Through graduate level courses in fieldwork techniques, filmmaking, and contemporary US History at the University of Mississippi, I have engaged further with oral history in theory, practice, and scholarship. I draw from several models of oral history philosophy including Alessandro Portelli’s *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, E. Patrick Johnson’s *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, and Shannon Elizabeth Bell’s *Our Roots Run Deep as*

³⁰ Engelhardt, Elizabeth S.D. *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender & Southern Food*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 12.

Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice.³¹ The interwoven voices shared in Portelli's text are the result of twenty-five years of relationships with people in Harlan County. He notes his role as an outsider, collecting stories in Eastern Kentucky from the perspective of someone from Italy. In a conversation with one of the narrators, Portelli quotes Mildred Shackelford saying: "But you're not trying to influence people or anything. All you're doing is trying to gather a little knowledge or get people to tell you stories, and they don't resent that." Portelli then reflects: "It was a lesson in the methodology of fieldwork: the most important things I had to offer were my ignorance and my desire to learn... I was there not to study them but to learn from and about them. It was what I didn't know that encouraged people to talk to me, knowing that they were helping instead of being "helped."³² E. Patrick Harris's *Sweet Tea* centers around interviews he conducted with black gay men throughout the South. Both authors show an awareness of their own presence as co-creators in the interview process, viewing oral history as a dynamic, relational performance between the interviewer and interviewee. Johnson comments, "their relationship becomes reciprocal, and the importance of dialogue cannot be overestimated. Instead of interviewer and interviewee occupying the traditional hierarchical positions, their encounter is analogous to an invitation to dinner in a southern home in which the researcher is the guest and is asked to help by shelling peas, chopping onions, or setting the table."³³ Through method and example, both authors demonstrate a fluid intimacy with the

³¹ See Portelli, Alessandro, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Johnson, E. Patrick, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008); Bell, Shannon Elizabeth. *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

³² Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 7.

³³ Johnson, *Sweet Tea*, 8.

people they interviewed. They model how oral historians can honor the stories they collect, respectful of the communities they engage with and aware of how their presence affects the performed narrative.

Portelli and Johnson's work heavily influenced my approach in this project. I understood our interviews as a shared performance at a moment in time between two – and occasionally three – people, knowing our interactions in that particular setting influenced the stories told and questions asked. I prioritized an openness to what narrators felt important to share about their own lives and communities. I tried to immerse in community, demonstrate trustworthiness, and honor the stories so generously shared. Oral history work is subjective and dependent on the exchanges among participants in a given space and time. As I communicate my engagement with this process, I do so knowing that my own biases, curiosities, personality traits, and connections were a part of co-creating this project alongside narrators.

Shannon Elizabeth Bell's *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed* is a collection of oral histories with twelve women from West Virginia. While the content is informative in realms of gender studies, environmental impact of the coal industry, and recent social activism in Appalachia, this text also serves as a model for presenting oral histories. Bell articulates her intention to center the text on the words of the narrators. In the introduction, she explains her methodology, editing choices, and common themes. In the conclusion, Bell expands her analysis to weave her insights with the words of the women she interviewed. The bulk of the text, however, is taken directly from the interviews. Bell organizes interview excerpts with minor contextualization from her own words. She has made some edits, but she expresses the intention to amplify the voices of these twelve women above her own. Bell's conclusion is especially

helpful in terms of drawing from Appalachian Studies and other scholarship to connect her interviews to larger environmental and feminist movements. Bell's structure guides my own presentation as I seek to center the majority of this text in the words of narrators, bookended with my own reflection of context, common themes, and contradictions.

Over the course of this project, I conducted twenty-three interviews, with twenty-five people, as a few people interviewed as pairs. I spoke with thirteen women, eleven men, and one person who is non-binary transgender. Two interviewees farm for their primary livelihood; seven farm to supplement other jobs or retirement; five others grow gardens for their friends and family. Four people are in leadership in non-profits; three others were working as VISTAs at the time of our interview. Five are former coal miners; four are retired educators. Five participate in community theater and several others are involved as volunteers in their communities in other ways. All of the people I interviewed could be considered white, with a few people who also claim Cherokee ancestry. Twenty of the narrators live in Letcher County, two in Harlan, one each in Perry, Leslie, and Clay counties. I didn't seek out a specific balance of socioeconomic status and did not classify people based on class, but make assumption that interviewees fall along the "broad middle" spectrum, not at either extreme of wealth or poverty.

The scope of this project is limited to the people I met during the two and a half months I stayed in Letcher County who were willing to be interviewed. Instead of an intentionally representative survey of all the people in a place, the stories I collected are based on human interactions, connections, and recommendations. I still prefer this relational approach, but with additional time and presence in the community, I would have ideally assembled a wider diversity of narrators including beneficiaries of the farmers' market programs, people of color, and more

people from the LGBTQ+ community. If this project were to expand, I would hope to include more people from these groups. In our interview, Brandon Jent reminded me of the need for more awareness and education about diverse Appalachian narratives:

I want our communities of color and our queer Appalachians to be more visible and to be accepted and loved in the way that I know they can be accepted and loved. Because at the end of the day, this is a loving and caring place and a giving place and a protective, clannish place that not just takes care of one another, but watches out for one another and protects one another at all costs. I want more visibility so that they can use their narratives to educate others than might not understand or that might be scared of the unknown aspects of that. To realize how this fits into the way that we're all raised here, which is to love and to care about one another.³⁴

The interview excerpts that follow are organized into three major themes: Sharing Food and Heritage, Raising Food and Opportunity, and Growing Community and Justice. These themes were loosely inspired by the sections in the collection of essays *Women of the Mountain South*, which includes topics of “identity, work, and activism.” All of the narrators in this project relate to one or more of these themes. I am including all of the excerpts from each narrator together into the category that most strongly correlates with their interview. While many interviewees relate to multiple categories, in attempt to maintain the character of narrators and prevent their voices from being lost in interwoven quotes, I keep all the quotes from each narrator together. Following the concept of “before, after, and through,” I give attention to excerpts where people shared history of people who came before them, hopes for people who

³⁴ Jent interview

will come after them, and how they connect past and future through the ways that they live in the present. I have minimally edited interview excerpts for brevity and to link similar ideas shared at different parts of the interview. While I aim to be true to the stories shared, I admit that there are choices I have made in what to include and what not to include in this thesis for the sake of length.³⁵ It is my hope that the choices made remain acceptable and authentic to the people who shared their stories. For each group of narrators, I offer an introduction and conclusion of the theme their interviews evoked. For each specific person, I give a brief introduction of our interview. Drawing from Johnson's work that merges story and academic writing, I aim to uphold this standard:

While I offer critical analysis and interpretation of the narrators' stories, I for the most part, allow them to speak in their own words. It is important to me that my "academic voice" be placed in the background in this regard. While I want to make the narrators' experiences accessible to my colleagues in academia, I don't want their life stories to be rendered in a way that makes them unrecognizable to the narrators themselves.³⁶

In addition to this written presentation of story pieces, I will also present a web accessible version of interview excerpts and portraits.³⁷ Using audio documentary paired with photography, I hope to provide a meaningful opportunity for others to listen to the wisdom, humor, gumption, and character living in these individual and collective voices. It is my hope that this combination

³⁵ Smith, Richard Cándida. "Publishing Oral History: Oral Exchange and Print Culture," in *Thinking About Oral History: Theories and Applications*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2008), 169-182.

³⁶ Johnson, *Sweet Tea*, 19-20.

³⁷ For audio interview excerpts and photography from this project see: "Before Me, After Me Through Me: Stories of Food and Community in Eastern Kentucky."

<http://ekyfoodstories.wordpress.com>.

of written and spoken words will demonstrate the power of narrative and the insights people have shared from their own lives in a certain place and time. With deep gratitude and sincere admiration, I pass on the following stories.

CHAPTER II

SHARING FOOD AND HERITAGE: STORIES OF FOODWAYS

Food is an expression of heritage for many of the people I interviewed who engage in saving seeds across generations, passing on family recipes, and studying herbs in the footsteps of ancestors. Food is interwoven in stories of extended families and communities coming together to put up food through bean stringings and corn shuckings, to take care of one another during difficult times, to celebrate one another over Sunday and holiday dinners. This chapter references six different interviews with seven narrators (as daughter and mother Gwen and Mable Johnson interviewed together). The interviewees in this chapter have a deep connection to the meaning and rituals of sharing food and if they keep a garden, they raise food for themselves and their friends or neighbors. The next chapter will be centered in voices of folks who also have a love of sharing food but are exploring avenues to make at least a portion of their livelihood from selling food. This project doesn't argue whether giving food away or selling food is better – culturally, economically - but recognizes that both ways of distributing vegetables have happened in the past and continue to happen. As Glenn Brown recounted during our interview, he helped his father peddle green beans as a child, but now highly prefers to freely give vegetables away to anyone who arrives at his door.³⁸

³⁸ Glenn Brown, interview by Abby Huggins, June 6, 2016.

These stories, perhaps more so than other chapters, may ere on the side of nostalgia. Narrators reflect upon the past and speak fondly of traditions that have continued into the present. John Craft comically recalled how his brother spent all day putting up beans in the old way over a wash tub and then complained: "I remember why we used to hate that so bad... Lord, they've killed me today packing water and packing wood and stuff. I've done that all day, I'm killed." John speaks with a profound respect for the knowledge of the elders who came before him, but laughs his brother's almost foolish forgetfulness of the demanding work of some foodways that were more common in the past.³⁹ Mable and Gwen Johnson shared similar day long outdoor canning memories and then laughed "Now, we put them in a pressure canner, cook them 25 minutes."⁴⁰ While these stories remember the past with fondness, they are expressions of the present.

In her interview, Greta Fields poses a challenge to be mindful not just of the previous generation or the next generation, but seven generations back and seven generations forward, as her Cherokee ancestors practiced. Greta's reflections on her Cherokee, Austrian, and chosen ancestors guide the way that she lives with ambitions of caring for the land wherever she is, respecting it as a home to those who came before, and preserving it for those who will follow. Greta has been deeply affected by the environmental impacts of water contamination and strip mining, and connects her inspiration to take care of the earth with a personal activism to counter the negative environmental forces happening around her.⁴¹ While the final chapter of interview excerpts centers around activism, it is important to note that narrators in this chapter are also

³⁹ John Craft, interview by Abby Huggins, August 4, 2016.

⁴⁰ Gwen and Mable Johnson, interview by Abby Huggins, July 18, 2016.

⁴¹ Greta Fields, interview by Abby Huggins, June 5, 2016.

activists as they save seeds, raise gardens, share with their neighbors, care for their communities, and pass on nourishment from the land around them.

This set of interview excerpts begins with Glenn Brown, an avid seed saver and gardener in his eighties who still saves the same bean varieties his father saved when Glenn was a child. It continues with Helen Cooper, Gwen and Mable Johnson, and Evelyn Kincer, who all exchange care with their extended families and neighbors through food. John Craft discusses the herbalism that his grandmothers practiced and attributes their knowledge of wild medicinal plants to connections with Native Americans in the area. Greta Fields also discusses her Native American, specifically Cherokee, roots as well as Austrian ancestry in remembrance of her parents and the values they passed on.

These interviews are rich in the foodways of saving seeds, growing gardens, cooking food, preserving food, and using medicinal plants. They mention sauerkraut, corn, beans, tomato juice, dumplings, gingerbread, among many other foods. They discuss methods of putting up food by the almanac signs and planting using biodynamic methods. Beyond stories of food, interviewees also emphasize the importance of education, philosophy, music, and dance. As with this project as a whole, I present these story pieces as individual voices that hold collective meaning. With this particular group of narrators, I witness an admiration for the people and land that came before and ways of passing on traditions with a dynamic awareness of the present generation and generations to come. Gwen Johnson discusses the evolution of cooking across generations in their family and goes on to describe the culinary abundance and diversity when many generations contribute to their family gatherings:

I tried to improve and learn some new things, on top of what mom did, on top of what her

mom taught her. And then, I came along and I learned a few different things and added somethings to the table that were a little bit different. And now I see my girls doing that same thing, which is pretty cool... But they're learning to do their own things and they're bringing those to the table, and now when we have a gathering, we don't have room to set all the dishes. You about need a separate kitchen to set all the different dishes that are brought to a gathering. Because now, we've got like five generations cooking, so that's pretty wild.”⁴²

This chapter honors spaces where five different generations can gather, bringing old and new expressions of nourishment and love, passed on and changed over time, all to the same overflowing table.

GLENN BROWN

Glenn Brown is a generous home gardener and avid seed saver who I met through Valerie Horn. After sharing meatloaf sandwiches and looking at family pictures at his house in Whitesburg, we sat outside in the shade on a swing for our interview. Glenn shared about growing up on Dry Fork and gardening with his family. He spoke fondly of attending high school at Pine Mountain Settlement School, across the mountain in Harlan County.⁴³ He told some stories of minor mischief and the chores he did as a student. He talked about meeting his wife,

⁴² Johnson interview

⁴³ For an analysis of the cultural politics of the settlement school movement, see Whisnant, David E. *All Things Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2009); For a perspective on settlement school foodways, see Engelhardt, Elizabeth S.D. *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

working for a feed company, training as an electrician, working to earn enough money to get a plot of land and build a house. He also talked about his love of gardening, which came from his father, and his methods for saving seeds. After our interview, Glenn showed me around his early summer garden and insisted I take home a mess of spring peas and a handful of fall sweet potatoes. Glenn has become a dear friend I have been fortunate enough to visit with many times since.

Yeah, we had a garden. Well, dad was lucky he had about five to six acres of bottomland, level land. But he had about a hundred acres of hillside, of woodland. But, we'd raise a lot of beans, corn on this bottomland. I remember when I was ten years old, I'd go out and gear the old horse up. And, we had, what you call a hillside turner plow. That you plow this way with it going, turn it one way going north, you'd have to raise your plow up, switch your blade over to head back south with it, turn it the same way. They called it hillside plow. Well, I'd plow all day with that hillside plow at that bottom. And we'd have corn in most of it. Save part of it out for hay. And, we had a regular garden we raised beans and corn. I guess I was about seven years old, far back as I can remember much, I'd help dad in the garden. I'd pull the weeds out around the corn and beans so that when they hoed it, they wouldn't have to bend over to get the weeds out to rake dirt around it. I just got to liking that. I didn't like it too good then, but it stuck with me for eighty year anyways [chuckles]. I guess you can say I liked it.

We raised a lot of the stuff we eat, because it was during the Depression. Coal mines around here was out of work, mostly. And, what they did work they just get a dollar and something a day. We raised a lot of corn. I thought we was just raising corn all summer long, feed that old mule during the winter, you know. But come to find out, we was feeding the cow

corn, we had it ground up into fine grain to feed the cow. And we had hogs, we'd feed the hogs corn. Chickens, they had to have corn. And we had to have corn for cornmeal for cornbread. So, I guess corn was the main item on the list, back in them days. And we canned a lot of beans, kept plenty of beans canned. Quite a lot of small stuff on the garden there, you know, to live by. Onions and, I can't remember, tomatoes, about everything people raise in a garden now, I guess the same thing, cabbage, a few other little items, you know, that we needed. But, it was pretty rough.

But, if we had to have more land, we had to go out and cut timber in the woods. Most of the people over there didn't have a fifty-foot square for a garden, you know, level land. They would cut this timber down, and, they couldn't plow it, but they'd go through with a mattock, dig it up, plant their corn in it. And a lot of places, you couldn't get enough dirt right handy to cover the corn with, to plant it. They'd reach up above it or beside of it, get enough on the hole or something to cover it with. We'd do that for about four years. Didn't have fertilizer to put on the corn. And, the soil would wear out in four or five years by raising it. So, every four or five years, you'd go cut another little strip of land and start all over again. Mostly, the whole Dry Fork Creek, both sides of the mountain, was in corn fields. We called it new grounds, when we cut them, you know. That was pretty rough doing on that, now. If I had my druthers, I'd just druther not do that [laughs]. But bottomland, you know, was easy compared to that.

Well, we'd have what they call a bean stringing, if you've ever heard of that. They'd make shucky beans, leather britches. A family would raise up, I guess, maybe five or six bushels of beans. And, they'd call it a bean stringing. They'd go up to the house, their house, you know, have four or five neighbors. Some of them would be stringing those beans, cleaning them, you

know. Another would have a needle and thread with a string on it. They'd just stick that needle through, and put them on, have them on big strings, shucky beans. Now, they put them in freezers, break them up and put them in freezers, mostly now. Then they'd, sometimes we'd have a little something to eat or, they'd call it, even bigger ones they'd have a party you know, have somebody singing the banjo or guitar or something. So, it just seemed more like friends, it did, instead of neighbors. But, most all of them got along pretty good, you know. All worked hard, had to. I guess most places around this part of the country is the same way. So, you couldn't move off and get you a good job. Some of them did finally at the end of it start going north, you know, to Ohio and Detroit, get work. There weren't too many of them that done that. As long as they could make it in the hollow, that's where we was at. We liked it.

All my seed beans, I pick the best ones out before I gather them. I leave them on the vine, you know, all my best beans. Sometimes I even leave a little section of it. Well, they turn yellow. Now that they get good and yellow, I pick them and lay them on the table, picnic table. Let them dry, until they, like shucky beans, you know. Then I hull them out and separate them. But, I've started putting them in the freezer now. Most of them, I put some in the jars because I can't, I have so many, I can't get them all in the freezer. But, most of the time, they keep four or five years. Every four or five, every year I take some out that I've got over four or five year old. I forgot how many I got, I guess about thirty-five now. I got two off of Bill Best, up here Saturday. Greasy, some kind of a greasy grit. I've heard of them, but I've never seen them. They don't even look like green beans, but that's what they are. And I got promised two or three more kinds, you know. Supposed to be good beans. I don't like these old Blue Lakes or something like that. They raise them, pick them with a machine, and no telling what's in them, besides they're not

any good to eat much. If you eat a good bean then eat a Blue Lake, you say, “What’s wrong with that bean?” [chuckles]. Not just Blue Lake, they’re all about that way. One’s I’ve got, my mainstay, I know they’re good beans. So I save the seeds of all them. And I’ve had at least five of them for eighty year myself. I don’t know how long dad had them before that.

Well, on a vine you can tell by looking at them, a pretty bean or something or other. My Big John’s, they’re prettier now than they were eighty year ago, I think. Because I pick out the best looking ones and save them, you know, to make sure they’re good ones. And you can about tell a tough bean, if you ever find a tough one, the hull sort of fiber like and it’ll be good and stiff when you break them open. When you find one like that, I just throw the whole thing away. That’s the reason I quit using half runners, what they call half runners around here. Half of them got to be tough. And, I quit raising them, but I found some this year that said they’re guaranteed to be tender. Come from Tennessee, I’ve got some planted out there. They’re about that high. If they’re good, I’m going to keep them because a half-runner’s a good bean if you get them not tough. And I got about five kinds of fall beans. A lot of people don’t like them, but the people who do like them would rather have them as the green beans. So I save the best seeds out of all them too.

I don’t know, I guess it’s in the blood [laughs] or something. I’m a nut, I guess about gardening, about the only thing I know. I’ve always liked it. I helped my dad. He’d sell those Big John seeds, peddle. I used to go peddling with him, he liked to go to these coal camps and peddle on beans and corn and chickens, sweet taters, anything that growed. He’d do that as good as to eat. And, he’d take me with him. He burnt me out on that, though. He said, you know in the coal camp, there’s a row of houses on this side of the street and one on that side. And he said, “You

take this row and I'll take that one." Well, some of them is pretty nice about it, buy stuff and buyers that are nice anyways. Some of them, "I don't want that old stuff." I can't stand that kind of talk, burnt me out on it pretty quick, that peddling. Now I give my stuff away. I did sell some for my brother when he had the Dry Fork market. He'd buy every bean I could raise. I couldn't raise enough for him, especially the Big Johns, that cornfield bean and the fall bean. He could sell more of them than I could raise in a lifetime, I guess. And he liked to sell them, because it was pretty and good too. I just got in in the blood I guess. ⁴⁴

HELEN COOPER

Helen Cooper is a kindhearted gardener, grandmother, and retired educator who is very involved at the Cowan Community Center and her church. I went over to her house on Kings Creek for our interview. She noted the different perspectives her parents had about food - her mother having grown up in a coal camp in Millstone, where they bought more food from the company store, versus her father, who grew up raising most of their food on Kings Creek. She shared about the importance of education within her family. She went to Berea College then became a classroom teacher, principal, and district supervisor for curriculum and instruction. She commented about how the school system has changed and grown more challenging over the years. Before and during the interview, Helen showed me a scrapbook of recipes her daughter Melanie made for her. Melanie interviewed different family members about their favorite recipes that Helen makes – the list included fried chicken, chicken and dumplings, meat and potatoes, cornbread, and various baked goods. Food is clearly an expression of love for Helen. She talked

⁴⁴ Brown interview

extensively about efforts among fellow community and church members to provide meals for each other when there is sickness or death in families. Helen has received that support from her community when she has lost loved ones, including two children and her husband. Helen is a part of Grow Appalachia and loves attending the canning classes at the community center. Helen showed me her garden and drove me around Kings Creek for a tour around the neighborhood.

Always, always. My dad when he got home from the mines would always hook the mule up to the plow and he plowed. And really, I never did do a whole lot in the garden. I helped after it was carried in the house. I strung beans, shuck corn, that kind of, I mean I helped do all that. And then, after my dad retired, he continued to raise a garden. But by that time, I had three small children and was teaching school, so in the evenings, I helped put up the food, but I didn't help do any work in the garden at that time. I can remember vividly, when I was, at some point in time, he would fertilize and I could go behind with a chain to spread the fertilizer through the furrow. That's the extent of what I really did in the garden. At some point, I can't remember exactly when that was, but I can remember doing that.

Well, now, when I empty a jar and wash it, I put a lid back on it. A ring and the little flat lid. So that I don't have to wash it so hard in the spring, I just have to rinse them good, you know, lightly. Well, somehow people didn't do that then and I don't know if they just didn't think of it or what. So, one of my jobs was always to wash the jars and they would be so nasty and just hard to wash. And so, I did a lot of jar washing. But I always helped break beans and for a long time, we froze our green beans, blanched them, you know. We'd have to blanch them, put them in the hot water just for a few minutes, then take them out and let them dry, make sure you get them

good and dry and cool, put them in the bags, put them in the freezer. I always helped do that. I always helped make tomato juice. Helped make kraut.

My friend and I were laughing the other day. Now we have all these raita stainless steel choppers and I burnt up a food processor two years ago making kraut because I used it too much, didn't even think about that. But, we were laughing that our mothers, when we were young, we made kraut by using, they cut the top off of an old, we called them cream cans, but it's evaporated milk, Carnation. Everybody had Carnation then. Boy, that was the sharpest thing, you could chop that kraut with it, it was incredible. I hadn't thought of that in years. We were just laughing about it the other day.

Let's see, kraut. Oh, one of the things I hated about helping, it was not about canning, but it was about the food. Then, people either dug a big hole and put potatoes in it and covered it over for the wintertime, to save them and to keep them from freezing. Or, if they didn't have a cellar, my dad, we didn't have a cellar, so we always had that big hole. Well, by springtime, a potato that had been that big would have shriveled to one like that. And my mother would put them in water three or four hours before she was going to peel them and let them spread back out. How I hated peeling those potatoes, that was the awfulest job.

Kraut, we always made kraut. Corn, we always put up corn, we put it in the freezer. My mother didn't do a whole lot of canning until later years. And I really don't know why. But, tomato juice, of course always went in a jar. I had to wash jars for that. But she usually froze beans and corn. And of course kraut, we put our kraut in jars, I'm sure I washed jars for that. A lot of people put it in those big urns and crocks and things, but my mother never did. My dad didn't raise a lot of odd stuff. I mean, squash, we never raised squash or zucchini. I don't really

remember raising green pepper when we were growing up. Beans, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage. I think that's probably the bulk of what he raised ever. My grandfather had a strawberry patch, but that was a lot of work. My dad thought he'd lost his mind, you know, just so much trouble to bend over, all that working with them so low to the ground.

I say all the time, [my mother] was a country girl, but she was a little less country than the women around here were. She did not like even trying to milk a cow. She didn't like chickens and that mess they left in their yard if they ran wild. And she didn't like gathering eggs and she sure didn't like getting pecked by them. She was raised about thirty miles from here, but it was a whole different world. It was a coal mining camp up there. At Millstone. Evidently, life was a little different... Well, I think they must have bought more of their stuff at the company store and I don't think her family did as much gardening and raising hogs and all that as my dad's family had done and then as he followed and did.

Actually, real difference in the way of thinking too. A very big difference there. I give my mother credit for seeing that we went to college. My dad had dropped out of high school when he was a junior. But oh my gosh, he was so smart. He could figure, math, it was incredible what he could figure. But, my mother walked about seven miles each way to go to high school during World War II. She had to walk down to catch a train or a bus. And she's ride the train to Neon, get off and then walk on to school. And they always carried their good shoes and wore old boots out to where they got on the train. They hid their boots in the bushes until they got back that evening and took their good shoes off and walked in the home with their boots on. I always found that fascinating. And that determination to have a high school diploma. And I think she is the person who just said, "You girls and Ronnie, you all will go to college." We grew up

knowing that high school was just one more step on the ladder. That was not common here. I was probably the first person on Kings Creek to go to college and my sister and I are probably, and my daughter, my goodness, I about left her out. I don't think there's another woman on Kings Creek with a college degree. It was just, my mother, like I said, was a little bit more forward thinking. and I'm thankful, grateful, always have been.

Well, the canning classes are a tremendous help to everybody, I think. In terms of they provide the vegetables that we can and, of course we don't have a lot. We might just have one or two jars or beans or we might have three or four jars of kraut when we're finished or something like that, depends on availability and all that. But they provide that. I know this time our message said to bring a bowl and a knife for chopping, I think that means to take a chopping board too if we're going to chop tomatoes and all that. But, they have been so good about providing to every participant a bag of canning salt, sometimes jars. That's a big help because of the expense of that kind of thing. When we made pickles, they provide that Mrs. Wages seasoning and it's very very good. I really like those flavors. And when we made salsa, they provided the Mrs. Wages seasoning packet. I was not familiar with any of that when I started going to the canning classes. My mother made pickles with, all I can really remember is, turmeric and two or three spices, you know pickling spice and canning salt and I don't know what else, I can't remember, it's been a long, long time. She used to make some that she used lime and you soaked them in that lime overnight or a day or two, I know that. I have just learned so much about different things. We made jelly over there. It's been a really good thing.

This is my third year, I think, to do [Grow Appalachia]. And I really have liked it. In fact, Grow Appalachia has turned our garden the last two years. One of their employees has turned it

up good and one of them came over and helped me lay off the rows for the first few things that I planted this year and helped me plant the potatoes. And, I'm actually getting ready to call and see if I can get him to help me take down the posts and vines, help me clean up the part where the beans were because it's time to get that done and I probably can't do it by myself. My grandson helps me some, but I think I told you he's got asthma and allergies and I'm careful about how much time I let him spend out there with weeds up over my head, you know, not weeds, but vines, bean vines and stuff. But, I like to go out in the morning and fool with it. But I have really, really enjoyed Grow Appalachia. It's been a wonderful thing. There's so much emphasis here on farmer's markets. I think Valerie [Horn] has done a magnificent job creating the interest in gardening that she has. Not only for people like me who just grow it for personal use and family use, but for the market. It's an incredible thing for our area, I think.

I do like, obviously, I like to learn. I can't help it. I just think it's - even now, I think it's exciting to learn new things... It would be a mighty dull world if you couldn't learn, I think... I've just had some wonderfully good experiences in my life. Feel like I've been blessed in a million ways. Had a lot of heartache, God knows I've had plenty of that too. But, I've also had a lot of rewards.⁴⁵

GWEN AND MABLE JOHNSON

Gwen and Mable Johnson are a daughter and mother who live in the Hemphill community. They met me at the Hemphill Community Center for our interview. The community center used to be a school but now serves as a space where community and family events

⁴⁵ Helen Cooper, interview by Abby Huggins, August 1, 2016.

happen, including weekly Friday night music and dancing. Gwen is a friend of Valerie Horn's and Mable is her mother. They are both involved in leadership of the community center. Mable enjoyed telling stories, especially about family, food, and doing things by the almanac signs. She had to leave for a funeral visitation during our interview, but Gwen continued sharing about her own life, education, traditions, musicianship, community involvement, and dedication to home. Our interview was very conversational as Gwen and Mable prompted each other to share memories. To capture the spirit of our interactions, I present their excerpts more as a dialogue than other narrators. After our recorded interview, Gwen and I continued to talk about more about politics, faith, music, and feminism. Outside of the community center, there is a monument to coal miners who were killed in mines from Letcher County. Gwen pointed out names of her own brother and uncles who died in the mines.

Gwen: Tell her about supertime at mamaw's house, mommy.

Mable: Supertime, what do you mean?

Gwen: Like when the family would gather for supper.

Mable: Oh. They had been outside playing, working. Our mommy cooked on a coal stove. And, we never had electricity until later in life. But, we had a big long table, you know there was twelve children [laughs]... Wooden, had a bench, both sides we had benches. And our food is so good. And you was talking about food. Our mother could cook dumplings. I've got a recipe for - what do you call it - homemade macaroni. That's an old thing in our family. And also, I made chocolate syrup, they all loved that.

Gwen: To eat with biscuits in the mornings.

Mable: And our mother would make cornbread in a big pan, she'd make like two ponies in that

pan, you talk about good [laughs].

Abby: So you remember dumplings and cornbread and homemade macaroni.

Mable: Yes, and big skillet of fried potatoes, we had our own hogs and everything. Now, we did not go hungry, never.

Gwen: So what was a typical supper on a weekday mommy?

Mable: Weekday, garden stuff - fried potatoes - well, she'd fry meat too. One time when I was probably about eight years old, I was going to make cornbread. Climbed onto a wooden cabinet [to Gwen:] I don't know if I ever told you all. And made a pone of cornbread. I thought I got baking powder, it was lye [laughs]. My mother found it out quick. But I always helped her cook.

Gwen: That's crazy.

Abby: I'm glad she caught that.

Gwen: What about a Sunday dinner at mamaw's house?

Mable: Sunday dinner - fried chicken, dumplings, cured meat, we had that. Hams, big sweet potatoes, raised all kinds of stuff, and she canned too.

Abby: Yeah, tell me more about the kind of food she put up.

Mable: Green beans, everything. Peppers. Corn. Now we didn't have a freezer then. And, we would can corn and beans outside in a washtub. What you do is fill the jars, put them in a big three-bushel tub, pad rags or paper boxes around them. Build you a fire under it, her papaw on her daddy's side would cook them from daylight to dark.

Gwen: I used to help carry the water and help stoke the fire under the tubs.

Mable: And they'd say, "If it rains now, we got to put a piece of tin on top of them or all the jars would bust."

Gwen: It's the cold water as versus the hot water, the temperature change would break the jars. And the padding between them is because when they start cooking, they jiggle around and hit against each other and they'll bust that way.

Mable: Now, we put them in a pressure canner, cook them 25 minutes [laughs].

Gwen: So, talk about pickled stuff, mommy.

Mable: Oh, she'd have big churns of crocks, we called them. And she was a real clean person and she'd keep her churns real clean. You had to weight them down when you put your beans and corn in. You had to put your salt water weighed down. So, sometimes she would go to the creek, get her some big rocks, clean them up real pretty. Or, put plates on top.

Gwen: To weigh them down so they wouldn't float on top of the water.

Mable: And when they pickled corn, us children would sneak and run our arms down and get some.

Gwen: I bet their hands wasn't clean.

Mable: You talk about it. It was really good. She canned jellies – and I was telling Misty about this. She didn't have canning lids, and she would take pieces of paper, like, back then, that kind of wallpaper was big heavy stuff and she would cut out from a jar and make her own glue. And glue that on. And that's how she kept her jelly.

Gwen: Because it didn't have to seal.

Mable: No. But, the kind of lids we used then was - what do you call that - zinc, I guess, and it had a glass lid up in it, and you had a rubber ring that went on the jar and you put the lid on.

Gwen: Now, tell her about the apple butter.

Mable: And bleaching the apples too. For bleaching the apples, you peel them and cut them up,

like quarter them up, and they would churn like I told you... You put your apples in there, take your little dish or saucer and put you some sulfur in there. But first, you put you some little sticks, like four or five little sticks, clean, and pour your sulfur on that, and strike a match to it, and throw a rag over that and it would bleach them apples white as snow and little bit of the sulfur taste would get in it. Sandy never did like them. Can you remember?

Gwen: I love them. I think they taste really great. They're an odd taste, but they're good.

Mable: Gwen, I have my mommy telling a story and your daddy on a tape on how to do that, how to make homemade macaroni and hominy.

Gwen: And hominy?

Mable: Yep, we made it too.

Gwen: Now, mom still makes great apple butter. So, talk to her about how mamaw done that and how you changed it.

Mable: Well, my mother would cook it in a dishpan. She didn't have a blade like we do. But, I cut my apples and quartered them up, but you have to find a good apple - you can't use just any kind - find one that will cook up, clean them up, put them in a big canner, put a little water, say like a quart, and cook them until they start cooking up. Then, have your apple butter press, and press all of that through, put them back on the stove, have your spice - I like cinnamon and allspice. Then you heat that again, put it in jars. It is good, I declare.

Gwen: It's delicious, mom makes it with cinnamon oil.

Mable: Yes, cinnamon oil.

Gwen: That she goes to the drugstore and buys.

Mable: And I make it pretty hot too. Yeah, it's good.

Gwen: It's kind of spicy, if you eat very much of it, your tongue will get numb.

Abby: Where would y'all get the apples from? Did you have trees?

Mable: Yes, had our own trees.

Gwen: We had a horse apple in the yard at mom's for a long time, it's gone now, that tree.

Mable: We had to cut it down, it grew through the power lines.

Gwen: But she likes, tell her what kinds of apples.

Mable: Horse apples, Winesap.

Gwen: Granny smith, you can make it out of them.

Mable: Granny smith, that's good but they're a little thin when you cook them... So if you ever can that's what you can. Do you?

Abby: Do I can? Sometimes, I like to make jam. And, mom and I often make apple butter in the fall or winter. And I like sauerkraut as well.

Gwen: Mom makes a beautiful kraut.

Mable: I started to do it today, but I decided to wait. I'm not thinking my cabbage is ready.

Gwen: Tell her about canning by the signs.

Mable: Yes, her grandmother taught me that. You have to look at the calendar, if you put anything up when the signs are in the bowels, it smells, and if you put it up when the signs are in the head it will blow up. So, your best time is the thighs or the knees. And, when you wean your babies, if you'll go by the signs, they're nothing.

Gwen: No, it's easy. Because, we raised our youngins on the breast. Mom told me that about weaning them, she said, when you start weaning them when the signs are in the knees, by the time they go out the feet, they'll be weaned. And they are.

Mable: That's true. Sure works.

Abby: And you're talking about the farmers' almanac? Using that?

Gwen: Or just using an almanac calendar - a lot of businesses will give out almanac calendars and we just usually use one of them. But, I love the farmers' almanac.

Mable: I never could hardly see into that farmers' almanac.

Gwen: And the ladies' birthday almanac, some of the businesses used to give those away, a little booklet. And they're real cool too. But, those calendars are so easy, you just walk up to that calendar and it will tell you what sign it is.

Mable: That's really why I didn't make it today, because the sign goes out of the knees tomorrow. And I never did do it like that. I was afraid I'd lose it.

Abby: Would your parents also pay attention to that?

Mable: If my mother did, I never did know it.

Gwen: But my grandmother on my dad's side was who taught mom.

Mable: Yes, she taught me that about weaning babies and canning. If mommy did, I guess I was just too young to pay attention, like trying to make the cornbread [laughs].

Abby: Or any planting by the signs, in the garden?

Mable: But, her papaw, people would say, you're planting at the wrong time. He would say, I'm not planting it in the moon, I'm planting it in the ground.

Gwen: But, there are a lot of things we do by the signs - I don't trim my hair until the moon's in the new of the moon on the increase because then your hair grows stronger and faster. If you trim it in the new moon to the full, then it does better.

Abby: Interesting, I know someone that only trims her hair on the full moon.

Gwen: And that's when it's just about - if you got it a little bit over, then you'd stunt the growth of your hair until the next time you cut it [laughs]. So, when it's waxing, I'll trim mine, but when it's waning, I won't.

Mable: That's why I didn't do the kraut today, I was afraid I'd mess up.

Gwen: So tell her how you do the kraut, mommy.

Mable: Well, you gather your cabbage, wash it good and clean. We cut a big dish pan full with a big knife, just slice it. Then we take it with a chopper, chop it. Now, some people put it in a blender, I never did. We just chop it. Then you put a big tablespoon of coarse salt into boiling water, little bit of vinegar, little bit of sugar, like a tablespoon.

Gwen: And it's white as it can be, and it's really crispy, good.

Mable: There's one woman here in the senior citizen's, she said, "my kraut turns brown every time I make it." And also, I put it in a block building until it begins to snow and then I move it into the house. But, this woman said she put hers under the sink and it was too hot in the house.

Abby: Are you putting it in a crock?

Mable: No, I put mine in the jars when I chop it. We'd used to put it in the crock and let it sit nine days. We just decided to try it the other way, to make it, put it in the jar first, just as good.

Abby: Gwen, what about food growing up for you in your mom's house? What memories do you have?

Gwen: Well, always supper on the table when you got in from school because daddy would get in from work not long from that time. And so, there'd be supper on the table, and then there'd be work to do after that. And then, maybe homework every evening. But, we ate taters and beans most days - fried potatoes and pinto beans and cornbread on the weekdays. And sometimes we'd

have something different. Sometimes there'd be meatloaf and sometimes there'd be homemade macaroni that she talked about. Sometimes there'd be a dessert, just different things. But now, on special occasions, the food was different. We'd have ham and turkey on holidays, and we still do. We still have ham and turkey [laughs].

Mable: Or pies, cakes. She's a great cook too.

Gwen: Custard, cream pies. Well, I think, I tried to improve and learn some new things, on top of what mom did, on top of what her mom taught her. And then, I came along and I learned a few different things and added some things to the table that were a little bit different. And now I see my girls doing that same thing, which is pretty cool.

Abby: Can you give an example?

Gwen: Well, growing up, we just had the regular, well, let's take thanksgiving for instance.

There'd be a turkey and dressing - mom makes awesome dressing [laughs] - and desserts and mashed potatoes and peas and corn and the things that were put up during the summer would be added to the table. And, maybe bowl of coleslaw. And then I came along, and there'd always be some dessert, there'd be those custard pies that mom was talking about.

Mable: Cream pies.

Gwen: And banana pudding, things like that. Well then, I came along, I started learning to cook, and so, at Thanksgiving, I might come in with a bowl of pasta salad.

Mable: A bowl? [laughs]

Gwen: Well, we got a bunch, it's like a double batch, whatever you fix. And I might come in with a chocolate layer dessert or a creamed cake or I remember one time I got the recipe for an Italian cream cake and it was the best things we ever had, it just tasted so good. So, things kept

evolving, and then I learned to make some hot rolls and sometimes I bring them. And so, now my girls come to Thanksgiving, and they have their own brand of cooking and they add a few more unusual things. And as the kids have grown up and learned to cook - and then, the boys are all hunters, so we always have venison and we have been known to have rabbit and squirrel and all kinds of different things [laughs].

Mable: Used to, that was the thing for your Thanksgiving. The men would go out rabbit hunting while the women was cooking. Bring us in a rabbit.

Gwen: So, I watch it now, the girls are coming in with their own kind of take on cornbread salad and peanut butter pies and all these different things that the girls are kind of perfecting. Like, my daughter has been learning to make most amazing cheesecakes. [To Mable:] You've not had that yet. Sarah. Oh my God, they're awesome. But they're learning to do their own things and they're bringing those to the table, and now when we have a gathering, we don't have enough room to set all the dishes. You about need a separate kitchen to set all the different dishes that are brought to a gathering. Because now, we've got like five generations cooking, so that's pretty wild [laughs].

Mable: We come here [to the community center] for Christmas.

Gwen: We've come here, like on Christmas Eve and rented the center when the weather is bad because if the weather is so bad they can't get outside, mom's house won't hold us all. And so, we're on the porches, we're out in the yard [laughs].

Mable: One thing we've not covered: gingerbread.

Gwen: Yeah, we need to talk about that.

Mable: She can make it too. I use plain flour, eggs, lard, plenty of ginger, brown sugar, and I

make mine up with my hands like biscuits, put it out in little cakes. And then, with my recipe, I can make a bread pan full of the biscuits and make a cake. I'll make two layers and then I'll split them, which makes four. And put some of that apple butter on them. Man, it's good.

Gwen: She's awesome. But I learned that gingerbread recipe came from my Grandma Johnson. And I watched her one day, and I wrote down, she didn't use cups. So in my original recipe that I wrote down, it said a glass of buttermilk. It wasn't an actual measurement, and a pinch this and a pinch of that, and a handful of this and a handful of that. So, that's how she cooked. We then adapted it to cups and spoons and that sort of thing, but that's how the recipe was saved.

Mable: Well, when I went to her and ask her for it, she said, "honey, I don't have a recipe." And that's how she did it.

Gwen: [What keeps me here is] the culture. And it being our heritage. And my kind of being a collector of stories and hanging out with the old people all my life, I've always had friends. When I was a little kid, one of my very best friends of my whole life lived around the curve down here. And she was a widow and she just lived in a little old house down here. The house is gone now. But I would go after my chores were done in the evening and hang out with her a little while. Her name was Angeline. And I would hang out down at Angeline's and people couldn't figure out, why do you want to go down to Angeline's? But she would tell me stories. And my grandparents, I would hang out with them all the time and they'd tell me stories and so, I kind of been a collector of stories in my head. And when I look around, I see the stories and I don't want to leave the stories.

And it always bothers me when the young people leave. That's why, we've got to dream up some things to keep them here. We've got to give them something that's so positive they can't

turn loose of it. For me, that's been the stories and the music, in my life. My mom, I guess you notice her voice, she sung all her life. But then, I thought she might have Parkinson's, but we took her for all the testing and she has what Audrey Hepburn had, Spasmodic Dysphonia. And the first time, you know it happened so gradual, I wasn't paying much attention to it. And people would say, "Have you noticed your mom's voice?" And I'd say, "Well, you know, not really." And then, one day it dawned on me that this tremor had happened. And she said, "Gwen honey, mommy can't sing no more." Which was really sad. Because she sung all her life. You know, she and all her friends would gather on the back porch and sing, just without any music, just sing.

They sang church songs. And they'd go early, about an hour early to church until you could hear them all over the community. Just sing. Go to funerals and sing, go to reunions and sing. Just sing, everywhere. Under shade trees.

There were a number of old time musicians around here. You know, a lot of them have died and gone on, but when I was just learning to play guitar, there were a number of them. I used to have a little grocery store up here, across from mom. She and dad had a grocery store in their house, and then I put a little grocery store in a building that was on the same property, but right across from mom's house. And I used to keep a guitar there and a coffee pot, and that's really all you had to have to attract musicians like flies into that place. And then, it kind of evolved and on Friday and Saturday nights we'd have a big jam session. And I sold feed, and we'd have feed sacks, you know, of animal feed sitting around, and everybody would use them for chairs and set on them and pick until the wee hours of the morning and have the best time ever. Just keep the coffee pot going... that was in the late 80s. It's probably been, that's a long time now, when you think about that. And my dad used to have pickings in that same building

before there was electricity or windows in it. And everybody would gather round. He'd hang lanterns and they'd pick. So, dad wasn't a musician. Mom was a singer and dad would sing, he'd sing bass. But they always did shape note singing. And the reason I couldn't get a guitar all the time growing up was because they said I would play in a bar or play in church and they didn't believe in playing music in church. So, I didn't get a guitar until I was grown, that's why I never learned to play it well.⁴⁶

EVELYN KINCER

Evelyn Kincer lives on Pine Creek, where she has lived for much of her adult life and raised most of her ten children there, along with her husband Graham, who has passed away. At ninety-two, Evelyn was the eldest person I interviewed. I met Evelyn through her daughter, Kim, who is a friend of Valerie Horn's. She talked a lot about the importance of church to her and her family as well as the tradition of Sunday dinners at her house. Her extended family prepares a feast for every Sunday after church for twenty or twenty-five family members. The table, kitchen, and porches are full of relatives. She talked some about her large family growing up in the Millstone and Mayking areas and the large family she raised. After our short recorded interview, we looked at family pictures, shared supper, and sat on the porch overlooking her family's garden.

Back then, we had big families to feed. You might not want me to say this, we always had hogs to kill for our meat, always did. And then he would raise big gardens, I would can a lot of beans and potatoes around to keep. Because we had a big family to feed. But did you know,

⁴⁶ Johnson interview

we've lived in this house all of our lives? All of our lives. Three of my children was born right here in this room. But we have, the Lord had been so good to us, all you can do is thank him. This table here is filled every Sunday with our family, children. My children and their children and anybody who wants to come along. We get up, we plan now for dinner for Sunday dinner, we have us meat, green beans, corn bread, everything, make a cake, pie, pudding. We do now, every Sunday, we work on it on Saturday and then on Sunday we get up and go to church and Sunday school ... For the rest of our family, they live, got children, grandchildren, daughters in law, sons in law, everything just surrounds us and we just love it. Have I said enough?

My husband now, say it this way, he retired from the coal mines, but he would farm and put out a big garden and stuff. But now, my daddy, he was a farmer too. His short name was Pat Fleener but his real name was William Wesley Fleener... And mommy, she had the big house full of kids too. Just like here, there was nothing wasted. I mean, I would can everything I would get a hold of, and put it up, dry beans, shucky beans, canned beans. We'd have a big cabbage patch, we'd put away a lot of kraut and it was just a good living life because we all worked and lived.

This is the home all my kids have had. All of us, they come, just come. Our children come, they bring their children and their grandchildren and this is just a Sunday home for all of us. They come, we almost all of us try to go to Sunday school and church... We bake hams, we maybe have fresh green beans I'm cooking. But now [my daughter] Joy, her name's Joy Celine... she comes down and she goes ahead and gets dinner cooked, bakes cornbread and some of us always bakes a cake or banana pudding on Saturday and we set this table sometimes twice. That's what this home is for, for the rest, for all of them. They know that this is a home they are welcome in and treated good. We love them. It's just great for them to come, you know. And to

see this table filled up, and sometimes eat in there [in the living room] and fix the kids' stuff. And I mean, this is every Sunday. And if I had time, don't know if you've got time, I would show you our family out there in pictures. You reckon I have time? Let's see what time is it?⁴⁷

JOHN CRAFT

John Craft is a wild forager who I met through Randy Wilson of Hindman Settlement School. John lives with his family in Leslie County, surrounded by gardens, flowers, and fruit trees. We conducted our interview in his living room, decorated with with old family pictures, instruments, artwork, and full bookshelves. John is related to the Craft family who came from Wilkes County, North Carolina (where some of my people are from) and originally settled this area in the 18th century. He grew up in Letcher and Perry counties. John talked about his grandmothers who both used medicinal plants in various syrups, tinctures, and remedies. Though a lot of the details of their plant practices were lost, he draws inspiration from their ways of being and seeks learning from books and other people. John talked about his work mining as well as the work he currently does teaching music at a residential youth treatment facility. As a hobby, he grows and forages food and medicine, with an interest in things like mushrooms, ginseng, bloodroot, yellow root, and spring greens.

My mother's mom and dad were Halls from Letcher County. Actually, just across the mountain from where my dad lived. And that's my mother's mother [pointing to a picture on the wall]. We called her Mommy Hall. That's actually a picture of her in her front yard. She didn't have grass and stuff [laughs]. She had plants and flowers and stuff. She had everything in the

⁴⁷ Evelyn Kincer, interview by Abby Huggins, July 15, 2016.

world in that yard, everything you can think of. You know, she was the one that always made all this herbal stuff. Everything you could think of, it was horrible. She'd hold your nose and pour it down your - "Here, you got to take this." Yeah, did all kinds of stuff like that. And, you know, I wish, I was so little though, I remember some of the stuff, but there was a lot of it, man, like all of these tree barks and stuff that she used and I don't know how to use it because I don't - nobody older than me in my family was really interested in that stuff. That was in the 50s and early 60s and everybody here was trying to get out of here to get a job.

That's her walking through that yard, down in front, on the front porch, and it was all around her house from the house all the way down to the creek and all the way around the chicken house was kind of up in the holler on that side of the house and it was all them plants, every kind of plant you could think of. Echinacea and mulling and all every kind of mint you could think of. And, that sweet shrub stuff, do you know what that is? It's them little purple things, smell really good. Now she used that for something too in medicine, but I don't know how she used it. But now, one of the things she used to do, she'd make us pick that and put it in little cloth bags and put it in the clothes and make your clothes smell good, it was like a potpourri, sachet or whatever you call it, that's what she'd call it, sachet.

I tell you what now, see that big apron she had on? She would take a butcher knife and stick it in a pocket in that apron and take off up in the hills and she had a way she could, she'd pull, it went all the way to the ground and she'd pull that thing up and take the strings, tie it and have a string around her, up here too most of the time, some of them did. She had some way that she'd take them strings and tie them over her shoulders and she'd fill that thing up, man. It'd be like a bushel basket of stuff, bark, roots, berries, everything you can think of, man. And then, she

had a certain way that she fixed different things. Some stuff, you just made tea out of. Some stuff you had to boil it for two days. She had certain way. And some stuff, she'd put in whiskey.

Like she had them, I've got some of them out here that come off hers, them poppies. And she'd take whiskey and when them poppy flowers fell off and them big bulbs, she'd cut them stems off and cut them up in little chunks and put them in a jar and pour that whiskey on them and seal it up and set it up in the window and it'd turn black. And when it turned black, if somebody got hurt, she'd give you a tablespoon, "Here, take a tablespoon of this, you need this" [laughs]. That was old time. That was before all the laws and stuff. Probably not Native American because that was Oriental. Probably came with the railroads, with them Orientals that they brought in here to make the railroads. Probably where they come from.

So, I think that they shared knowledge. Different cultures. When they found something that worked, they used it, and she had a big bed of them that grewed every year. She wouldn't let nobody fool with that but her. You'd get whapped over that [laughs]. Getting in her flowers. "You can't get in my flowers, them will make you sick."

My uncle told me, my grandpa [on the other side of the family] was a preacher too. And he wouldn't allow liquor on his place, but my grandma made medicine out of it. So, Chunk made the whiskey, but he lived on the other side of the mountain. And, my uncle told me that Grandpa Chunk would walk from Craft's Colley across the mountain and to the head of Millstone and carry a half a gallon of whiskey and he said always carried it like that right there and had a big walking stick. And he said, he would walk up, my uncle said he would walk up to the fence and stay in the road and not come inside the fence with it and he'd holler: "Hey, Pricey, I brought your dram to you." And she'd come out and get the whiskey and take it and hide it from my

grandpa, because she made medicine out of it, she made tinctures and stuff... All kinds of stuff, yellow root, bloodroot, white oak bark, mulling, clovers, willow.

Different sides of the family, but they all knew the same stuff. And I think a lot of that stuff was Native American stuff that they learned from them Indians. Because a long time ago, there was no roads, there was no doctors, up until about, right around 1900, there were no doctors at all. None. And it was, they learned from the Native people here, is what I think. They figured out what worked and they used it.

[I've learned through] studying. I've known a bunch of these old herbalists and I've always tried to make contact with them and learn what they know about this stuff. And it was really hard, man, until just recently, until the computers, because every little clan and every little group called the plants by different names. And so, you could have four names for the same plant, right? Just depends on who you talk to [laughs]. Like over in here, that black cohosh, they call that rattleweed over in here. That's what everybody in here calls it.

Well, my grandma and my uncles, my dad's brothers, they knew a bunch of this stuff too. They knew certain things. Then, when I got over in here, there was a couple of them herbal people over in here, these old timers and I learned from them. There's an old woman that lives down the road here that's still alive that lives out of the hills, she really does. She makes this cold medicine stuff that really works. It's not too bad, don't taste too bad, either. Her biggest herb that she uses is pennyroyal. You know what pennyroyal is? It's an herb that the Native Americans – it's, I don't know, but they used it for birth control. It was a birth control herb. And she makes this stuff and it don't taste too bad, man. She uses two or three of these mints, these wild mints that grow. And roots and this stuff, she calls it tangle gut, but it keeps your stomach from

cramping. I learned a lot of stuff from her, I learned a lot of them herbs from her. We'd get out and walk through the hills, I'd go with her when she'd go gather, gather that stuff up.

I think she said, like that cold remedy that she makes, she puts twelve different herbs in it, barks and roots and then she boils it and boils it and boils it and boils it for a long time. And then she puts it in jars and she pours a little bit of whiskey on top of it that keeps it from, she does keep it in the refrigerator. That stuff works, man. You can have a cold and take you two or three big doses of that stuff and it goes away [laughs].

We always had a big garden, Lord, they'd work you to death in that thing... [My dad] raised a big garden every year, him and my mom did, golly. I've seen us have a pick-up truck load of green beans to work up. But now, there was several families involved in that, it wasn't just us. My uncles, their families would have one of them big bean stringings and they'd can a bunch of them and string a bunch of them to dry, you know.

It was just for us. Sometimes, if somebody needed some beans, they'd sell them to them, or corn or something like that, tomatoes, bushel of tomatoes. No, they didn't sell stuff... Everybody didn't [grow a big garden]. Back then, man, the big deal was working in the mines. And you'd get these guys, like some people in my family and they'd work, like my uncle Benny, sometimes Dad and my uncle and them would take stuff up to Uncle Benny because he'd work so much he wouldn't have time to raise a garden.

I tell you what, mommy every year made 500 cans of stuff, every year. Everything you could think of. I've seen mama can sausage. Deer meat, canned deer meat. Canned fish, we'd go fishing, she'd can fish. Can everything in the world. To make 500 cans of stuff.

[To Leslie:] Do you remember all that stuff that was up there in the basement...all that stuff down there? That was stuff mom canned... make pickled corn and pickled beans and kraut.

My brother here, about two or three years ago, somebody that he knew down there in Tennessee had made this big, raised the awfulest bunch of beans there was. And they're in some kind of cooperative where each family just raises one thing. Like one guy raises all the potatoes and one guy raises all the apples. And one guy raises all the beans and then they split it up, it's like a group of them and they're like in this cooperative, that way you don't have to raise everything, right?... So, he called me one Sunday, no it was Saturday, late one Saturday, eight or nine o'clock one Saturday night. He said, "Buddy, you wouldn't believe what I've been doing," I said, "I don't know, what?" He said, "Well, we had all these beans that so and so raised," I forget who it was, he said, "We decided we'd can them the old way in a washtub on a fire." And he said, "I remember why we used to hate that so bad," [laughs] he said, "Lord, they've killed me today packing water and packing wood and stuff. I've done that all day, I'm killed." [laughs] And it was, I can remember that. I can remember, Lord they'd kill you packing water and stuff, put it in the washtub and packing wood to keep the fire going. And work all, start at daylight, when it got light enough to see, have a fire built and not get done until dark. Work all day long [laughs]. Well, except for eating dinner or something, you know.

Everybody. Two or three different families. It was a whole - it was a big deal. And that evening, they'd all get out on the porch and play music and people would get out in the yard and dance. And they'd have them corn shuckings where you'd have a pick-up truck load full of corn [laughs] to shuck. And then, they'd sometimes, they'd cut it off the cob or sometimes they'd put it in a barrel and pickle it, different stuff, you know.

An interesting thing. There's a bunch of famous musicians come out of this country. A bunch of them. But, you know, I talked to my uncle, my dad's brother. And he said, that somebody was always playing music, they was always dancing, square dances and stuff, but he said, I never saw a professional musician until I was 20 year old and joined the army [laughs] and went to Great Lakes, well the Navy, he joined the Navy. And he said, I never saw a professional musician, it was just somebody from the community, two or three people. And everybody could play back then. Dad made everybody in my family learn how to play something, you had to.

Started out playing, well the first thing I ever played was a ukulele. I was real little and my brothers, one of my brothers played the guitar and the other one played the mandolin. And I aggravated them to death. "I want to play the guitar, I want to play the guitar, I want to play the guitar." And, they'd say, "You ain't big enough to even hold one, you can't play one." Well, we was in some hardware store and I don't remember where it was at exactly. It was before I started in school, I was probably about four or five years old. And there was a ukulele hanging back behind there and I said, "Right there's a guitar I can play." And dad said, "Well, that's not a guitar, that's a ukulele, but if you'll learn how to play it, I'll buy it for you." And he did. And I had to learn how to play it [laughs]. Then I learned how to play - then one of my uncles played the harmonica, I learned how to play the harmonica. Then when I was nine, I started playing the guitar. My brothers helped me learn a few chords on the guitar, I learned how to play the guitar.

I wish - and there are people - I wish people would research this stuff [herbalism], right? And figure out what works. Just recently, maybe ten years ago, they figured out what this black

cohosh did and what the blue cohosh did. That's just been recently. And Indians been using it for thousands of years.

One of the things I try to do, the plants that I use, I try to look up the real Latin genus name for them. That way you know exactly what that plant is. I have certain books that I found over the years that I collect and keep that's got that stuff in it. And it tells, one of the things I just found is a guy from North Carolina, Native American guy, he's one of the Native Americans from down there in North Carolina. He's written this book and the real good thing about that book is that he tells you the dosages, which see, I didn't know that stuff because I was too little. My grandma would take a, she had a thing called a dram glass and it was a little tiny glass about that big and she'd put so much of whatever thing in it and hold your nose and tilt your head back and pour, "Here, you've got to take this."... Yeah, she knew how much, yeah. And see, that's one of the things that I didn't know. So, that's the reason I got that book and collected it because he's got dosages by body weight, which is cool, that's a cool thing. Because, you know a lot of these plants, you can hurt yourself on them. They're poison if you take enough of them.

I do wish that they would research some of this stuff better. And, if we could change the way people think about that, right? Because, "Oh yeah, that's them hippies out there wandering around," [laughs]. There's that stigma, there is. I mean, that's the way it is. And, change that, because it is a real thing and it does work. The drug companies know it [laughs]. You can bet on that, and boy, as long as they can manufacture some product and sell it to you, they will.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ John Craft, interview by Abby Huggins, August 4, 2016.

GRETA FIELDS

Greta, the aunt of my friend Carrie, generously opened up her home to me during the summer I spent in Letcher County. Her property is at the head of a hollow in Bottom Fork that goes right up to the base of Pine Mountain. Her land has a charming wildness to it, quilted with flowers, vegetable gardens, and fruit trees and brambles. Greta is a seed saver, lover of bees, retired journalist, and a participant in Grow Appalachia and the Cowan Community Theater Group. While Greta and I had many kitchen conversations over coffee or cornbread, we conducted one recorded oral history interview. Greta discussed her childhood, remembering both her mother and father fondly. Her mother was a nurse and her father worked for the city waterworks in Jenkins. She had much respect for her father and his commitment to the health and wellbeing of the community. Her father was Cherokee and her mother from an Austrian family, both of which she connects her identity to. Water emerged as theme among Greta's childhood memories and her passion for protecting clean water. She recalled neighborhood friends growing up, attending school, being a teenager, going to the swimming pool. She talked about racism and her father's intention of treating everyone equally. She mentioned going to college in journalism, working in New York City, and being drawn back to Kentucky. She discussed moving to this land and her hopes for it as a biodynamic farm. She talked about biodynamics and Rudolf Steiner extensively, which also led to discussion of other philosophers, writers, and historical figures like Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Einstein. She is clearly passionate about Aristotle, his ideas, and others who have built upon his ideas. She spoke especially about the interconnectedness of thought, feeling, and will. She believes deeply in living in a way that honors one's biological, intellectual, and spiritual ancestors.

Since my dad grew up in Harlan county and they had trout in the river, it was a big change and trauma to him to see gasoline in the beautiful Cumberland River or the Kentucky River. I remember one time when I moved back to Eastern Kentucky. I moved to a river in Virginia and it was the headwaters of one of the rivers over in Wise County and my dad come up there and saw fish and he began crying. And, of course, I still think about that and I cry because I just remember how hard he tried to give us water. He gave us a water paradise. People don't realize how hard an average person like him works to do something for the community. They just think it's - they just take it for granted that you have water, that you have electrical power, and you have coal. And of course, the coal miners feel the same way about their families: "My daddy died in the coal mines, he died for coal." And they feel as bad about the coal miners dying as I feel about my dad and the water. They're all men trying to take care of us. So we should not hate men because they're coal miners. I have a tendency to hate coal miners because they dirty everything up. But it's impossible to grow up with these people and hate them because you grew up with women whose daddies died in the coal mines.

What's really important is what people do, it's not what they say. It's not what happens later, it's what you do with your life, what counts is what you do. And there were hundreds and hundreds of kids that benefited from the things that my father did. He taught us all that we were supposed to take care of the community. He would pick up me and my brother and children in town and take us to a park and have us clean up the park. But, that's the way Cherokee are, they clean up their communities. They're not like white people who say, "That's not my job."

My dad was an important part of my growing up. I'm talking more about him than myself, but that's what I want to do because that's really what's important. It's what you get from

your ancestors not just your parents, but your grandparents. And I'm not talking about my mother, but of course, your mother is the world to every child that has a decent mother. My mother was a registered nurse, she was educated, she played a violin. She was Austrian, she knew classical music, she played classical music for us growing up. We grew up hearing the Blue Danube waltz and all the other classical music. I grew up knowing those things. We grew up gardening with mother. She taught us kids how to garden. She never could teach Donald Belcher how to garden though [laughs] my little neighbor. Donald just wouldn't water his plants, but she tried [laughs]. But, she taught me how to garden. She was a wonderful mother, she was the type of mother who would give you a sponge bath in bed if you were too sleepy to take a bath and you fell asleep nasty in bed, she would get a little soapy pan of water and wash your arms off. And it felt so good. And then, she would make hot chocolate for us and apple fritters [laughs] and do all these wonderful things for children as well as cooking incredible meals.

We were kind of poor because she didn't work as a nurse at first, she just stayed home and took care of us kids and we were terribly poor but she found out ways to stretch food, incredible ways to stretch food. She made tomato pudding, I was telling you about. She made all the breads by hand mostly at first. She made biscuits and all that by hand. Not the [sandwich] bread though, we ate Wonder Bread. At times, we would go to her mother's farm and bring back carloads of vegetables, chicken eggs. And she would can all these vegetables. And then we had a garden in the backyard and she grew food in our backyard in Jenkins. And I can still see the food, the onions and the tomatoes. She tried so hard to feed her kids, in spite of the fact that we were poor. And then we she got a job as a nurse, she was making twice as much as my father and we were on easy street financially compared to most people. But, it wasn't that easy, I had to

work. I had a job as a teenager. I worked at a restaurant. I had one of the few jobs in town, but my parents wanted me to work, and it scared me to death, but they wanted me to work. So I learned to work.

I became a journalist and then I went to work on a newspaper. I worked on five different newspapers during my life. I worked most of my life on newspapers... They were just basic newspaper jobs. But I'm really proud of the work I did because I did what I wanted to as a journalist. I set out in journalism wanting to know about life. I wanted to be a writer, but I thought, you can't possibly be a writer if you don't know anything about life.

And I was very shy, I didn't date boys, I couldn't talk to people, I couldn't interview people. Interviewing people at first was very traumatizing. But, I forced myself to do it and I found out later I was one of the few people in journalism school who actually did things like that. Most journalism students never really do journalism. They get a degree but they don't really actually go out there and write and do the interviewing. A lot of them don't do that, they wind up getting jobs in some other area. But, there was a handful of journalists in every journalism school who actually become journalists. And I was one of them. And so I had friends, we all worked on the college newspaper.

I actually was a pretty proficient interviewer by the time I left college and so I got a decent job in New York City and I lived up there five years. And that's when I started missing the mountains, nature and farming, clean water. The longer you are away from home, I think the bigger home looms in importance, you know. You want to go home after a while. And, I love New York City, it's like my second home, even today. I could talk about New York City for three days sitting here.

To make a long story short, I came back here from New York City in the 70s. It was like '73 or '74 and I had just bought a Volkswagen. And I came back here to Appalachia. I got here at two o'clock in the morning and I got up the next morning at eight o'clock to drive up on top of Pine Mountain to see the vista because I wanted to see Pine Mountain, which was home and see the vista. And I'll never forget it because when I looked out over Pine Mountain, somebody had stripped it. I saw a strip mine, it was like, you can't hardly see it now, but when I first looked at it, it was terrible. It was like a huge ugly scar across this vista. It should be a national park and they're strip mining the damn place. It was traumatizing, I can remember just, it hit me in the pit of my stomach. I told an Indian, I think it killed my unborn children when I saw that. They're just like, "we're not going to be born into a place like this. We're not going to be born into a place where people strip mine mountains." It's bad enough that they poison the water the whole time I was growing up, and now they're strip mining the damn mountains. It was terrible. I had never seen a strip mine.

They stripped, and in fact, you have not seen a strip mine until you've been in an airplane. Because when you go up in an airplane, you will be horrified, the entire county of Perry County, Wise County, Virginia, Pike County, looks like the Grand Canyon. You can say, "No it's green, I see green mountains." No, when you get up in an airplane, it's the opposite. It's like, I'm not kidding, you have to get up in an airplane to see it. As far as the eye can see, it's like the Grand Canyon, there's no green at all in Wise County or Perry County. And Pike County's like that, I think, and large parts of Letcher County are like that. So, my first experience coming home was trauma, environmental trauma. And, you know, that made it important for me to do something environmental. So, I decided I was going to get a farm for my horse and try to preserve a little bit

of nature here, which is what I'm doing, I succeeded. So, I'm hoping before I die I will complete that one goal is to somehow save this farm, part of nature. As maybe a part of a land trust.

It's meaningless to be rich, it really is meaningless. If you don't have the important things of life, like the land, your children, your family. Children and healthy kids... Kids are what's important and where we destroy the environment, we're making it impossible for children in the future. Like the Cherokee say, we should plan for seven generations ahead. You want to think ahead, like, what the children seven generations ahead, what are they going to have? Well, I counted back seven generations, and I found out if I go back seven generations - it was real interesting to do that - I found out there was all these Cherokee on one side of the family and they're Austrian farmer fanatics on the other side. But it goes all the way back to Cherokee and there's this one English guy named Fields that comes over here and he married Abigail Creech who was the Cherokee. So, if you go back seven or eight generations, you find Abigail Creech, who is a Cherokee from North Carolina. I'm real proud to be a Cherokee. And I'm also really proud to be Austrian. Because the Austrians are incredible, fabulous people. They're a lot like Appalachians. And they're a lot like Indians because they love nature, they garden, they love their children, they love animals, they don't live on the clock.

I grew up spending summers on my grandma's farm and she was Austrian. And originally, there was four or five generations there. Let's see, there was the great grandpa, the great aunt, the son, the grandma, the daughter, and the three kids, there were like four, five generations on that farm. It was very much like an Austrian hill farm... But, my grandma actually came from the Alps, she immigrated here when she was sixteen. They were educated people. They were priests, doctors, and even governors in Austria. Like, one of my Austrian relatives

was the mayor of the Vienna province, basically like being the governor, but it was something else they called it... So, my mother was 100% Austrian, so I grew up under this tremendous Austrian influence, which is very much like the Cherokee influence, interestingly, because they're so much into gardening and nature... I did know my grandma. Even though she was very well educated, she became a farmer when she came over here. She knew about Rudolf Steiner, who, as I told you, is a big influence on my life now. Rudolf Steiner was born on the edge of Austria and developed the biodynamic gardening system. And, my grandma had heard about that. And she loved Rudolf Steiner.

Basically, overall, I think that biodynamic garden system is something we need to follow here in the mountains and would really help restore strip mines. We could get people to do that, oh, it would be wonderful. Biodynamics is a system of revitalizing, taking care of nature and revitalizing nature that's already been destroyed by cooperating with nature and helping nature do what nature will do naturally. It goes a little bit further than simply adding compost to the soil. It's an organic system of gardening, but it also involves applying techniques that attract the proper energy to the earth. Because the earth has to have, or plants have to have, not only sunshine to grow, they have to have energy that comes from the other planets. Rudolf Steiner describes in his books what the effects of other types of energy are on plants. And scientific studies have shown that he was correct about things.

That's really all that Rudolf Steiner is about. Helping farmers do things naturally to rejuvenate the soul, the soil. I said soul, that was a pun. To rejuvenate the soul. It's like the soul of nature is rejuvenated by his method. And that's really what biodynamics is, rejuvenating the soul of nature and the soul of people as well. His whole system, he has this system that deals

with the soul of nature, but all his other books are about the soul of people... His books are like rituals when you read them.

So far, I'm really enthralled with it and I think I'll probably proceed with becoming a biodynamic farmer. And that's basically, organic farming carried to the hilt. And what I would really like to do is save whatever's up here, not only the mountain lions, but the bumble bees. And, I have this dream that when I get the place farmed properly, children will come back up here and visit. Maybe some of the children in the community can come up here and garden and get good food to eat and see farm animals and experience the great farm life that people used to have. People don't have that anymore. But, I would love to have just a children's farm up here.

I would like to leave the farm, then, for successive generations of people that will hopefully have the wisdom to keep saving the land. But, you know, we all die sometimes and if I can't do it, you know, I can't. We all have a soul and we're not always connected to the same place. The Cherokee want to be connected to the same place. They don't ever want to give up their homes and most Indians are like that. And I was like that 99% of my life, I've been like that. I want a home. I want a forever home. Just like a stray animal, I want a forever home. And then, I finally realized in my old age that the whole earth is our forever home. You know? It doesn't matter where you live, you should take care of the dirt. It doesn't matter whose farm it is, it doesn't matter if it's my land or your land or the city of Jenkins, if you get a chance, you should take care of the earth. The whole earth is our land. It's our mother and it's our home and so, it's not about finding a little piece of land like me and having a home that you're guarding, your home and you've got barbed wire around your home. It's not about that. It's about trying to save the earth and if I can do this much, I'll be happy. I feel like this, when I go to the city or any

place, I try to do something that will help bumblebees or something, I'll plant a flower. Once you achieve that attitude, you can be very peaceful in your life. You don't have to be concerned about buying property anymore. It's like, I'm going to take care of this farm and I'm going to leave it for another farmer. It's not mine, it doesn't belong to me, it belongs to everybody.⁴⁹

This set of excerpts documents individual, family, and community foodways as expressed in the reflections of these seven narrators. Folks mention raising common garden vegetables of corn, beans, tomatoes, and cabbage, keeping hogs and chickens for meat and eggs, and using various methods for preserving food including kraut, dried beans, canned beans, frozen corn and beans, tomato juice, sulfured apples, and apple butter. Several interviewees also delight in the array of desserts that have found their way to their family's tables: gingerbread, banana pudding, cream pies, cakes, and cheesecakes. A couple of interviewees are intentional about saving seeds from generations past and a couple are active in foraging wild edible and medicinal plants.

Glenn Brown, one of the seed savers I interviewed, mentioned Bill Best, who is known as an expert in Appalachian Heirloom varieties and has spent a lifetime gathering stories and seeds. Best's text, *Saving Seeds, Preserving Taste: Heirloom Seed Savers in Appalachia*, weaves together his memories of seed saving with knowledge of particular varieties and stories from other seed savers. He is mindful of the ways seeds have been passed along in families, communities, regions, and through outmigration from the mountains. His attention to the quality of produce from these storied seeds is reminiscent of Glenn Brown and others I met and interviewed. Best focuses his shared wisdom on the stories of beans, tomatoes, apples, corn,

⁴⁹ Fields interview

candy roaster squash, and cucumbers. He is clear to credit Native American origins of Appalachian heirloom varieties and botanical wisdom. Best's knowledge base as a seed saver and seed folklorist is a treasure among Appalachian foodways.⁵⁰

Likewise, Ronni Lundy's *Victuals* is a gem of a collection of stories that connects past and present foodways, based on her experiences and travels throughout the region. Lundy also organizes her narratives along themes of specific foods and many of Lundy's chapters and recipes - especially ones on corn, beans, apples, and preservation - are reminiscent of these oral history interviews and the common foods, methods, and memories that emerge from them. Like Best, Lundy's text honors the diverse foodways that have been passed down over generations, including Native American contributions to Appalachian food traditions. As stated, this awareness is also reflected in my interviews with John Craft and Greta Fields, who both attribute their family's plant knowledge to Native Americans, specifically Cherokee. Lundy's work does not remain in the past, but is also a profile of what is happening around food in the region in the present and an expression of how foodways can continue to be a dynamic part of communities and economies in the future. Lundy reflects upon the complexity of her own mother's hybrid kitchen that existed in a changing world of store-bought food with a dedication to the food she was raised on:

I didn't realize it then, but that was a period of transition in foodways, and it was evidenced in the hot, tiny kitchen my mother presided over in the city. There she might try a 10 cent box of Jiffy cornbread mix for supper one night, throwing out half the chalky sweetened pone and declaring it, "not fit to eat." She found the cake mixes "acceptable" though,

⁵⁰ Best, Bill. *Saving Seeds, Preserving Taste: Seed Savers in Appalachia*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013).

especially for making fruit cocktail pudding, a quick go-to that mimicked the cobblers of home-canned fruit with a cakelike crust she'd had as a child. She fell in love with tiny Le Sueur peas in a can, somehow still sweet and if not crisp, at least not mushy. She never had a can of carrots or potatoes in the cupboard in her life, for you could always find them fresh at the grocery. She was thankful for frozen broccoli, but scornful of frozen corn. She had no use for commercially canned green beans that had no actual onion before she would set them before us. Whatever "quick" or processed food she bought, she measured against a palette honed on freshness and flavor and memory, and those that made the cut were worthy.⁵¹

Indeed, the narrators in this chapter communicate a hybrid of appreciation for foods that have been passed on and a willingness to open up their kitchens to homemade dishes made with more convenient ingredients or technologies. Cornbread sits next to pasta salad. Gingerbread shares space with peanut-butter pie. Canning classes use flavor packets in pickles that add a welcome new deliciousness. Box cake mixes are on hand in case a quick cake is requested by a neighbor. In these interviews, I hear a definite commitment to heritage, but also an openness to change and an ultimate value in the process of sharing food moments with family and community. A few narrators mention freezing instead of canning or using pressure canners instead of canning all day over an open fire. In studying archived oral history interviews, Lora Smith has written about the presence of changing technology - specifically Jell-O made possible through refrigeration - as an indication of evolving foodways in Appalachia:

Refrigeration changed everything about household and farm labor. Women were no longer

⁵¹ Lundy, Ronni. *Victuals: An Appalachian Journey, with Recipes*. (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2016), 211.

tied to wood stoves, canning massive quantities of produce. Now, they could cut corn and freeze it. Instead of cooking beans outside over an open fire for four hours, pressure canners could do it in thirty minutes on an electric stovetop. Community canneries and smokehouses faded from the rural landscape. Gelatin products like Sure-Jell sped up the process of preserving fruits.⁵²

As these narrators express present foodways, they also show a deep respect for the often intangible wisdom of the past. John swears by the medicinal knowledge of herbalist elders; Gwen and Mable perform many food and non-food tasks based on the almanac signs that Gwen's paternal grandmother followed; Greta seeks to practice a combination of Austrian-based biodynamics and Cherokee philosophy; Glenn prefers the taste of the beans that he's been saving from his father for eighty years. In these cases, the past remains relevant to health and wellbeing in the present and future: always intertwined, they inform and influence one another. I am personally interested in further study of these practices – wild foraging, gardening by celestial signs, and seed saving – both through written and oral passing of knowledge.

One observation across these interviews is a participation in food processes across gender. From what I hear from these narrators, mamaws, papaws, uncles, aunts, mothers, fathers, and children participated in the various parts of the food process – saving seeds, gardening, foraging, putting up food. Different families may have had their personal divisions of labor, but from these interviews, I don't see that these practices were exclusively gender segregated. In consideration of the communal nature of food, I also witness an emphasis on music. John and Glenn mention music and dance as a part of bean stringings. Gwen reflects upon her parent's

⁵²Smith, Lora. "Electric Jell-O: Refrigeration brought the jiggle to rural Appalachia." *Gravy* 58 (2016): <https://www.southernfoodways.org/electric-jell-o/>.

church singing and the old time music gatherings she has hosted over the years. Greta remembers the classical music her parents loved and exposed her to. I continue to be intrigued by spaces where food and music coexist in community settings.

I also observe that though these interviews were largely about food, every narrator mentioned coal mining. Whether they worked in the mines themselves, had family members or community members who were coal miners, or witnessed human casualty and environmental impact, the coal industry is a part of the stories people share about this place. In other sections of this thesis, other narrators also share their connections to coal mining. The industry has been and continues to make an imprint on these communities and this region. Many scholars have traced the origins and impacts of extractive industries on politics, economics, environment, and culture in Appalachia.⁵³ Many individuals and organizations are envisioning what just economic transition looks like as communities create diverse, equitable, sustainable economies beyond fossil fuels.⁵⁴ While this thesis acknowledges that there must be many answers to economic development in the region, it posits that food can be one part of the story. The following chapter offers interview excerpts from people who are farming for part or most of their livelihood, as well as others who are envisioning local restaurants, community canning spaces, and fruit and

⁵³ For example, see Eller, Ronald D. *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982); Eller, Ronald D. *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Montrie, Chad. *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003; House, Silas and Jason Howard. *Something's Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

⁵⁴ See "Renew Appalachia" <http://www.appalachiantransition.org>, accessed December 20, 2016; "What Do We Mean by a Just Transition for Appalachia? *Kentuckians For The Commonwealth*, <http://www.kftc.org/issues/what-do-we-mean-just-transition-appalachia>, accessed December 20, 2016.

nut production. The dynamic expressions of foodways and heritage in this chapter continue on in the stories of the next.

CHAPTER III

RAISING FOOD AND OPPORTUNITY: STORIES OF FARMERS AND LIVELIHOOD

This chapter presents oral histories with people in Eastern Kentucky who are connecting food and farming with economic opportunities. The following interviews focus on folks who earn some of their livelihood through food or offer support to food entrepreneurs. This set of interviews include: nine growers (one of which is also an extension agent), one restaurant owner, and one person helping to create a new community kitchen. While the focus of this chapter is on farmers, it also expands into restaurant and food processing as additional local food business opportunities. The growers are raising mostly vegetables, but also fruit, eggs, and meat. Some growers are working full time on the farm, others are partially retired or supplement their farm income with other jobs.

With one exception, most of the growers I interviewed I met through the Letcher County Farmers' Market. This market has been organized for about four years. During that time, the number of vendors has grown from four to over forty. Several initiatives connected to the farmers' market have increased food access in the community, expanded sales opportunities, and provided support and resources for farmers and gardeners. In particular, Grow Appalachia, a region wide program with a site in Letcher County, has helped to encourage more people to grow vegetables and more gardeners to consider selling their products. I include more content on those particular programs through an interview with Valerie Horn in the following chapter.

While most of the growers sell through the farmers' market, they also sell through such avenues as: restaurants, schools, roadside stands, word of mouth connections, and an online buying club. Beyond selling produce, many of the growers talked about saving heirloom seeds, sharing food with their neighbors and putting food up for their families.

Overall, farmers expressed an appreciation for work that allows them opportunity to be outside, take care of the earth, feed their family and community, raise specific vegetable varieties, and preserve food for the winter. Yet, farmers also discussed challenges including accessing ample flat bottomland, navigating markets, figuring out how to grow consistently for wholesale, having enough labor, and earning enough income to fairly compensate their time. Maggie Bowling, a young farmer in Clay County cautiously spoke of the place of agriculture in the economy:

And the role of farming, I think it has a role to play, but I hate to be really optimistic about it being a big one. And really that is, it isn't a big economic or wealth creator for any place in the US that I see it. I mean, there aren't many people making their living off of farming anywhere, and so to think that in a place that's mostly straight up and down, that that is going to be something that can really help the economy here, I just find doubtful and I'm pessimistic about that, even though that is what I'm doing. So, I know that's conflicting. I do think that will be useful for some people and I think there are agriculture opportunities in Eastern Kentucky that aren't really being utilized. But I don't, I'm not as positive about it as a lot of people that I talk to are... It's not going to be easy at all, and if people want to be making money in this sector, it's going to be so hard, they really want to have to do it. It's not something, "Oh I think I'll try that." You really have to want to do it and stick to it and

work at it. But, to some extent, I do think it will be a part of the economy, and as people keep energy and support in it, I think it will be. It's just not going to be the livelihood for a lot of people, just like I said, it's not the livelihood for a lot of people in any place.⁵⁵

Analysis of the feasibility of farming in Eastern Kentucky as a livelihood is beyond the scope of this thesis. Many people I talked to, like Maggie, see farming as a part of a larger transition beyond the mono economy of coal, yet admit farming cannot replace the level of income previously generated by the coal industry. Organizations in Central Appalachia, such as Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) are actively supporting Appalachian Transition through the growth of diverse sectors including sustainable agriculture and local foods as well as energy efficiency, sustainable forestry, arts, tourism, healthcare, and technology.⁵⁶ Farming and food enterprises are part of strengthening local economies, but must occur in tandem with other sectors.

The majority of the following narrators and/or their family members have worked in coal or other extractive industries. Coal, though in decline, remains a part of everyday conversations in the region. While these interviews explore alternative industries, it is important to hear the past livelihood, meaning, and complexities of coal for many of these narrators. Bennett Quillen reflected on his family and personal history with coal and his shift to farming, acknowledging: “they say coal mining gets in your blood, but farming gets in your blood, in my blood.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Maggie Bowling, interview by Abby Huggins, September 16, 2016.

⁵⁶ For more on ideas, efforts, and stories connected to Appalachian Transition and economic diversification, see “Appalachian Transition,” *MACED*, <http://www.maced.org/AT/index.html>, accessed February 26, 2017; “Appalachian Transition,” *Kentuckians for the Commonwealth*, <http://kftc.org/campaigns/appalachian-transition>, accessed February 26, 2017.

⁵⁷ Bennett and Colette Quillen, interview by Abby Huggins, July 18, 2016.

These interviews serve to document a collection of people who are striving to be a part of food entrepreneurship in their community. Yet they also represent stories from individuals with their own families, histories, passions, motivations, obstacles, and successes. As the entirety of this thesis emphasizes, each person's narrative is simultaneously their own perspective, as expressed at a moment in time, and a part of a wider chorus of voices.

This set of interview excerpts begins with farmers from the Letcher County Farmers' Market and moves into other food entrepreneurs. The first narrator, Dock Frazier, is known across the county for his eggs, but also cheerfully sells vegetables at the farmers' market, to the schools, and to local restaurants. He cares for land that his ancestors tended and sees the interconnectedness between land stewardship and faith. Just down the road from Dockey, on Cowan Creek, is Shane Lucas, a former employee of the coal industry and a leader with Grow Appalachia who is trying to make his living from farming now. Shane expressed curiosity in specializing in certain crops and partnering with other growers on wholesale market strategies. Don Maggard, a former miner, is one of the founding members of the farmers' market and grows a large garden on family land in Vicco. Debbie Adams from Jeremiah shares her story of accidentally getting into market gardening because of successfully growing twenty-year-old bean seeds. Debbie sells at the farmers' market and is also exploring opportunities to process food to sell. Colette and Bennett Quillen raise gardens in Deane and sold at the farmers' market for the first time this past year. Maggie Bowling farms full time at Old Homeplace Farm in Clay County with her partner Will and his family. They sell vegetables and meat mostly through an online buyers' club as well as nearby farmers' markets. David Fisher who lives on Little Cowan Creek was another founding member of the Letcher County Farmers' Market. While not

currently selling at the market, David offered insight into the challenges of growing for profit. Daryl Royse co-owns Heritage Kitchen in downtown Whitesburg with his husband Brad. Daryl offered his perspective on heritage cooking, sourcing local ingredients, as well as the greater community. Harry Collins is an educator who has been instrumental in starting a community kitchen in Whitesburg and believes agriculture will play a role in economic transition. Finally, Shad Baker is the Letcher County Agriculture Extension Agent who also raises blueberries on a former strip mine just over the state line near Pound, Virginia. Shad is interested in agriculture possibilities on reclaimed mine sites, including fruit, nuts, livestock, and maple syrup. Together, the insights from these narrators speak to the joys, barriers, and opportunities for agriculture and local food systems in Eastern Kentucky. As in other chapters, these stories connect past lessons and inspirations with dedication to present work and commitment to the land and people of future generations.

DOCK FRAZIER

Dock Frazier lives just past the Cowan Community Center in the Kingdom Come community, at the head of a hollow, along a beautiful creek on 190 acres of land passed down from previous generations. We sat drinking coffee on his front porch overlooking bottomland planted in peas, cabbages, and lettuce, with mountains on either side. I met Dock through the farmers' market and looked forward to seeing him once or twice every week over the summer. Besides being a farmer, Dock is a minister and dog breeder and has dabbled as a musician and oral historian. He was very willing to share about his family, land, faith, and the greater community and expresses a dedication to stewardship of the earth and its people. He has been

back on this land for about seventeen years and farming it for two. He hires two other people to help on the farm. He strives to use practices that build life in the soil. He also keeps a large flock of chickens for eggs. Overall, he is cheerful and hopeful. Though, he admits there are many challenges and many reasons to be pessimistic about the future of the region, the country, and the world. In spite of concern for the future, he lives with gratitude and strives to make the most of everyday he is given. After our interview, he walked me around the farm to see the chickens, goats, new cooler/packaging shed, and vegetable fields.

Well, [my great grandfather] was very typical of people who settled in this area. There's a historical mark as you saw here in Kingdom Come that says early settlers settled in this area in early 1800's. And, so his dad was among those people and they staked off large claims of territory as they came. And then, Bill wound up here with this place, and now there's 190 acres. And of course, this was a real working farm. They had a little blacksmith shop and they had a two story chicken house, which I just had to tear down, it finally got in such bad shape, we had to let it go. But, they had horses or mules and they had cows and pigs and chickens and then they farmed these fields. But, they didn't just farm these fields, and you can't see this on the tape [audio recording], but on the side of these hills, right in there, they farmed that, they raised corn and beans up on that hill with a hillside plow, hillside turning plow. It turned over, you'd plow it one way and switch it over and plow back the other way. And, it was designed for that purpose. And, so anyway, he was a serious farmer, but it was more, he sold some things and made some money from the farm. But, it was more just providing for his family. And, so that's what he did, I think for the majority of his life was to basically live and work and operate this farm. And, so I'm thankful that I get to kind of fall in those footsteps a little bit. And now, at 164 [joking about his

age], I have an opportunity to be here and to farm a little bit and I do think about that a lot. That, first of all I think they would be happy that I'm doing this and taking care of the land and making it produce, it hasn't produced in some years. But, making it produce again and chickens in the chicken house and that sort of thing. So, yeah, I'm pretty excited about kind of having opportunity to follow in those kind of footsteps for a while. And, I'm also excited about being a part of some local things going on in the way of local ag. [agriculture] right now.

I was born and raised about a mile up the road on Cowan Creek, 1952. And, again, spent all the way through high school here. When I, you know [laughs] that little story that I walked to school and it was uphill both ways [laughs]. Well, we actually did walk to school in the grade school. First six grades and then we got a consolidated school and were bused. But, first six years, we actually walked from the house to the school, which was about a mile. And, so anyway, I finished up high school here and wanted to leave this area at that time. I was sure my fortune would lie somewhere else. But, spending some time outside this area, Cincinnati for a while and Columbus, Columbus, Indiana for a while. And those were fun things, but I was, I wanted to come back here, and so anyways, when I came back after being gone for about five years, whatever I had to do, I'll do, I'm staying here [laughs]. So, I've been here ever since.

At eighteen I left, at that time there was a lot of factory and production work and that kind of stuff lots of places. And, so that's what I did in Cincinnati. I worked for a plastic factory in Cincinnati. Then I worked for, in Columbus, Indiana, I worked for a steel mill. Actually, Cummings, they produced blocks for Cummings, it was a foundry. I worked for them for a while. So that's what I was doing, just out working and getting to know life [laughs]. I worked on a north shop glass in Columbus, Indiana on a second shift. There was twelve men there and nine

of them were from Eastern Kentucky [laughs]. One thing we export is our people. There's no real, except for the coal mines. The coal industry, now that's not doing hardly anything, there's not really any job opportunities. Some service, you know, medical and teachers and that kind of thing. But, you have to leave this area. And so, you know, our people migrated to the north earlier in the '50's and '60's and in recent years, decades, it would have been moving more south, but just job opportunities.

When the farmers' market guys started, I thought, "Man, I want to be part of that." And, I have a multitude of reasons why I want to be a part of that, but one is the fact that the history of this place and being connected to the land and using the land and utilizing the land and respecting the land and loving the land and all those kind of things. And, I've always done that, but in doing this, I get to spend a little more time here, and a little more time nourishing and developing and watching it grow and produce and do what the good Lord designed it to do. And so, I'm excited about that. You know, we have a real problem in our only industry, our coal industry. Our people have been devastated by the actions of the last eight years, and I'm not trying to be political, but it's just true. And our people in particular, the Eastern Kentucky, Southwestern Virginia, and other coal mining areas have been absolutely - and, we have no second alternative. Nothing else for our people to do.

Well we have this blessed land. And so for me, part of that is to say, even though we don't have forty acre fields that we can utilize, we have some and we can do some. There are things we can do. We can provide a lot for our own local and regional markets. It's a different skill set though, to take, most of us around here call these little areas creek bottoms, the bottoms around the edge of the creek, as opposed to having a hundred-acre field. I think I said forty a

moment ago, but anyway, the idea is large areas of tillable land, it's a different skill set to manage that. And I'd like, and I am learning farmers' market's one thing, our extension office is, they would love to see more of us be more ag. minded. We have a lot of support in those kind of areas. But you know, we talked about that earlier. You can talk about that all day long, but somewhere, we got to get some rubber on the road kind of thing. So you got to do some of it. We got a few guys that are really doing some of it. And it is not easy, it's hard work [chuckles]. Making it be economically good is really going to take some tremendous management. And I want to be a part of trying to help solve some of those kind of things.

I also care about the land and the economy and the quality of food that we eat, regional availability, because I really do think that we've farmed it out to somewhere in California or Mexico or wherever, and we're not responsible enough in our own regions. In a region like this, with such beautiful capabilities of producing, we're not utilizing it and we're not being productive. Again the economics of it is hard to work out, so I understand why we're not doing that. But nevertheless, we're not. And, we're totally dependent on agriculture from Florida and particularly citrus and of course we can't do that here. But, about anything, it comes from California. Green stuff, it comes from Florida or California, some of it comes from Michigan or wherever. But, I'm just saying too little of it comes from Eastern Kentucky. So, I want to be a part of that too. Helping us figure out how to utilize what the good Lord gave us and how we can use this to, and make sense for the family.

First of all, you provide the best quality food you can hope to have for your own family. And then, secondly, at least supplement your income a little bit and help with that area. And then, you know, I want to try to help us do that rubber to the road kind of thing. You know, how

do we actually take all these practices that the ag. department and the farmers' market and whomever might be teaching and getting people, and they are, getting the best people they can get to come and teach us workshops concerning different aspects of growing, and all that kind of stuff. But, how do we actually put that into practice and make economic sense out of it. And, I'm going to tell you, that's the hardest part. You know, and I'm sure it's hard getting skilled education and knowing the kind of informational kind of things you need to know. But, I'm also sure the people who put the rubber to the road, who actually produce some product and take it to farmers' market, those guys are the guys who really make sense out of all that other stuff, in my personal opinion. And I want to be part of helping those guys figure that out. And again, it's not easy here, but it can be done.

I love this place - not just this land, but this was in my family - all my life. My dad's family grew up here, his family before him, and I've always admired and respected, so I'm so thankful and so grateful that I get to be the one who is here, and now, my turn. I did this concept album called Stone Ager run I told you about. I actually intended to follow that with another one, "Keeper of the Land." And that's how I think I am. My chore now is to take care of, I get to be the caretaker here until somebody else's turn [chuckles]. So I'm thankful to get to be here.⁵⁸

SHANE LUCAS

Shane Lucas is a former coal miner who farms on his land on Cowan Creek and supports other gardeners through his work with Grow Appalachia. I met Shane through the farmers' market, of which he is a faithful vendor. When I arrived at his farm for our interview, he and his

⁵⁸ Dock Frazier, interview by Abby Huggins, June 9, 2016.

four-year-old step-granddaughter Paris gave me tour, showing me a late succession of tomatoes, a planting of hot peppers, a hoop house filled with tomatoes intercropped with strawberries, a diverse garden of late spring crops as well as summer beans, corn, and cucumbers. Shane lives on about thirty-nine acres of land and is raising vegetables on about two acres of bottomland.

He talked about how his family likes a certain type of fall bean – the turkey crow or goose crow. He saved a type of bean from his father, but lost a crop he hoped to keep saving when rabbits got into the garden. He still grows beans like half runners for market, but his family really loves the fall beans. Shane talked about growing crops that can yield the most profit in a small space – like lettuce, tomatoes, broccoli, as opposed to corn that takes up a lot of space but is sold cheaply. He'd like to specialize in just a couple of crops but at the moment, he is growing a lot of lettuce and tomatoes while supplementing with other vegetables. He is the primary person doing the farm work.

For our interview, we sat down at a picnic table in-between his house and the farm stand where Shane sells produce. I could look out and see bottomland planted in tomatoes with a backdrop of the nearby mountains. Shane shared a little about where he comes from and his work history of operating equipment coal mining. He has been laid off and is taking this year to see if he can make farming work as a career. In the past, he raised vegetables on the side of his coal mining job, but now works with Grow Appalachia and farms full time. Losing that salary has been an adjustment, and he may return to coal mining work if the right opportunity came. However, even after the interview, he talked about preferring a quality of life farming where he can enjoy time outside, help take care of his granddaughter, and have flexibility. During the interview, he expressed hopes for expanding markets, looking into wholesale, strategizing how to

specialize and collaborate with other farmers. His ideas reminded me of a farmer cooperative model where farmers pull resources to sell to larger markets together. He talked some about the farmers' market as a valuable way to sell, especially with the demand from the MCHC FARMACY program. He also discussed needs for education among young people – and the general population – about healthy eating/cooking if local food is going to be a viable part of the economy. Marketing is one of his biggest challenges. He can grow large amounts of vegetables, but it is a different skillset to seek out restaurants, schools, and other institutions that will buy his produce.

*Shane offers an important perspective of someone who benefitted from the coal industry but has changed his lifestyle because of losing his job. He was featured in the film *After Coal*⁵⁹ as an example of agriculture as an alternative industry. Shane noted that he could never earn the equivalent income farming as he did working for the coal company. His wife's job provides a helpful off farm income. Shane is clearly invested in trying to make farming work. After our interview, Shane continued talking about adjusting to farming as his only income, his plans for future crops and marketing, and his desire for collaboration and specialization among farmers. He gave me some sausage and corn and said I am welcome to come back and visit, or work in the garden, anytime.*

I was raised right here on Cowan. A quarter a mile above here, where I live at now. I've lived here all my life. Like I say, I worked in the coal fields about eighteen years and due to decline, I'm laid off, November of last year. I've been doing farming, the farmers' market, selling

⁵⁹ *After Coal*, film, directed by Tom Hansell (2016; Charlottesville: Virginia Film Festival, 2016), DVD.

for about the last five or six years. I've been in the farmers' market about three years now. And I'm just trying something else so that I won't have to leave home.

We've always growed a family garden, you know, for our personal selves, helping my dad. He's probably the best friend I ever had. Probably the best dad you've ever had. You know, he worked underground for thirty-nine years. We fished, we hunted, we gardened. We done everything together. I lost him in January 25th of '14. And I felt like this, Paris, she's a little angel. He sent a little angel. [To Paris:] You got to meet him a little while, didn't you? My dad. Y'all eat cantaloupe together and all that good stuff. He always told me, you make sure you take care of her. She's took up pretty good to me now.

I've been doing it about six year, working and doing it full time, trying to. Every year, I keep adding something, trying to get bigger and bigger, you know I worked five and six days a week, ten-hour shift, and trying to keep it going, just in case I did get laid off I would be a little bit bigger to try to sell and make a dollar here and there. So this year, November when I got laid off, me and my wife, we sat down and discussed it and said, you know, take this whole year off, try it, treat it as a job, and see what you can do. So, that's where I'm at right now. I'm looking into the lettuce, a lot of the lettuce production. I've been selling it since January. To the restaurants, and that's where I'm going, still trying to go to right now.

Marketing is probably the biggest struggle for me. Two year ago, I wasn't into the marketing as much. But, this year, I've really, trying to push and find out what I can sell. That's a struggle. You know, you get, they want to buy off of these big producers or the trucks and stuff and they don't want to fool with a small scale farmer. Trying to talk to them, trying to get them to buy, that's the roughest, most hurdle I've got. Just trying to get it out there. But, since I've been

selling this lettuce, started selling it to one restaurant, now I've got more restaurants and a grocery store now wanting to buy. So, it's getting out there. I've got more people that's a little far distance, but I can't deliver to them until I could get me another one. You know if I could get two restaurants where I could deliver, make it worth my while, traveling just a little bit farther. But, like I say, in the last two or three weeks, I've got three or four more sales here that people's wanting. So, it's building up slow.

It's starting to grow. And as, like I say, as the summer come along, there's a lot more people wanting it and I'm getting my name out there and I hopefully grow enough that I can sell. I'd like to do all lettuce if I could, if I got the market for it, that's where I'd really like to go to. I got a little certified roadside stand, here at my house I sell out of. I sell at the farmers' market. And then, you know, like I said, the restaurants and stuff like that that I sell to. I'm looking at doing broccoli this fall, hope I can do the school systems and the restaurants and all. Maybe I can have before the market gets done. But, I hope the school takes the biggest part of it.

We got the MCHC [Mountain Comprehensive Health Corporation] vouchers that comes in, that helps a whole lot. Trying to eat healthy, get the blood pressure down, cholesterol down, that's done wonders for our market, big time. We got the senior vouchers, we got the WIC vouchers, that's helped the farmers and the market considerably. Because, you know, around here, people could really care less if they got, eat healthy or, you know. They just as soon go buy it off of Food City as buy it off of me or anybody else. You know, for a cheaper price. You know. But, since the farmers market has started, I see people, some people changing, going to the healthier eating. But, not what I'd like to see yet. Getting farm fresh, it's just too easy to drive to McDonalds and order something, instead of cooking. A lot of the younger generation now

don't know how to cook, don't know how to prepare the vegetables. And that hurts. You know, maybe the school system could maybe focus on that just a little bit more.

Right now I can about grow everything I can to produce just to put out to the farmers' market. This year right now, like I say, you know, I'm still trying to get my lettuce production out there. But, I'm doing beans, cucumbers, cabbage. I'm doing some corn. And my tomatoes, I have a high tunnel, I grow tomatoes in a high tunnel, I've got about a thousand out in the field right now. Probably, if I could get it down to focus on tomatoes and lettuce.

If I had just a little bit more help, a little more knowledge, and I had the marketing, I think I could. With my lettuce I can, I believe. Three months ago, I would have laughed at you to say, grow lettuce, you can make a living out of that? But, now, I can see it. On an acre, producing lettuce compared to growing corn or something, if you got the market for it, you can make a lot more money for it in the lettuce production.

Lettuce compared to corn or cucumbers, lettuce is more valuable per square foot than it is corn, that's what I'm looking a lot into right now, learning that. I'm growing on two acres. I don't have ten or fifteen, twenty acres to grow corn in to have, to make my profit back. So, what I can grow for most profit in a small acre farm is what I'm trying to go to. My high value crops like the lettuce, that's one of my highest ones that you can grow. You know, arugula, rhubarb is up top. Corn, cucumbers, stuff like that is low on the list. So I'm going to focus on my high crop stuff for small acreage.

Eastern Kentucky, you know that's another challenge. Do you have a market for that much lettuce? Can you get that much lettuce out to sell? We don't have that many restaurants that is interested in it. I'm hoping these other restaurants, what we got, that they wants to buy off the

truck instead of buy off of us, maybe one day they'll change and say, "Hey, yeah, we do want your lettuce."

It needs to grow. The younger people, the older people, you ain't going to educate much. But they need to learn to eat healthy. Around here, for years, me too, like I said, McDonald's easy, the way we cook our foods. I think they need to be educated and learn to grow or eat healthy foods and have the market out there for them to eat it. Like I say, we own small acres. We can't run out and plow ten acres up. We got to do an acre or two acres. I think that's where we was stuck at, eating unhealthy because we didn't have it. Everybody worked in the coal fields. They raised their little family gardens, put it up, you know, your generations come on up then they quit gardening. Probably me, my generation, very few of us. So, I think they need to be taught back that, eating healthy, the taste, compared to store bought. And I think if there was more of us farmers, if you want to call me a farmer, but we grow, we can get it out there we can get people buying and eating it, it would grow more, they would get their taste and say, "This tastes a lot better than store-bought."

I just hope to grow big enough one day to do it on my own instead of have to worry about working. I'd like to see the farmers that's in the farmers' market pull together and say, let me grow this for you, or I'll raise this, you raise that and maybe we can keep enough going to keep these restaurants interested in us, to buy, work together that way, maybe we all can grow and do something.

Farming wise, I'd like to see more of us, like we've discussed, work together, focus on one crop. I ain't saying not grow nothing else, but focus on one crop and try to have that demand at the farmers' market to sell the whole year. One farmer could say, "I'm going to grow beans all

year,” but still raise their cabbage and tomatoes and all that. But just try to focus on one crop and say, "Hey, I'm going to try to have this there every Saturday.” You know if five farmers can say, “I'm going to have beans there every Saturday,” or “I'm going to have corn there,” just another farmer going to have corn there every Saturday. And “I'm going to have tomatoes there every Saturday.” I think that would work better. If we had the variety there every weekend instead of maybe this Saturday we don't have beans, next Saturday we may have beans. That lets everybody focus on one crop, grow more of it, and have it at the farmers' market, and I think that would help build the farmers' market. A variety there every Saturday.

Here, staple food, you're going to sell tomatoes, you're going to sell potatoes, corn and beans, that's your main four. Your guaranteed, pretty well guaranteed to sell them. Your broccolis and cabbages - cabbages are pretty big in that everybody wants to make kraut out of it. Your cherry tomatoes, your bell peppers and stuff, that's just extra... But that's just a luxury. But, you're going to sell them four no matter what. That's what people's going to buy, can, put up. And that's what a lot of people try to focus on.⁶⁰

DON MAGGARD

Don Maggard is a retired coal miner who was one of the original founders of the farmers' market in Letcher County. He lives across the line in Perry County near Vicco. I met him at a gas station and followed him a few miles, over a mountain to a piece of bottomland where he grows his garden on the home site where his grandmother lived. Don lives up the hill from there and walks to and from the garden for exercise. He had a wide variety of beans

⁶⁰ Shane Lucas, interview by Abby Huggins, June 30, 2016.

(greasy, fall, turkey crow, among many others) carefully trellised in pyramids with tall sticks as well as several rows of sweet corn. He also had tomatoes, peppers, onions, squash, cucumbers, and beets. He takes much pride in his garden and loves sharing the produce with his neighbors. He welcomes people to stop by and take something from the garden if they need it. After Don showed me around the garden, we recorded an interview on the side of the road, looking out at the garden, a creek flowing behind us. Don reflected on being a coal miner for thirty-seven years and being forced to retire because of back issues. He talked about growing up, his family, his passion for gardening, his appreciation for the support from programs like Grow Appalachia and the farmers' market. After the interview, he talked some about wild harvesting different plants like ginseng, yellow root, blood root, and mushrooms. He has a kind, humble, and generous demeanor and made sure to send me home with cucumbers and zucchini.

We have learned to work with the farmland to help supply the needs for our families. We have food, all different types of food. We dry beans, we can beans, we cook beans, or whatever, anyway they can be fixed, all the vegetables, we use for our own personal use. We have done that from generation through generation, we've always raised a garden to help supply the needs for the family. And this is the homeplace here where my grandma and grandpa lived for, I don't know how many years they lived there. But the old homeplace burned down, probably about 40 year ago, somewhere close by there. And then, I bought the property where they lived and now I use the property for my own personal use. And I use it for the farmers' market. I sell to the farmers' market.

I got married and I have two children, I have two girls - Abigail and Regina. One of my daughters, Abigail, she has three sons. And I'm hoping that they will pick up and do the same

thing that I'm doing that they will take the property and use it for the same reason why that I'm using it today. And, I think they show interest in it, so I encourage them every time that we get together to learn something about your surrounding area and keep up with it and you'll always have something to look back upon, you know, as far as food supply. And I think it's great, you know, that we here in the mountains can take just a small amount of property and raise enough food on that property to supply you for a winter, from one year to the next, it just keeps. We always put our food up, can it, like I said while ago. We can it, we dry it, every which way that we can keep it. But I can remember growing up too, that we would have, we would dig a big potato hole in the ground, probably, that would hold, probably ten or fifteen bushels of potatoes and we would hold those potatoes up and in the winter months, we would go out and take the cover off the top of the ground and get potatoes out that way and eat them. This is the same property that the potatoes were grown on then that's being grown today.

I started a very young age working in the garden. My mother, she was mostly the gardener of our family because my dad, you know, was working. He worked in the coal mines, as well as so did I. I worked thirty-seven year underground in the mines myself. But my mother was always a gardener and she would take us out and we would start real early every morning and we'd pretty well work all day in the garden, you know, to raise what we had to raise. And I've also, I've worked for different people in their gardens and I could remember, too, we'd probably just maybe for fifty cents a day, we'd work in the corn fields. That's probably about what we would make then would probably be about fifty cents a day, we would get for working for other people in their crops.

And today, I grow, probably, I'll say probably six or eight different varieties of beans, and

I grow cucumbers, I grow zucchini, I grow sweet corn, carrots, beets, cabbage, peppers, a little bit of it all. I just about grow it all. And I usually, I've probably got, maybe, an acre of property that is tenable, that's level property, it's probably approximately about an acre that I tend. It seems to do real well and I enjoy working in it. I enjoy the food that comes from it and I enjoy working in it.

I have goose beans, I have turkey creek tomatoes, I have turkey crow beans, and I have Vinson-Watts tomatoes, and I have okra. And I have about all of my beans are heirloom seeds, about all of them are heirloom, they're the old seed that we have, that I have accumulated over the last, say, ten or fifteen years myself. That I collected old seed from different people that have grown them for years. I have found out that using the heirloom seed that you have better production and they're bigger, more yield, and they're just a better for me to grow. And I grow sweet potatoes and I grow carrots, cabbage, and I don't know, just about anything that you can grow, I grow it. Mustard greens, lettuce, I grow all of that. And my, all of my brothers and sisters they usually eat from it and I eat from it and I just share it with the community around. Anybody that wants to can stop by and pick them a mess of beans if they want to or get them some cucumbers or whatever.

My favorite [bean] is probably the greasy bean, the brown greasy bean. I like the color bean and my favorite would probably be either the - and the red eye fall bean, I like the red eye fall bean, is probably one of my favorites too, and cucumbers. I like cucumbers, cabbage, we make kraut out of cabbage, we put it up. And we make tomato juice and we make, I make, apple butter from my apple trees. I just try to work it to where we can eat what I grow in one way or another, we try to work it up to where we can eat what we grow.

And I helped get the Farmers' Market started in Whitesburg. My daughter Abigail was the market manager and she decided she'd give it up to somebody else, she went on to do something else. I helped get it started and I think it's been a great success for Letcher County especially. With the economy the way that it is right now and everything, I think the farmers' market has really made an improvement for Whitesburg city up there, especially the community around Whitesburg. The farmers' market has helped them people a lot. As well as it's helped myself, it's helped the people, especially with all the people that's been laid off from work. The mining industry's about gone. Now they're going to have to look for something else to take up the slack and I think by providing them with the farmers' market with fresh fruit, I think that is great. That we can take it and have for the farmers' market to be in the community where it's really needed. And I think the people really enjoy it. I've met a lot of good friends at the farmers' market. And I just thank the Lord for it, that I'm a part of the Whitesburg and Letcher County Farmers' Market.

When we first started at the farmers' market there, there was only four of us. We were setting up tents. Me, myself, my nephew, a couple more was the only ones that would be there. Now that it is grown, we probably had twenty different vendors now, plus we have the free food for the kids and they have a lot of activities for the kids. We have live music, we have arts and crafts as well as we do the fruits and vegetables... It's growing and the future of it to me looks great for the farmers' market in Letcher County and Whitesburg.

I started June 10, 1973 working in the coal mines, coal industry. I worked underground, I worked in low coal, I worked in, well different veins of coal. Most of it was probably, say 48 inches high was average height I would assume, somewhere close by there. And I worked 37

year at that and I just wore myself down to where I was not able to do that any longer. I had to have back surgery and that's when I just quit work then, I had to quit. But I enjoyed working in the coal mines too. I started out with probably, I think it was \$4/hour when I first started working in the mines and when I quit I think I was making probably \$31/hour in the mines. So, it provided my family with a great income for over the years. But, now, I'm glad too that we see that not only the farmers' market but other things are beginning to happen in our communities that is related to farming or whatever it may be. And we just going to have to look for something else now to take up the slack from the coal and start getting something else into our communities that will help.

I'd like to see some of the communities get something into where - and I think they're working on it in Whitesburg too - where we can take our products and get it canned, put in the can, have a cannery. Not only for the local farmers but anybody that wanted to use it, that they could can their product and sell it that way as well from the can that way. I would like to see them bring something in for younger people, something where young people that would have an opportunity to work, to really get to work. I think if they work it takes their minds off a lot of the drug problems that we have in our communities and this and that. I think if we can get them all to work, then I think a lot of that will go away as well.

I live in a real good community, everybody seems to share with one another. We all get along real good. If somebody wants something out of my garden, I just tell them to stop by and get it, they don't have to ask me, just stop by and get whatever they want out of my garden, I don't care. I know they would do me the same way if I went to their house, they would give me a mess of beans or cucumbers or whatever it may be. It's a real, good quiet community too. Very

little noise up in here. We're off the main [Highway] 15, probably about five mile off of that, right in the head of a holler, which is called Big Branch. Maggard Hollow is the name of the fork where I live here. We got to carry that name, we got a road named after us at least. So, we got Maggard Hollow where we live. Mostly Maggards, we're all cousins from the mouth of Big Branch to the head of big branch, we're related one way or another, on one side, either the Caudill side or the Maggard side, we're related one way or another. But we have a real good community and they're real good people, they're willing to share. I can remember years ago, growing up at home, if we needed to borrow maybe some lard from somebody or maybe we needed to borrow some meal or flour one to make a meal with, we would go borrow it one day and then they would come the next day and borrow something off of us. So, we've learned to share from youth up... I'm 64, I'll be 65 here pretty soon and hope I can live another 65 years and I hope the next 65 years I'm able to farm then. ⁶¹

DEBBIE ADAMS

Debbie Adams is a cheerful grower who is always a delight to see at the farmers' market. I interviewed Debbie at her home in Jeremiah. Debbie fixed us some coffee and we sat outside under a tree to do the interview. She talked about gardening and putting up food growing up. She shared about her first job working with courthouse records as a teenager and how she came to be a medical lab technician. After her husband was laid off from mining, they started having a big garden. Debbie found a bunch of twenty-year-old half runner bean seeds in her freezer and planted them. The beans grew and they had more than they could use. She realized other people

⁶¹ Don Maggard, interview by Abby Huggins, July 21, 2016.

would be interested in buying the vegetables they had. She eventually got connected to the farmers' market, where they've sold produce for the last couple years. She also has an interest in preserving food to sell – especially chow chow and tomato sauce. She is taking steps to be certified to sell preserved food and have her recipes approved. Debbie talked about the canning classes at Cowan Community Center and her thoughts on the farmers' market. Though she has faced many family challenges recently, Debbie is a radiant light. She always says, "some people are lessons and some people are blessings." I consider her a tremendous blessing to have gotten to know.

I'm Debbie Adams, my husband and I raise vegetables and fruits and sell them at the local City of Whitesburg/Letcher County Farmers' Market. Previously, I was a medical lab technician. But in 2009, I started having some back problems, with my lower back and I've got two herniated disks in my lower back and two in my neck. And the doctor in Lexington said, "You work on concrete, you have to make a choice whether you want to continue working and be uncomfortable or not." So, I chose to quit work and stay home. And at that time, my husband was a coal miner. And coal business was booming around here. But, since then, with the EPA requirements and stuff, coal business is basically dead in this area.

So, we heard about the Grow Appalachia. Actually, I talked to a lady at Walmart. And, I was buying some canning jars. And asking her about some kind of recipe, I don't even remember what it was. And she was so nice, she's part of Grow Appalachia and she started sharing with me about Grow Appalachia. That was in the fall. She said, "They'll have meetings this spring, just look for it, like on Facebook or whatever." So, I started following it on Facebook and when they started their spring meetings last year, Woody and I went to it. And, I wanted basically just to get

more knowledge about how to grow a garden. My family always grew a garden, Woody's family always grew a garden, but, being young, that wasn't the route I wanted to go. And so, we never really grew a large garden or anything like that. Every once in a while, I'd grow cucumbers and tomatoes or a lettuce bed. And I had canned tomato juice and tomatoes and stuff like that, but never canning or doing anything on a big scale.

So, when Woody got laid off in 2013, the following spring, my brother, we've always let him use our property to raise a garden. He was telling us, he goes, "Y'all might as well raise a garden, Woody ain't working now. Woody's not working, y'all might as well raise a garden." So Woody and he got together and decided to raise us a small garden. Plant some potatoes and different things to have over the winter. And Woody came over one day from the garden and said, "You got any bean seeds?" And I said, "Oh my gosh, if I've got any, they're old." But, I keep all my seeds in the freezer. And I went out there and grabbed a bag of bean seeds, it said 1994 on them, and I chuckled when I handed them to him. I said, "these things are twenty-year-old. There's no way they're going to grow." And, that year, we had six bushels of beans come off those twenty-year-old seeds. And, I was pleased. He picked the corn and the beans, brought them home. And I guess I kind of wanted to brag about them because they were beautiful vegetables. And, I put them in buckets and had them in my kitchen. I took pictures and put them on Facebook. And so, I realized when people wanted to know how much I wanted for these beans and corn and everything, there was need. And that gave me more interest in the Grow Appalachia part project. So, when I went up and told Valerie, the head of our local Grow Appalachia, I said, "We want to learn how to garden more, more about gardening and everything." And in the meeting, they was talking about raising vegetables for the farmers'

market. And I thought, well we've got plenty of land. We might grow extra and what we don't can or preserve or anything like that, we'll just start bringing it up to the farmers' market. And, I never thought I would enjoy it as much as I did.

And so, last year, I went to every farmers' market day that they had. And, it was just, to me, it was rewarding. I didn't realize how much I missed being around people. I worked as a medical lab technician for fourteen years or so, and I enjoyed my patients. I always said they helped me more than what I helped them. But, I just basically loved [the farmers' market]. And we had the extra vegetables, so we sold and did quite well.

And, this year, we have tried, well, we grew a lot more, but we haven't been able to maintain it and keep up with it due to my daughter's illness. So, she was diagnosed with breast cancer on April 24th, and so it's been a rocky road. But, the farmers' market is absolutely a blessing to people in this area. It really is. It's gave us a source - we've been spending the kids' inheritance is what I've been laughing and telling everybody, even though it's not a laughing matter. Because, he doesn't get social security or anything like that. He's got third stage black lung but he can breathe too well. So, we've been spending what he's saved over the years. To compensate our income, and it's really good to know that you can take some vegetables up to the local market and make some decent money. The possibility of people getting into agriculture and farming around here is a bright spot for the county. And they have did wonderful working with people to try to encourage them to grow gardens and can, and preserve their crops. So, I'm just real pleased with the organization.

Like I said, in the years past, over time, I can remember when my mom was alive, because I knew she knew how to do it. Woody had went out and got some blackberries. And we

had an ample amount of blackberries. And I called mom up and asked her how to make jelly. And so, I guess that's the first time I ever made jelly. And tomatoes and tomato juice and stuff like that. After my mother in law passed away, my father in law still raised a garden. So, he had all kinds of tomatoes and things left over. So, I learned how to make the tomato juice and the tomatoes and stuff like that. But, I never really went at it hard core until last year, or year before last, now. And, when we had those beans, I knew I wanted to preserve them, I didn't think that I would enjoy them in the freezer as much as what I do canned. Even though you get more nutrients and vitamins out of the freezer food than what you do the canned food, I just, first of all I'm limited in my freezer space.

And my sister in law, she had had two or three strokes, so her niece came up from Lexington so, she and I, because we both had got beans galore where my brother raised. We got on YouTube, we was watching on YouTube how to can beans. And then, we called one of the older ladies up in the holler, we had borrowed her pressure canner because we didn't have one at the time. And she explained to us that even though we seen it three or four different ways and heard it two or three different ways, or whatever, it was kind of scary at first because I've never used a pressure canner, I've used pressure cookers. But we survived it, we both was so proud when we got those jars out of that pressure canner and they started binging, that was just a rewarding experience.

And so, my husband's sister, I talked to her about it. I said, I'm going to can more stuff next summer. I said, we've got the beans, I feel like I'm pretty comfortable with the beans now. And I said, what kind of recipes and things or what do you can? And she cans all kinds of stuff. And she said, "I've got recipes for chow chow and spaghetti sauce I think you would like." So

she gave me both recipes. And, I made the chow chow first and my daughter absolutely loves it. I had never ate chowchow. I've heard, I've been at tables where they serve it, it just didn't seem appealing to me. Most people eat it with their soup beans. Soup beans to me is good by themselves, you know? But anyhow, I made the chow chow and my daughter started coming over and getting it. I thought maybe she's putting it in a little sandwich or something and she said, "No, I'm just eating it right out of the jar." And so, it was rewarding to see her. And I thought, I've got to make more of that stuff. And I made quite a few jars of chow chow that year.

And then I made spaghetti sauce. Oh goodness, I only made, I made it in pints. I made two quarts because I had two extra, I had enough to fill two quarts. And I thought, I'm just going to make it in pints because that's small enough that Woody and I can use it on everything. Well, and I gave my brother-in-law the quarts because he has a larger family. And we fixed that spaghetti sauce that night for supper. I fixed spaghetti and salad and everything. And, we enjoyed it totally. And my son came down and he ate some. We had to end up opening two pints because we had so many. We enjoyed it, we enjoyed it. And then, my brother took it up there and his wife had fixed it and they called down, because I told them, I said, "Let me know how you like it." They called down, they was talking about how good it was, they wanted the recipe and everything. And so, I thought, we've got to make more of this stuff. So, we ended up making I think about 32 quarts that summer of the spaghetti sauce.

And, since then, I found out that, after talking to Valerie, you can actually can your stuff if you've had the right classes sell it commercially. I'm actually in the stage of getting my recipe approved for my spaghetti sauce and I'm going to do the chow chow. And some of the other things I've canned. And I'm going to submit the recipes to the state and if they're approved, I can

go - I don't have my kitchen certified, you can get your home kitchen certified, but I don't have it yet. And so, I can go – to the local county extension office right now and prepare my, and can my food items and they can be sold commercially. Our local Mountain Comprehensive Health, the clinic that I worked at for several years, in collaboration with the farmers' market has bought, well they've bought the Whitesburg High School, but in collaboration with the farmer's market, they are in the county extension office, they are going to let them have the kitchen part of the school to turn it into a commercial kitchen. And I think that is such a great idea. I understand they bought a lot of equipment for it already.

I just encourage anybody that wants to stay in Letcher County to start raising gardens and preserving and maybe go that route, get your recipes approved and be able to sell. Even if it's not during garden season, you've got the preserved vegetables that you can sell and make money off from. And, people from away from here love to come here and get the vegetables and stuff. And they would love to get the canned food too.

It might not make a million dollars or nothing like that. But I think, of course, I'll leave the recipes. My granddaughters only twelve-year-old and six years old, they have no desire for anything like that right now. But I'm hoping in the future, they will see that I have that in a store, that I can make a little money off that and they might take interest in it and continue it and maybe make a really good living off from it. That's what my hope is for that. And, I think, I really don't see any other thing coming back to this area, any factories or anything like that. So, I would like to see the young people around here get the interest in the gardening and preserving. Even if they don't do it to sell it, they can sustain their families with a better quality of life. Because, we try to use organic fertilizers and things like that. And, the older I get, the more I

realize the chemicals that we've been putting on our foods, that's all going into our bodies and it's affecting everybody. And, there's so much cancers and things and diseases and things. And I can't help but wonder if a lot of it has come from where we was shooting for bigger and better crops, but we was killing ourselves with the fertilizers and the chemicals that we've been using over the time. But, I hope and pray that Letcher County can thrive again and I think a lot of that will have to do with farming.

When I was younger, I guess I kind of thought that being a hillbilly or Appalachian was something to be ashamed of. I think it was, you know I was young during the period that was the War on Poverty, I guess you would say. And I knew we was poor, we were poor. But, I'm so proud of that now. I'm proud to be an Appalachian, I'm proud to be a hillbilly because I feel like we've got so much to offer. I really do. And, I like to see the young people regain our culture of things we've lost. My mom made her own clothes, she canned and I remember her making soap. This fall, my brother and I are going to make homemade hominy. We haven't made it since our mom died. But we're raising the type of corn that we can make homemade hominy with. I'd like to see people be more self-sustainable. I'd like to see that for the United States. This nation has so much, there's no excuse where we have to be dependent on foreign countries for oil and gas, somebody's smart enough to figure out how to do something with other resources that we shouldn't have to be dependable on them for stuff like that. That's just the way I feel. But, I'm proud to be a hillbilly [laughs].⁶²

⁶² Debbie Adams, interview by Abby Huggins, August 8, 2016.

COLETTE AND BENNETT QUILLEN

Colette and Bennett Quillen raise vegetables in several garden plots in Deane, Kentucky and this was their first season selling at the farmers' market. During our interview, they reminded each other of stories and gave each other space to talk. Bennett grew up around Deane and Colette was from nearby in Knott County. Both families gardened and even sold some of their produce. Colette especially has saved bean seeds from her family. Bennett worked for the mines and Colette worked as a nurse. They are raising their grandson and dedicate most of their time to taking care of him and taking care of the garden. They both have a deep love of watching plants grow and harvesting vegetables. They shared their joy of gardening throughout the interview and along our walk through their gardens. They are growing lots of beans and corn as well as tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers. They also have plans to start growing strawberries for the spring. Bennett set up a variety of trellising systems for his beans, including pyramids, wire, and field corn, with several successions for a longer harvest. I was impressed by the size of their garden and the obvious care that has gone into maintaining it. I am grateful for their generosity and kindness throughout the summer.

Bennett: I was raised up the creek here about a mile, up in a holler, it was called Chicken Pen. And my mother and father: my father worked in a coal mine, and my mother cooked in the lunch room, but they farmed and gardened every summer. And my dad would rent, we lived in a holler and we didn't have much land. So, he would go out and rent big bottoms and raise corn for the hogs and mule. And we would hoe it, no spray at the time. They'd grow cornfield beans in it. And when I was a kid, my mother would sometimes take them to Neon, which was very busy at the time. And just raise the trunk of her car and it would be nearly full of green beans. And I

remember packing big sacks, being a very small child, green beans, no bushel baskets, packing the big sacks and putting them in the trunk of the car. I also remember hiring people to hoe corn, and my mother could beat them all. And I was a little boy, I would be second behind her. And then, after me and my wife got married, our first garden, I plowed it with a horse on a hillside. And we've had a garden every year since, for forty-three years. And we just keep raising more and more. And we have bought farms from out of the county in Western Kentucky, but we can't seem to leave here. We ended up staying here and leasing our farms out.

Colette: Well, I grew up in Knott County, just across the mountain. It was called Hall, Kentucky at the time. They actually had a post office, Hall Post Office. They took the post office out and now it's Kite, which Kite was already right below Hall, close to it, and it's all Kite, Kentucky now. And, my mom and dad always grew a garden. My dad worked in the mines, he worked construction, among some other things. They gardened. I remember them growing beans and corn and tomatoes and stuff.

And I remember being a kid and I remember, my mom would let me and my sister go beside the road and sell vegetables. And people would come along and stop in the car and buy them. And, I was very shy at the time and I didn't like to do it. And my grandfather, on mother's side, he was a farmer, he never worked on a job. Every week when the garden vegetables was in, he would go to Neon, Kentucky with a wagon and horses and they would all, all the family would help load the wagon and get everything ready. And he would take it there and sell it. He could grow watermelons better than anybody. I mean, nobody else grew watermelons but my grandfather. And he'd grow cantaloupes. And I remember, I was in the 7th grade. There was the boy that was in class with me, he lived close to my grandparents, like across the creek. And he

was telling about stealing a big watermelon, and rolling it across the creek and he said, "It tasted so good," said, "I guess because it was stolen." Well, he didn't know it was my grandfather, and I remember it very vividly just like it was yesterday, it was just hilarious. He was telling that, but he didn't realize that was my grandparents. But, he was always a real good farmer.

Then, my mom, she would try to grow the white fall beans that was handed down from the family. They were very good. It was like she had something that nobody else had. She was tight and stingy with them and she would not share them. So, after we got married, she wouldn't give me the seed. So somehow I bought some beans off of her. I bought them from her [laughs], which is strange. But, that's how I got the seed to them. So, what I'm trying to do is, I'm trying to give everybody seed to them so, because they're very good and I don't want them to be lost. And there's nowhere else in the area that has those specific white fall bean. And they're like high in demand. If anybody knows you've got them, they're like, "Yeah, I want those, you better make sure you save me some and I get them." And everybody you know is just like, they'll call you later, "I want those." They're that good. So, and then we married and we've always had a garden. We would even travel other places to grow a garden because it was instilled in us, that's just what you do. But, since he's quit work, we grow more stuff now than we did because we like to do it.

Bennett: I do love to do it, they say coal mining gets in your blood, but farming gets in your blood, in my blood. But I'd like to also add my dad telling me that when he was young that everybody around had ten to fifteen children. And they would go into the mountains and clear up new grounds. And it was real rich soil. And he said that in the spring, that you couldn't hardly hear for the hoes hitting the rocks in the mountains, the people hoeing beans and corn. And I also heard my aunt, which was a lot older than my dad, she's probably been dead for twenty-five

years, aunt by marriage, saying when she was a kid, she remembered hoeing corn in the mountain and coming out and all they had to eat was blackberries and something else that they'd put up the year before. Or maybe they just picked them, I don't know how they could have preserved blackberries for a year at that time. But they had blackberries, I can't remember what it was. It was very little left to eat.

Colette: They canned the blackberries. I remember canned blackberries. And your mother, I remember her having canned blackberries. They didn't have the freezers like they have now. So, most everything was canned. And, I remember my mother canning green beans in a big black tub or a kettle, I don't remember which one it was. But I remember her building a fire outside and I remember her canning the green beans. That's hard work.

Bennett: I would like to add that she [Colette] collects beans, if she sees, if it's got a different name, she's got to have them. And if she can get two or three out of it that she can seed, I'll be planting them next year and we usually use the guy-wire from the telephone pole if we only get two or three seeds. And if we like them, she'll continue the name and we'll keep them.

Colette: We'll get a mess of beans to eat and then, I'll save the seed. If we eat them and we like them, I save the seed. But, I've saved seed for, oh my goodness, for a long long time, for years, I guess the last thirty years. And, some of them I like, some of them I don't. My favorite is the Logan Giants and the White Fall Bean. I like the Fat Boys. We plant half-runners, but I don't really care that much about them. I'll eat them if I don't have any other kind of beans. But, I like heirloom beans. we mostly plant heirloom beans because they have a better flavor [Bennett: more bug resistant]. Yeah, they're not as, they don't get as diseased as the hybrid beans that you buy and they have a better flavor, I mean, they're just totally different. But, if you save your seed,

you have to plant more beans per hill than the beans that you buy because they're not treated and all that stuff, they don't germinate as good as the beans that you buy at the farm supply place or whatever.

I think I got the Logan Giants from a fruit market or somewhere, I don't really remember. But, I think I bought them at Whitesburg, maybe at the Golden Apple, I'm not sure, because they used to grow their own food and sell it. I cooked a kettle of them, our neighbor was here, he ate lunch with us. And we knew they were good and they cleaned the pot, there was no beans left. So, they were a hit with us, and I saved the seed to the Logan Giants. I think maybe Dry Fork Market, I may have got some seed from them, back years ago whenever maybe they grew some of their own stuff. What they actually done was, they bought stuff from the farmers around, surrounding area. Mr. Brown is the guy that had it, Lloyd Brown, the older guy. He had the market there for years. And I would always go searching for heirloom beans because I like them better. And if I liked them, if I cooked them and like them, I saved the seed to them. I would always keep me out a handful of the kind of yellow looking ones that I could seed, just in case that we liked them. And I come up with a lot of seed that way. And then I think some people's give me seed. I don't remember exactly who they were, just people that I met and got to talking to about gardening and they would give me seed. I know my son had Hodgkin's in 1995, and he was taking chemo at Pikeville Hospital. And there was a couple and this older couple and the lady, she had White Hastings and she give me seed to those. So, just by talking about gardening, just by meeting up with people that like to garden, I wound up with a lot of seed. I ordered some of the seed online from people like Bill Best. I've got some of those seed too. And just, you know, just different places, I've got them.

Bennett: Every year, I learn more and more about gardening and farming. I think I'm pretty good and then I see somebody I think's much better. And there's no distance how far I'll drive to learn any little thing. If it's two states away, I don't care, if I want it, I go after it. Knowledge. And, I ask questions, if they're younger than me, older than me, bigger than me, or smaller than me, it don't matter.

Colette: But, it's a good feeling to plant stuff and see it grow. It makes you feel good, you've accomplished something that means a lot.

Bennett: And there's nothing more beautiful than a clean, pretty garden. Part of our landscape. Leave it better than I find it, I do. I'm a firm believer in that. Leave the earth better than you find it.⁶³

MAGGIE BOWLING

Maggie Bowling is a full time farmer in Oneida, in Clay County, Kentucky. Maggie grew up in the flatlands of rural Ohio, but has lived in Eastern Kentucky for about six years. Maggie's partner, Will, is from Clay County. I met Maggie at Hindman Settlement School during the first Dumplin's and Dancin' weekend, in which Maggie's farm, Old Homeplace Farm, provided much of the meat and vegetables. Their farm primarily sells through an online buying club and delivers to customers in London, Manchester, Oneida, Harlan, Hyden, and Hazard and has a presence at farmers' markets in Clay County and Hazard. We conducted our interview in the shade outside of Maggie's house before she showed me the farmland where she raises vegetables

⁶³ Quillen interview

and flowers. Like Shane Lucas, Maggie's partner has an off farm job, but her income comes solely from the farm.

Maggie defined the place she lives and farms now in terms of specific geographic features: in the Cumberland Plateau of the Appalachian Mountains of Eastern Kentucky, on Goose Creek, at the headwaters of the South Fork of the Kentucky River. She commented on the combination of open bottomland and mountains, contrasting the landscape with the flat cornfields of Ohio where she is from, and the steeper, tighter mountains of Harlan County, where she has also lived. Though Maggie doesn't live in the place she is from, she described her people broadly as rural people from farming communities. While she continues to consider people in Ohio as her people, she has fostered relationships with folks in Kentucky as well. Both her previous work with Grow Appalachia in Harlan County and her connection to her partner's family helped establish those connections. As an "outsider," she grapples with concepts of belonging to place and people more so than if she lived in the place she was from.

Maggie shared about the challenges of farming, especially the time and labor involved, but also noted that the relationships with customers, ability to work outside, flexibility, and access to good food are benefits of farming. Maggie admires the enthusiasm for food in the region. While she is uncertain how large of an impact food will have on a changing economy, she sees it as part of other efforts.

Where I grew up was flat, mostly cornfields. And where I live now, I live in Eastern Kentucky, and so I am obviously in the Cumberland Plateau of the Appalachian Mountains, but there is still a lot of open space where I live. So, I think it's a wonderful combination of this part of the Cumberland Plateau. We're getting a little bit more towards Central Kentucky. So, we, our

farm, we have like sixteen acres of bottom ground in addition to our hillsides and our mountains. It's very hilly but there are some open valleys and big river valleys. Where our farm is specifically is on Goose Creek. So we are in the bend up a huge, one of the biggest creeks around, right at the headwaters of the Kentucky River. So, right below where we're speaking is where the South Fork of the Kentucky River comes together. So, Goose Creek right here and Red Bird and Bull Skin. And so, it's a really nice place since I really love being by the river, that our farm's in that huge bend. And then, we have such a nice combination, to me, of flat ground and sloping hillside and really steep hillside and little hollers coming out and I like seeing all of those place features together.

Mostly, I think maybe more broadly think of my people as just being like rural people from farm communities, if that makes sense. I grew up in small town farm community, and all of my family and all my extended family all lived within 20 minutes of each other, and I'm the only person that left there. So, I really think all those are my people from where I'm from and my family as my people. But I don't feel very out of place here either because I feel like most people are pretty similar, I can connect to them pretty easily. And I feel like, especially, when I worked at Pine Mountain [Settlement School], and then my job being agriculture based, that gave me a lot of common ground with people to try to fit in. And feel like I could fit in here, that these could also be my people. Even though I didn't grow up here and place is such a strong thing for everyone here, it seems that it might be hard for me to fit in, but it didn't seem that hard. And especially, being married to Will, I kind of got an automatic in. But then also, I think maybe my people more broadly, I could kind of fit in with everyone here. But I do kind of feel like his

community and family and people here are my people now, even though I've only lived here a few years.

When I quit my job and moved here and we were talking about what do I do, we just decided we would try to sell vegetables in addition to the meat. So, I mostly am raising vegetables and I do help with the livestock some. But mostly the vegetables are my enterprise. We just are small and learning as we go. So, we have two acres that we're doing as our market garden. And we also sell eggs and beef, lamb, pork, and chicken. And so, now we have some livestock at our farm too and kind of expanding that as we've grown. I do most of our customer interactions, if that makes sense. So, I do all of our deliveries and interacting with people, kind of more of the public face, which seems kind of funny since I'm the newcomer to this farm. And then do the vegetables. So, I'm delivering all the meat and kind of bagging it up and everything. But, my role currently with the livestock is pretty minimal to, I'll take care of the chickens or stuff like that. But, mostly, Will's dad and he and his mom are doing a lot of the livestock. I'll build a fence or something, but day to day most of my energy is devoted to raising vegetables and washing them and packing them and then delivering everything together.

It's a wonderful time to be farming because there's so much interest and more financial resources for grants or loans for beginning farmers than there would have been when my parents were starting out. Like I said, there's demand out there right now, people are interested in local foods, it's not too hard to sell stuff. But, my struggle really isn't with capital to buy things it's more labor and not having enough time in the day. And I just don't know where the day goes. Also, the toll that takes on when we're working until after dark every day and then I come home and eat supper and then I'm sending emails and doing all the computer work that farming entails

until 11pm at night and then I get up and do it every day. That's a rough lifestyle in the summertime that I don't know how long we can go on with.

Food seems to be very important in this region and that's been a wonderful thing for me because it's such an easy topic to talk about. Whether you just met someone, it's not a controversial thing to talk about, like the way you like to have beans and what your favorite food is and how you're cooking stuff and how you can and preserve things. And just all the different seeds and varieties that are specific for here. That was one of my favorite things in Grow Appalachia is people would give me seeds all the time and tell me all their family stories about their beans and seeds they found in their grandma's freezer. And that's one thing that I love about here so much is all the specific foods that are really from this region. Eating soup beans and cornbread, mustard greens and different beans or apple stack cake and fried apple pies. And one time we were visiting my parents and we were trying to think about if there is any really specific food to where I grew up. We really could think of one or two things and I was like, that is so sad. I have my favorite foods from where I grew up but they aren't really region specific. People might eat those anywhere, they eat them here too. So, I think it's such a special thing about all the specific food traditions that are here and specific dishes and way of preparing things.

And so, that's been a fun thing with selling people food too to see what they do with it and since I'm selling food to the customers, a lot of people will tell me what they did with things. I can see people are cooking their mustard greens the traditional way people would cook them here or if they tell me they did something else with them. And so, it's been an interesting mix to see how people fix them in a more traditional way of this region or if people are really trying new things. And so I think two, when I tell people that I'm selling vegetables, people will assume

that people here are only going to buy mustard greens and potatoes and tomatoes and beans and corn. And, I'm like, that's not true. Everyone loves those things, I love those things and people are buying those things. But, they're also buying eggplant and weird tomatoes and all kinds of stuff and if I put a recipe suggestion on my email, ten people will tell me they made it. So, people have their favorite foods and comfort foods, but they're also going to cook other stuff too. Not everyone. Everyone cooks differently and has different ways of what they're going to do in their kitchen... Learning the specific dishes and food culture here has been so much fun for me, but I also think that it's a lot more dynamic than people think it is when people just can't believe that my number two money maker last year was kale. They were just like, no one is buying that and I'm like, they are buying it. And they're also buying mustard greens, so that's been fun.

That's what I saw in Grow Appalachia too with all those home gardeners. A lot of people wanted to grow the traditional things but they also wanted to try new stuff, probably everyone tried one new thing every year. People would call us, probably every week and be like, how do I cook this or tell me a new recipe or they would make something and they would call us in Grow Appalachia and tell us how they cooked it so they could tell other, we could tell other people. So, there is tradition, but there is a lot of open and experimenting and new ways and changing that up too.

I do think that food has a role to play, and especially since there are such specific food types and traditions here that I'm not sure how that gets played out, or if it's in conjunction with tourism or what. But the food here is delicious and amazing, and I think there's something to that. And the role of farming, I think, it has a role to play, but I hate to be really optimistic about it being a big one. And really that is, it isn't a big economic or wealth creator for any place in the

US that I see it. I mean, there aren't many people that are making their living off of farming anywhere, and so to think that in a place that's mostly straight up and down that that is going to be something that can really help the economy here, I just find doubtful and I'm pessimistic about that, even though that is what I'm doing. So, I know that's conflicting. So, I do think that will be useful for some people and I think there are agriculture opportunities in Eastern Kentucky that aren't really being utilized. But I don't, I'm not as positive about it as a lot of people that I talk to are. And so, I don't know if I've actually ever told anyone that. Because a lot of people, a lot of people that work on it are people that buy food from me and are really supportive of me and I don't want to be like, "What you're working on, I just don't believe in it." I do believe in it, I just, maybe they don't think it's going to be as big. When you're pitching something, you want to make it sound wonderful. I don't think it's quite as wonderful as that. I don't think that, it's not going to be easy at all, and if people want to be making money in this sector, it's going to be so hard, they really want to have to do it. It not something that somebody's going to be like, "Oh I think I'll try that." You really have to want to do it and stick to it and work at it. But, I do think that there's, it can, to some extent I do think it will be a part of the economy, and as people keep energy and support in it, I do think it will be. It's just not going to be the livelihood for a lot of people, just like I said, it's not the livelihood for a lot of people any place.

I do think that there are institutions here and just lots of people talking about food traditions here too. I mean, it's not like I really have to go around being like, "My food is organic and wonderful." A lot of times it's more just like, "I grew it." And people are like, "Yes, I know that fresh food is better because I've always had a garden or I did as a kid." And so, I do think that there is space for people to be selling here because I think people are pretty connected to

food. And that's not a hard sell. And I do think selling meat for us is really easy and I don't see a lot of other people in this area selling meat. And I think that would be a huge opportunity for people that really - I know lack of process is an issue, that's an issue for us too. But I think that could be a pretty good opportunity for people, even just as additional income, and not their full time job. I think it's a part of economy and I am not a big picture person and I'm a pessimist. So, I'm having trouble seeing what it is, but I'll be excited to see how it plays out.⁶⁴

DAVID FISHER

David Fisher has been active previous seasons with Grow Appalachia and the farmers' market. I was introduced to him through Valerie Horn as well as a friend, Elly Engle, who interviewed David for her forthcoming Rural Sociology dissertation about Grow Appalachia. David and his partner Kae live on Little Cowan. We sat down at their kitchen table for our interview. Kae was working on a colorful painting of a woman at an alter and added dialogue to our interview. David recommended when you ask people about themselves, ask who their people are. He said when you know who someone's people are, you know about them. David talked about his father who had moved down with his family from Indiana when he was a child, and his mother who was a Kincer from Pine Creek (one of Evelyn Kincer's daughters). David grew up in Millstone and then Whitesburg. Kae is from Little Cowan, right around the area where they live.

David talked about the work he did with steel companies and unexpectedly getting laid off. He spent years commuting to places like West Virginia for work because there wasn't work here. He has also been involved with oil drilling and fracking and sees the environmental

⁶⁴ Bowling interview

detriment of extractive industries. When he was fired in 2012, he realized he wanted to be able to spend time with his family and not work and travel so many hours of the day. He has tried to find jobs in Letcher County, but they are temporary or part time. He and Kae started a Mercantile business downtown which has since closed. He currently works as a substitute within the school system, filling in for custodians, cooks, and other workers as needed. Kae works as a bartender in a couple different places. A few years ago, when David lost his job, he decided to focus on what is needed most: food. He started growing food for his family and had more than they could eat. He heard about a farmers' market meeting at the extension office and went. He encouraged Valerie Horn to get involved because of her connection to Grow Appalachia. He was instrumental in beginning the market and cares about its success. He sees it as a community project that should benefit the whole community.

At some point, he was turned off from selling vegetables after experiencing customers who didn't value the amount of labor that goes into farming. He commented on the tradition of people giving their surplus crops away to friends and neighbors and how some people aren't used to really paying for vegetables. He has decided to grow enough to take care of his family and focus on trying to find employment where he can make a living. He is raising chickens for meat and eggs on the side. He remarked that people are talking about economic struggle recently with the decline in coal, but that struggle has always been a part of life here. He accepts that struggle with resilience, not willing to give up. David and Kae both talked about how much their grandchildren mean to them. In spite of challenges, David remains optimistic about the future. Creating a world that will be better for his grandchildren is part of that hope. After we

finished the interview, Kae had made taco salad for supper and invited me to stay. I was thankful for their enlightening company and kind hospitality.

We grew up handling hard times and the odds was always stacked against us. It's not anything new to us. It's just a way of life. But, that's a thing a lot of people don't, they've forgot that. They took this one industry, which is the coal industry, and they now that it's not real prevalent, you don't have a lot of jobs here, everybody's kind of freaking out, you know. What are we going to do? But they've forgot that it's always been like that here. At first it was the timber. Before they ever started mining coal around here, they harvested all the timber. All these trees and stuff that you see in a lot of this area, it's second and third growth, none of its virgin timber. The first thing they done was come in and took all the timber out. Then after they harvested all the timber, and somebody found coal and they said, "Oh, wait a minute, we can get all this coal." And in comes all the coal companies. Peabody, Bethlehem Steele, Scotia, places like that. They're mainly, Massey, several other large coal operators that's not just in this area, but they're based in Pennsylvania or Wyoming or Ohio. They had the foresight to purchase all the mineral rights around here. So, by them owning the mineral rights, they pretty much control all the land and everything that happens. They, a lot of the people that harvested the timber they bought the timber rights, they bought the land and they sold that to the coal companies with the mineral rights attached to it. They had the trees off of it and they wasn't going to do anything, so they got all the mineral rights sold and that pretty much - it's hard to get land around here that's not been in somebody's family for generations. And if it's not been in your family for generations then more than likely, there's a coal company that owns it or a land company, a lot of people call them land companies that own all the land around here. It's hard to get any land.

We've been on this quarter acre all this time, like all we want to do is just have a farm and be able to meet our needs. It's not like we're wanting to feed the world, we're just wanting to feed ourselves.

But it's so hard to get any land, workable land. We've just got to make do with what we've got. It's different living here, you know. The traveling and stuff, the work situation is really, it's always been like that. There's never really been a lot of manufacturing and stuff. There's never been any big factories because first off, it's so isolated, it's so hard to get anything in or out of this area, except coal. They'll make a way to get the coal out. But, that was all they was concerned with. They wasn't concerned with really bringing anything else in here. It's kind of where we're at now. But, a lot of people are getting away from the fact that we've always been very self-sufficient, very resilient in this area, through the whole Appalachias. We're kind of an isolated people. And people that's not from here that come here and visit, they think that we're real closed off and that we're not very friendly and that we don't welcome people in and stuff. It's not so much that, it's just that we're so focused on just trying to survive ourselves that it's hard to, it's hard to welcome people and open your home or whatever up to people. Because all we've ever seen was people come in, take what they want and leave and desolate. Why take the trouble because they're not going to be here very long anyway? That's not the Appalachia I know, which I'm from here.

And, one of the first questions, when two people meet, people that grew up in the county, one of the first questions they ask, it's not where do you live or where are you from or what's your name or whatever, it's: "Who's your people? Who's your dad? Who's your grandpa? What's your last name?" And that's one of the first things that's how we get to know each other. Because

somewhere down the line where we are so isolated and we've been in these hollers and on top of these hills so long, somewhere down the line, somebody's family, we've had dealings with your family before. And that's one of the things. Usually you know when you hear people talk, the first time people meet or whatever and they start talking about their relations and who their family is and stuff, you'll hear them go back two or three generations, usually by the second generation, they've got a connection somewhere. Where they, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, that's my aunt's husband, yeah," or something like that or "Yeah, that was my cousin's first wife." There's always something that they can find a connection. And without that connection in that family line or whatever, it is hard to get in to know the people and stuff. If we don't know you and we don't know your family, we are kind of closed off. It's nothing that - it's just how we were brought up. We know this family and we know that. And that's really how we get to know one another is from their heritage, from their people.

Getting back to the food thing, back to what I was talking about food. That's what really got me into agriculture, farming, is: what do I need, what do I got to have? If everything else shuts down, I still got to eat. No matter if I'm sitting in the dark, with no TV, and no way to go anywhere, I've still got to eat. I've got to be able to have water and food. So, being a person that I am, well, I'm not going to worry about if I can't afford groceries, I'm going to grow my own. I'm going to figure out how to make my own food. And that's what really got me into using agriculture. And, so, I started doing a little research on it, started talking to different people, finding out what I needed, what I needed to start doing stuff. Started three acres. Found three acres of bottomland that my grandfather, he worked all his life, ever since I can remember. And it was laying dormant, they was cutting grass. They was just mowing it, so I asked my

grandmother, "Can I tend this bottom?" she said, "Why, yeah." So, I started that, about three acres, put that out.

Then it dawned on me, as I looked back at 157 tomato plants, what am I going to do with all this stuff? I can't eat all that. Where am I going to sell it? Ok, where am I going to sell it? I'll sell it to Food City, they buy local food. Talk to them. Hmm, yeah. You got to have GAP Certification, you've got to be a certified farmer, you've got to be, you've got to have \$150,000 - minimum \$150,000 - insurance policy... I'm just talking about selling the regular vegetables. You've got to have a processing center that is USDA Certified. You can't just take a bucket of tomatoes down there and say, "Here you go." No, that ain't where it's at. And all those systems that they were talking about, all this stuff that I need, I got to realizing that there's nothing around here, none of that's here. We have no certified farmer. We have no certified processing center. We have no way of people producing food and selling it to the grocery store because they're not certified, there's no in between, there's no way to get stuff from their garden to the shelves of Food City without hundreds of thousands of dollars involved in insurance and this and that, so that's out.

Well, I can't sell it to Food City, what am I going to do? I'll take it to the Farmers' Market, oh wait a minute, we don't have a farmers' market. So, low and behold, I was driving down the road, going up to the garden and heard them advertising on the radio, "Well, we're going to have a farmers' market meeting at the extension office, 6:00." Turned my old truck around, went to the extension office. Walked in up there, "Heard y'all wanting to have a farmers' market." Three people up there, I was the fourth person to show up at a meeting out of the whole

county, four people. And two of them were crafters, not one farmer [laughs], not one farmer showed up. How are you going to have a farmers' market without a farmer?

There was a girl there from CFA, Community Farm Alliance, Alexa, and she was there to help get the farmers' market on the right path, how to set it up, how to get vendors there, how to get all your certification and stuff so that you can be a bona fide farmers' market so that you can do this, you can have tastings and you can have canned food and you can be an actual farmers' market. So, everybody else just kind of blew her off like she was just another outsider. Well, not me. "Tell me more about this CFA, what are we doing? How do you do this? Where do you start?" So, started talking to her and she started giving me websites to check out, paperwork that you need to do and things that you needed to have and one of the first things that I seen, you're going to have to have a non-profit umbrella to get under. And, didn't have that. Takes years to become a 401c3. So, that wasn't going to work out. This farmers' market ain't going to take off. What am I going to do with all these tomatoes? That's what was going through my mind.

So, called Valerie, I was working for Grow Appalachia, doing a little bit of tilling and stuff for Grow Appalachia. I just come on the scene, just helping them out. They needed someone to run the tiller and stuff. So, Valerie, she's the director of Grow Appalachia, she's got Cowan Community Center behind her, they've got a 401c3, or whatever it is. Maybe we can use that. "Valerie, you need to come to this farmer's market meeting, they're wanting to have a farmers' market, they ain't got no farmers. We're going to have to do something. We need to get this going."

I said, "I just so happen to know some people through Grow Appalachia, driving that tiller and stuff." I met people that was farming, like-minded people. So, got them involved, got

them to start coming. They wanted to push forward, so June the 20th of whenever, a few years ago, we got four people. Four growers. We had Grow Appalachia, we had our farmers' market. We formed our farmers' market and Grow Appalachia was a big part of it. Me and Andy and Don Maggard and there was another guy, I can't think of who it was... Anyway, there was four of us. By hell, we put on a farmers' market.

We had a lot of zucchini, squash, cucumbers, and tomatoes and stuff. There was just four of us. Man, we was there and our trucks was loaded down. It was a lot of hit and miss... We just had a lot of trial and error, a lot of putting stuff out and it not working out. But anyway, I started selling my tomatoes and my cucumbers and that was going along. I said, what about all that stuff I don't sell? What am I going to do with it? I need to process it. How do I sell processed stuff? First step, become a microprocessor... So I left from here and drove to Muhlenberg County for an eight-hour class to become a microprocessor. Got home that evening from that class, or that night, the next day, submitted the recipes, in two weeks I had seven recipes approved. Submitted my labels, had all that approved and went from there. But, it just got so much trying to can this stuff here. Not working out.

And then, what really drove the nail in that coffin was I was pretty well into it, growing some fine produce, I mean, beautiful produce. Tasted good, real fresh, we'd pick it the night before. It really stuck in my mind - had these Anaheim, I don't know how I keep remembering these peppers. But I had Anaheim peppers, 2 for \$1, I mean they were huge, Giant Marconi peppers is the name of them. They were like huge, I mean, I had two peppers and it was like three pounds' worth of green peppers for \$1. Two for \$1. And a woman walked by and said, "That's too much, I can go to that Food City and get it cheaper than that." And that stuck in my

mind that these people don't value how much effort I put in this. Just to get them two peppers down here. They don't realize it was 70 hours' worth of labor to get them down here, not to count, not mentioning all the tilling and the hoeing and the putting the rows in and planting it and keeping the crows out of it and beating the cats off of it from going over there and knocking my pepper plants over and putting up the fence and you know? And all that time, and her to say that, and me, the cheapest peppers in the county at the time, and scoffed at and turned around and walked away, put her money back in her pocket and walked away, said it was too high. So, that right there was an eye opener for me. These people don't realize that they're five tractor trailer loads away from starvation. They think that those shelves will always be stocked down there at Food City. They know that Walmart's always going to have potatoes.

So, second year, come out, and same stuff, you know? Onions, cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, corn, beans, peas, same thing. And still, they didn't realize eighty hours a week. And, yeah I made \$300, \$400 at the farmers' market. They didn't that realize I worked eighty hours that week. And \$400 for 80 hours, what's that work out to?

\$5/hour. Less than minimum wage. So, that really changed the way I look at things. Maybe I don't need to try to feed the world. Maybe I just try to feed myself. So, if people don't put no value on it. And I can't fault the people around here because they're used to their neighbors giving them food. They're used to opening the front door and a big bag of produce sitting on their door that the neighbors picked and it was overflow, surplus. And, sitting there. They're not used to having to go buy something or pay for it. But, you know, I realized that I'm not going to make a living farming around in this area. That's not going to happen. First off, you don't have the land to be productive to get into profit. I mean, you've got to produce thousands of

pounds to reach a profit. We don't have the facilities to preserve it. We don't have the network to distribute it. There's so many roadblocks in that. I tried to start changing that. I started putting the ideas out. Anybody I'd see, I'd say, "We need to get something going at this high school." Or "Let's do something with this." or "Let's try that." And a few people, they heard. Say, "that's a good idea, let's go do this." That didn't happen - kind of got left to the side, but that's alright, it's still, it may happen.

It's hard to hold out, it's hard to maintain hope. But, I'm still an optimist at heart and I'm going to keep on. People get so bogged down in the status quo and the rhetoric of "we can't do that, that's too big and let's let somebody else worry about it." But, I'm too strong to quit. I am not going to let that deter me, I know, I'm going to endeavor to persevere. That's all we can do, try to make it better. Maybe not for me, it may not come in my time, but it's going to come in my grandchildren's time, it's going to come in my great grandchildren's time. They'll look back on it; they'll reap the benefits.

Until people start actually taking responsibility, because I blame myself. I'm not saying I'm blameless in this, I'm not saying I've got all the answers or nothing. I am saying that I am aware that I am part of the problem, but I also am aware that I am part of the solution. That's what we got to, we really got to start taking stock. And not just in southeastern Kentucky, but the whole country. And quit blaming the other side for our failures. We got to quit that because, man, I just don't see any peace in trying just blame the other side, just trying to win an argument. Lose the country, just so you win the argument. What good's that going to do? And that's one of the biggest things is just be responsible, be responsible. If you're going to put me in charge of something, I'm going to be responsible for it. I'm going to tend it. I'm going to take care of it. I'm

going to leave it better than I found it. That's all we got to do. If everybody had that attitude right there, limitless, it would be unlimited what we could do, what we could accomplish, and how we could take care of our neighbors and our community and our state and our country and everything. But, we've got to really just try to leave it better than we found it.⁶⁵

DARYL ROYSE

Daryl Royse is the co-owner of Heritage Kitchen, a restaurant in downtown Whitesburg, that he runs with his partner Brad Shepherd. We sat down for an interview in a booth at the front of the restaurant between the lunch and supper crowds. Heritage Kitchen has a welcoming diner feel – checkered tablecloths, silverware and condiments on each table, comfortable green booths lining the perimeter, and tables and chairs scattered throughout the restaurant. There’s a small bar in the back corner and paintings from local artists along the walls. The sign on the window says that they serve “American Comfort Food.”

Daryl and Brad started the restaurant in September 2015 with a vision of creating a restaurant space that served home cooked meals, celebrated family recipes, sourced from local farmers when possible, and created employment opportunities. They were living in Lexington but looking to move to a small town. Though Daryl is from northeast Kentucky, Brad is from the nearby community of Blackey. They saw potential in Whitesburg as a place that would be receptive to their restaurant idea where Brad already knew the community. Daryl talked about his family and the importance of gardening and cooking. He has an accounting background and enjoys running a business that is a positive space in the community. He talked some about

⁶⁵ David Fisher, interview by Abby Huggins, August 3, 2016.

relationships with farmers like Shane Lucas and Dock Frazier. He also spoke of the challenges of supply and seasonality and having to adopt his menu accordingly.

In addition to food, he talked some about the acceptance and challenges of being gay in Whitesburg. He feels some judgement from the greater community, especially the religious community, but he and Brad are striving to just be people there, running a business. He spoke several times about the hope he senses in Whitesburg, even amidst declining coal industry. He connected that hope with a sense of pride in the rootedness of family and tradition. He pointed out the pictures on the walls from both his and Brad's family with their intentions of carrying on family heritage into the present, thus the name of the restaurant, Heritage Kitchen. I continued to stop by the restaurant throughout the summer, as it truly is a welcoming and friendly space to be.

I also have a love of food. When I was a kid, I didn't tell you this when I was giving you my history, but I always wanted to be a chef when I was growing up. Part of that going out and running around the land was me doing crazy stuff like making mud pies and things that kids do that is imitation of cooking. But I also spent a lot of time with my mom, and she canned food that we grew in our gardens and I spent a lot of time in our family garden, working the land, helping my family take care of our cows, all that when we had those things. There were large points of my life that my family dealt with some sort of livestock, gardening, almost always until I was an adult and even beyond that. So, my family history lends it to, I've dealt with food from the farm to the table. And so, I just grew up loving that aspect of doing something with food but also serving people. I love to make food for people, every day when I come out and I ask people how their food is, that's the best thing is to hear them say, "Oh it's really good." Simple pleasures

[laughs]. I love to do that, that's been a long thing for me. I think it's part of my family history, which is one of the things, probably needed to give you some background for us choosing "Heritage Kitchen." When we decided to create the business model and we knew we were going to do family recipes for some of the things we did, we chose "heritage" as the name so that we knew we were passing on what we knew to do in food. So, some of the recipes that are on our menu are from Brad's family and some are from my family and some are things that we've created ourselves. We just want to be able to pass that on to other people and let them enjoy it.

Sourcing food, it's been a small challenge, nothing that can't be overcome. But, we've worked with a few local farmers up to this point. We use Lucas Farms, which is Shane Lucas, and Frazier Farms, which is Dock Frazier. And we've sourced different things from both farms. For a long time, we were using Shane Lucas for Red Star lettuce, which was beautiful, we used it for all of our salads, and tastes great, locally grown product, and people loved it. It was just nonstop. People would ask for that. Unfortunately, Shane ran out [laughs]. I think he sold everything to us that he had. He's working on a new crop, which should be available, I think, by late summer. And, once he gets it, we will use that again. We've also used him for variety of vegetables, locally grown tomatoes, peppers, and other things. Dock Frazier, we have used him for broccoli, cauliflower, snap peas, eggs. He's our sole producer of eggs and just numerous other items. And they're all good, and people here love that they are eating locally grown products. It's huge for us to be able to market. It brings more people through the door. And I feel like we're creating a network, a demand for locally grown product as well. And that was one of the things that we wanted to, or one of our goals when we were working on our business plan, in regards to the area being economically depressed and the effects of the coal industry closing are still going

on. We wanted in some small way to create jobs for people locally both within our restaurant, but also from without, from the outside, both in the region where people could possibly farm and supply us with product that we could sell here. So, if we could create the demand for the product then they could supply us. I think we're doing that in small ways. I'd love to see it grow even more. Because I know the more volume that I can create from my sales, the more they're going to need help, assistance, and that hires more people locally. So, it's a big picture, it's like a huge circle, and it just goes around and around, and it's just getting that circle fine-tuned so that the network keeps going, the demand is there, the supply, and it just keeps going.

The challenges we've had so far is like there's also local farmers' markets. So, not only are the farmers supplying us, but they're supplying product for farmers' market and even other vendors. There are a couple other restaurants in town that use the products as well. And so, sometimes the supply has been the challenge, the vendors will run out. And it's unexpected. Like, I don't have a lot of notice, so to find another supply for that has been a challenge. For example, last week, we had been using locally grown romaine lettuce on all of our sandwiches for like two months. And now our customers have gotten used to that type of lettuce being on their sandwich. But, my farmer ran out. And there's not another crop ready to go right now. There will be in a couple of months because it's not the season to grow that product. So, part of the challenge is just creating a seasonally known, what is going to be offered for what time frame. So that we can prepare with other vendors to replace that product when it's not available locally. But otherwise, from a purchasing standpoint, they're very economical, comparable in price to me buying it from my distributors. So, cost has not been a challenge and they're easy to work with. The farmers love to farm, you can tell it. And they love to give their product. They're

just like me. I love to sell my product and make people happy. And they do the same thing. So, it's going to be a long term engagement with them and they'll get used to what I need when I need it and I'll get used to them and what they have available.

I think the area is prime for farming, for more restaurants, for tourists to come here and experience what the area has to offer, both from the food perspective but also from just the beauty of the land and what's here. You know, it's beautiful. But that's one thing I would hope over the coming years, and I know it's a long term project is that the area is marketed in a way to pull people in and help them understand this area once was focused primarily on coal mining and that was a way of life for people, but it has changed and it's evolved.

I know from my own family, I've been doing some research, and I know my grandmother, I was going to talk about her a little bit, she probably started my love of cooking. Because I remember as a very small child, going to her house on Sundays every week with my family. And, she was still cooking on a wood burning, old metal stove. And she would make wonderful biscuits, fried chicken, gravy, all this stuff that you would die for. And I just, it was amazing what she was able to produce in such limited capabilities. And I know she was always tinkering, like she had grapes that grew outside, and a huge garden, and she canned, and she had chickens and cows, and they produced everything that they could. They worked the land and lived off the land. And I think that sense of pioneer-ism has been passed on through us. Even though maybe as a young adult and kid we didn't realize it, now as an older adult, I feel more like those roots meant something. So, I think it's getting passed on through people's heritage, and I think that sense of hope and trying to do something was ingrained in this area somehow within the people.

Originally we had a lot of concerns coming here. It's not the most open area. It's still not the most open and accepting area. But there are a lot of good people here. It's hard for me to talk about because our families have been very supportive of us. And I know it was a challenge for them also for us to come here, a married gay couple. It's not a thing that is popular here. So, when we created the business model, we did it in a way that we wanted people to judge us on our food and not on who we were. And I think that that has helped with the acceptance because we put ourselves with the product, and stood behind it and said, "This is us, this is what we're offering to your community." And we've been fairly well accepted, there's been some odd things, no direct craziness or instances of something that was just horrible.

We did try to rent a house, because when we originally moved here, we moved into an apartment. And we wanted the space to be in a house. And we tried to rent a house from a local older couple and once they figured out that we were a gay couple, that was no. And there are no protections in the local area for that type of discrimination. There's no local fairness ordinance, nothing like that. So, we can't complain other than tell the people that we know to try to affect some change.

So, I think that has helped us in some small ways. We have put a face on people, I'm trying to put it into words. We've put a face on something that most people here would never have experienced otherwise. I think most people here probably don't even know gay people at all, unless it's a family member. And at that point, I feel like people don't care. That's the difference, where I find it kind of hypocritical. There's a lot of people that are very religious based here that are unaccepting of LGBT people, but at the same time if their son, daughter, cousin, brother is gay or lesbian, then, it's not a big deal because they know someone. But then,

they'll still go out and spout crazy hate speech. So, I find that really hard for me, I'm a very logical person. And I find it hard to understand how you can have two differing viewpoints in your life.

I've thought long and hard the last few weeks because there's been all of the things that have gone on. The Orlando thing was just horrible. It was totally horrible, senseless, it was terrorism but it was also a hate crime. After that, we had a vigil locally that we put together with the help of some of our friends. And we wanted to show people that it doesn't matter who you are, we're all human. From my perspective, I'm trying to show more and more people here that it doesn't matter that I'm the gay owner of Heritage Kitchen. That doesn't matter to anything. I'm just here trying to make good food so that people can eat. And that's it.

But, it's a challenge. I was talking to one of my friends a couple days ago how after the vigil was held, it was publicized on the local television channel. And then, they have online versions and people can comment. And I read some of the comments and it was really disheartening because forty-nine people lost their life that night and people's comments were very dismissive. Like, those lives didn't matter in any way because they were gay or lesbian. And so, I found it really, really disheartening because I didn't feel like that. I didn't want to read that. It's real bad. But, it's there. And so, my reaction to that is how can I change those people's minds? And that's the dilemma that keeps going around in my head. What can I do personally to change someone's feelings about the LGBT community? We're doing what we're doing here in this restaurant. And I think that that, over time will effect change because people, once we're immersed in the community two or three years, they'll just be like, "Oh, that's the gay guys down at Heritage Kitchen. They're good guys, they make good food and they're here. They said they're

going to be here for twenty years. They want to live their life here because they like us. Maybe we should like them too." So, I'm hoping that will effect some change. But, I also feel like we need to do a lot better job educating our people, our children. It's a cycle, parent - no one knows to discriminate by nature. Discrimination is taught behavior. And so, the only way I think you can change that is to educate people more fully, put the public face that I am a gay man there out in the public and show people that we're not some crazy person. Because, there's so much misinformation and there's a lot of hate. I just - and it comes from a lot people that are religion based. And so, I find that really hard to understand because I grew up in a church, I grew up in my hometown church and I was always taught that Jesus said to love one another, and not judge one another, and help each other out, and I think those are basic human things. I don't know that hate is a basic human thing that we need to be focused on.

When we had the vigil two weeks ago, I tried to get to the core of the issue. And I said, "there were about fifty people standing there that night." And I said, "Just look around, there are fifty people here, if that had happened here, we wouldn't be here. There's no difference between what happened there and what could happen anywhere to fifty individuals." And, I tried to get people to just think about what had happened and to reflect upon what they could do individually. I don't, I know there's a lot of divisiveness in the country. And there's a lot of people that feel like they're right, there's a lot of people that feel like they're left. We need to come together as one, and figure out problems, and not hate each other, and not scream at each other over senseless stuff. And try and solve problems. Relating that all back to Whitesburg, I think that there are solutions here, and I think that's what brought us here, is: there are ways that

we can help with those solutions for the area. And we're doing it through food. Maybe I can draw it all together for you [laughs].

When we were talking about my grandmother and my family, I've been doing a lot of - what we were just talking about, the LGBT community - I've been doing a lot of reflection recently. And it's just, I don't know, I think just the getting older, and trying to make sense of everything in a world that seems senseless at times. And so, I've reflected upon where I've come from and my family, and how they're being passed on through me. And, it just, it's, I've just been thinking about different people in my family. I just, like I hope that I am carrying on the tradition that my family would be proud of me, regardless of the person that I am. Whether they're able to understand why I am the way I am. I would hope that my great grandparents that's sitting over there on the wall looking out from a picture from 1897, is looking out and saying, "Oh my God, my great grandchild did this and tried to do something to improve this world." And I think hopefully that's what every person is trying to do is to carry on legacy, but also create something different in this world.⁶⁶

HARRY COLLINS

Harry Collins works for the public school system and is also connected to an up and coming community kitchen project in Whitesburg. He spoke about family history: coal was a part of both sides of his family, but his father had much more success as a chicken farmer. He expressed an interest in economic opportunity through growing technology and widening food markets beyond the region. He explained the community kitchen project and his hopes for the

⁶⁶ Daryl Royse, interview by Abby Huggins, July 5, 2016.

role it will play in giving people opportunity to create niche value added products sold in this community and beyond. Harry envisions a community returning to agricultural roots in a way that is relevant in the present.

We're going to have to go back to our roots and go back to our history, like we're talking about today, and going back to that agrarian lifestyle and that agrarian economy to bolster what we have here in Eastern Kentucky.

But it's not the first time it's been done, it's not the first time that coal has been replaced with agriculture. In my family, my father came from a family of eleven children and hardworking daddy and a loving mother that grew up in the small house on the farm that I actually live on now at Smoot Creek. I live in the shadows of the farm, there on Smoot Creek. And, he was coal owner. He actually owned three or four mines that he operated with ponies and wagons and manual labor with the breast augers, which were the drills that they would drill back into the rock and the coal, then they would load the holes with dynamite and do the shooting while they were still in the mine and then take pick and shovel and break the coal down, put it in the wagon, take it out, dump it and carry it off. And, to be honest, he just about starved to death in the coal business. He couldn't get ahead, he had eleven children at his death, but during the coal mining years, he had five initial children. Those five initial children that were raised on a coal owner's economics nearly starved to death. They had very little, their clothing was whatever they could get. They raised their subsistence foods - they had hogs and chickens and cows and vegetables. And if it were not for that, they would have probably starved. But, he made very little money as a coal miner.

And then, in the late 50s, early 60s, he heard through the extension office here in Letcher

County about the proposition of producing eggs through large chicken houses. And he bought into that and actually got out of the coal business and sank his money into building a chicken house that would eventually house about 10,000 chickens. He made that chicken house state of the art at the time. It had automatic waterers, automatic feeders, automatic lighting. Had a monorail system that the children would ride the monorail around and pull the eggs from the baskets and bring them to the grading room. He had all the equipment to grade the eggs into large and extra-large and medium and small. And then had the lighting system to check the coals. So, he had that quality assurance piece and then he would package those eggs and we would go out into the community and pretty much his tentacles of sales pretty much permeated southeastern Kentucky. And, every child that was in school, including me in kindergarten in 1975, we would carry eggs to our teachers and sell those eggs and take them back to our teacher. And, I remember when I was in kindergarten, just before he died and the business died with him, working in the boxing room and making egg boxes and he paid me a generous salary of a quarter a day and I was tickled to death to be working as a kindergartener and earning my own money. So, he carved out a niche, where he was starving to death in coal business, he was able to carve out that niche for his family. And the funny part about that is to look across the eleven children and to look at the first five that existed and then looking at the last six who were alive under the chicken house years, who thrived. They could have whatever they want, they had cars, they were able to go to local stores and buy clothing once a week, twice a week. So, it was amazing to watch that agrarian economy replace that suffering coal economy.

I feel that we're at that place now. That there are some hard workers out there and Letcher County has a plethora of hard workers that still remain that have been removed from their jobs

and lost that support of coal mining that are going to have to carve out that same kind of niche if we're going to survive. That niche may be agriculture, that niche may be working with the internet. When the fiber optic tentacles and the high speed internet makes its way this way, maybe we move from mining coal to mining information. So, and we've always done that. Ever since we left the motherland and worked our way this way, it's been an evolution of finding your way in the world and not giving up and I think that's still alive and well with the spirit of Letcher Countians.

It is our vision to develop a facility that will enable both local growers, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, to produce products that they can set on their shelves in their homes and use those through the winter and extend their crops to last throughout the year. We're also looking at that community kitchen being a place where processors, like those two people that I talked about to come to bottle a product or produce a product, that they market outside of the mountains. We're looking for that kitchen to be a catalyst that grows the number of producers that we have in the mountains, maybe building a co-op system with the farmers to produce the number of goods that we need in the fields to process at our kitchen. We're also looking at, as we were talking the other Monday night at the meeting, about health and wellbeing. We're looking at being able to provide a more nutritious, healthy choice for local diners in that facility, maybe a cafeteria of sorts in that kitchen. We're also looking at food contracts with the Senior Citizen's Centers, possibly with the jail, possibly to produce their meals economically for them and offering nutritious, locally grown products to our jail and to our senior citizens. Our county is strapped with the loss of coal severance tax and overall funds just being wiped out. So, we're hoping to meet that need of those meals through our kitchen, so it's a win-win situation. Our county gets a

cheaper price on those meals and we get the benefits of producing them and building sustainability into this kitchen. We're in the process right now of, we have our business name, CANE, Inc. (Community Agricultural and Nutritional Enterprises, Inc). Also doing business as "Raising CANE." But, we have that name, we are now in the process of securing non-profit status, which will put us in line for federal grants and foundation grants to develop the kitchen.

So, we're looking for those funds to help us with those startup costs and hopefully, there's good news on the way. As soon as we're able to produce that kitchen, we have a group of people that we already know in the public that are just chomping at the bits to use our facility to produce their products. It's a vision of hope, giving hope to a lot of people that are hopeless right now. They don't see a way to replace what they've lost in the coal economy. And, I'm not going to guarantee to anyone that. Because, we had coal miners that were making \$100,000 a year. I'm not going to guarantee to them that they'll replace all that money. But, I can guarantee them that they can replace a good chunk of that through production of vegetables. So, our vision is to give an option. Just another chance for the mountain people to carve out a niche. And, we hope that that facility can be part of that catalyst that causes people to think outside the box and change their lives, change their paradigm of how it's always been.

And I think that what we're trying to do now is find the outlet for that. That [youth] don't have to move from these mountains, they can take their talents that they've been given and they can use those to carve out that new niche of opportunity for themselves here in the hills. And they don't have to move to Detroit and they don't have to move to Illinois and they don't have to move to Ohio. But they can thrive right here at home. It's amazing to watch that the pioneer spirit of five generations back is still alive and well in this generation. I think history is playing itself

out again here in the hills and I think we're morphing into a new mountain community and I'm excited to see what goes on with that.

We stand at the beginning of a road that reaches out ahead of us. And I go back to Robert Frost. And, going back to his "roads diverged in a yellow wood." And I think that we stand at that crossroads again and we look down that soft, easy, well-traveled path and we look down that one that leads another direction that is not as well traveled and is not as groomed as the other. But I think the payoff of taking that path that is not as well groomed, that goes into a totally new arena, I think that's the one that we will go down. The path of least resistance - and I was telling someone this yesterday, someone was talking to me about the path of least resistance - the path of least resistance always leads downhill. There's no effort, there's no problems on the path of least resistance. But if we want to go up, if we want to make it to the top of the mountain, we're going to have to take that path that we're going to have to work at. And, I think that we stand right now in the crossroads. In Letcher County and southeastern Kentucky and America and the world in general, we stand at a crossroads that we can still take the path of least resistance and not get the results we want. Or we can take the other paths, we can take that other road. And he said that "the road I chose made all the difference." And, I think that we can take that path, yeah, there will be problems, there will be hiccups, there will be barriers, but I think that when we get to the end of that journey and we find ourselves in that new place, I think we'll be thankful for taking that path of resistance, that path of work, that path of surmounting the odds. And I just think that there's a bright future for Letcher County. I think there's a bright future for the children of Eastern Kentucky and I think that it takes people like us, I think it takes people that are interested in changing paradigms of Eastern Kentucky and changing the lifestyles of Eastern

Kentucky. I think it takes us to get us started on that road. And once we get our children on that road, I think they'll take care of it on their own and I think they'll blaze that trail that others can follow.⁶⁷

SHAD BAKER

Shad Baker is the Agricultural County Extension in Letcher County and a blueberry farmer. I met Shad through the farmers' market and had the pleasure of picking blueberries on his farm. We conducted our interview at his office in Whitesburg. Shad shared about growing up in Jenkins and gardening with his papaw. Three generations of his family worked in the mines, including his mother. He went to high school in Hazard and college in Lexington. He felt drawn back to Eastern Kentucky and landed a job as an extension agent in Letcher County. At the time he attended college, it was unique to be from Eastern Kentucky and study agriculture at the University of Kentucky, as most students came from perspectives of larger agriculture in Central and Western Kentucky. Agriculture in Letcher County is different, including more home gardeners and more geographical challenges with land space. Shad talked about the Pine Mountain trail that he was instrumental in developing as a part of community development. He also talked about his own blueberry farm on top of old mine land and his visions for fruits and nuts - especially revitalizing the American chestnut - on reclaimed mine sites. According to Shad, the pH, sun, and moisture conditions are well suited for perennials there. He envisions a diverse economy that includes rethinking the use of formerly mined lands. He also expressed frustration with the way Appalachians have been looked down throughout history.

I grew up in Jenkins and it was and still is a coal camp. Two story, kind of cookie cutter

⁶⁷ Harry Collins, interview by Abby Huggins, July 27, 2016.

houses, most of the houses had gardens out back. It was kind of the tradition for each family to have their own garden and almost every family tended one. And, I helped my papaw raise a garden in our backyard. So, that's what got me into growing things.

Well, he worked in the coal mines. He started when he was sixteen. I think he had to lie about his age to be able to work. But, he worked for forty-eight years in the coal mines. It was in the deep mines. And, he sharpened bits, he did a bunch of different things. But, he worked for a very long time. For Consol and Beth-Elkhorn and then he retired in 1974.

He grew up the next to the youngest of twelve siblings and they subsistence farmed, this would have been, he was born in 1912, so this was before coal was really, hadn't taken hold yet. And most of the people were still just trying to eke out a living... He tells the story about stealing sugar from the cupboard. They knew he had a sweet tooth and that was a luxury and they had just bought a ten-pound bag of sugar and had it up on top of the cabinet. And, they went to work in the field and while they were gone, he crawled up and pinched a hole in the bottom, thinking he could get a handful of sugar. And, of course, you know what happened, it all ran out in the floor. And, he was spanked for that. But anyway, so that was his background, subsistence farming.

After he went to work in the mines, by the time he got in his teens, mining was pretty big. And so, that was just something that everybody did. And I don't know if it was economics or if that was that post-World War II, they encouraged gardening during the liberty gardens, victory gardens. I don't know if it was part of that or what, but everybody had a garden. He was really big on tomatoes. He loved tomatoes and he took pride in growing the big beefsteak or whatever. And I remember one year, he had a three-pound tomato and he was very proud of that three-

pound tomato. But he had corn and beans and tomatoes and lettuce, just very basic. I don't remember him growing anything, back then they would have considered carrots and broccoli and things to be exotic. I'm sure he had cabbage. But, he did raised beds with railroad ties in his backyard and he had walnuts that he grew and just a bunch of different things. So, that's what got me into it. When I was five, he made me a little hoe with a small handle so that it would fit my hands. And he said, he called me Sugar Foot, and he said, "Sugar Foot, that's your row, don't cut the corn down." And, so it was my job to hoe that row and he made sure I did it right. So, very early introduction to gardening.

It was my mom's dad. Mom worked in the coal mines. She was a safety inspector. She, this is kind of a convoluted story, but she and my dad split when I was five and she had to go back to work. And, she had to find a job that would pay enough to support a family. And, there aren't a lot of jobs that meet that criteria. So, around here, coal mining was the main thing. And, a woman working in the mines, it's a male dominated profession because it's very rough and tumble, physical labor for the most part. She went back to school at Pikeville College and got a degree in mining technology and got a job working for Chaparral Coal Company in Pikeville as their safety inspector. So, she crawled underground and inspected and did all those things. She didn't garden. No agriculture. My mom likes to grow flowers but that's about it.

I believe that one of the most underutilized resources that we have in the Central Appalachian coalfields is our post-mined lands. For a long time, they were not viewed as an asset. Perhaps to a lot people that aren't from here, they're still not viewed as an asset.

I guess I get a little chip on my shoulder about this just a little bit. Because I feel like everything we do is painted as ugly. Our people worked in the mines and gave their lives to fuel

the engine that is America. And, that whole time, we worked like dogs, we were viewed as inbred, backward, ignorant, somehow less than any other place in the country. And, our men would die or they would come crawling out of the mines with black lung or with broken backs and that didn't mean anything to anybody else. And so, that was ugly. We were ugly. The people were ugly. And, the very thing that fed us has been viewed as ugly. The claim that we pollute, we put pollution in the air, carbon dioxide, acid mine drainage, all these things. And, my perspective on it, I'm the first person in my family that didn't work in the mines. And, my grandfather, my father, and my mother, and my great-grandfather, all of them worked in the mines. So, this notion that everything we do is bad here, it's almost like nothing that we, we're not allowed to do anything. If we log, it's bad, it's ugly, you're cutting the trees down, you're polluting the streams, you're starving the wildlife, don't you feel awful? You grow marijuana. Anything that people here have ever done has been viewed as bad. Even before the coal. It was moonshine. The region was known for moonshine production, that's bad. Everything's always bad. And I guess I'm just weary of that. And, I get a little bit, actually I get a whole lot combative about it. I'm tired of hearing it. And it's not that I don't realize that there's room for improvement, as long as I think that's what the motivation is. But, if the motivation is not to take something good and make it better, if it's to take something that they view as bad and kill it, then, I'm not in favor of that.

So, as far as the mine sites go, I'll get off the politics now and I'll move onto something else, but that's not just politics, that's really what I think. And I think a lot of people here feel that way. And that's why they are so stubborn, this is a stubborn place and we're not going to be bullied.

So, you've got this mine land that is naturally acidic. And that's just a function of the fact that that's what was there. Man didn't make it acidic, it was acidic and we exposed the acidity when we mined it. And, just to make the comparison again, when they talk about the mining, they say, "Well, you've destroyed the topsoil." What does agriculture do? I mean, when they go in and farm a place, does it look like it did? No. Do they eliminate all the native plants? Yeah, if they're doing a good job they do. Do they pollute the water potentially with fertilizer and other things? Yeah. There is no distinction between what agriculture does and what mining did except one has a perception of being pretty and the other one has a perception of being ugly.

The mine sites are naturally acidic and that lends itself very well to berry production. They like acid soil, they want it to be between 4 and 5 on the pH scale and just so happens that's what a lot of them are. And, as far as sustainability, other places where they might have to constantly be amending the soil with sulfur or something ammonium sulfate, something to acidify the ground, I don't have to do that. I've never had to put anything on the ground, it was perfect, just like it was. I did have to put some phosphorus and potassium on it, that helps the plant develop roots and it also causes it to fruit, those are the two most common elements for that. But, anyway, it's also situated very high in regards to the surrounding terrain, so if you think about the climate, there's kind of microclimates within an area. And, on late spring mornings when a lot of things are in bloom, be it apples or peaches or blueberries or any other fruit or nut crop, we routinely get these late killing freezes and that cold air settles in the valleys, which is typically where the people live and these mine sites are up above that. So, they're not frost pockets, they're not very prone to late freezes at all. And so, it's the ideal microclimate for growing fruit crops because you're not going to get that loss. It also gets a lot of airflow and

intense sunlight, so it's not shaded, and that cuts down a lot on the disease pressure that you would have down in the valley. The air's not as humid, so you're not going to have fungal problems, those kinds of things.

My hope would be that the economy would diversify. Even though it may have sounded like I was biased, it's kind of like, you can love your family, but you can see their faults. It's not any different with our industry here. You can love the industry, you can love the miners, you can love all those things and still see that there is room for improvement. And, I would like to see the economy diversify. And I think that would be a positive, it would be more stable and not so much feast and famine, boom and bust, that has been so common. I would like to see more tourism. And it's not because those jobs are necessarily high paying, because they're usually not, or a lot of them aren't. It's just that this is a beautiful, beautiful place and because I think it's so beautiful, I think other people would like to come here. And if something, if an area is seen as having, I don't know, if it's viewed as being pretty or scenic in some way, people tend to value it more. And, with that value comes a sense of pride. And, that bleeds over into the morale of the people. From an agriculture standpoint, I would like to see every one of the strip mine sites in production.

A lot of different things. But, all of them have merit, all of them have potential, all of them would accomplish the diversity of the economy and all of them would be attractive from a tourism standpoint, you know? To go see a herd of buffalo or to go see maple trees, or to go harvest your own chestnuts for thanksgiving, pick your own, how cool would that be? That would be my hope. Or, maybe the region be known for one of those. You think about Washington state and it's known for apple production, Georgia the peach, known, Iowa the corn.

What if this part of Kentucky was known for blueberry production or what if it was known for American chestnut? Any of those things, that would be great.⁶⁸

The narrators in this chapter share common ground as people striving to derive livelihood from growing, selling, and preparing food. They approach their work with various motivations, express certain challenges, and envision a range of economic opportunities for food and farming in Eastern Kentucky. Some growers nostalgically reminisce about their ancestors' connection to farming and the land. Dock Frazier and Don Maggard are both stewards of family property and farm with particular mindfulness of previous generations. Bennett and Colette Quillen remember their family members farming and selling vegetables for extra income. Colette faithfully saves family bean seeds so their specific taste lives on. These growers approach their gardens with a sacred respect for the soil, the seeds, the plants, and the people who receive nourishment from the land. Others, like Debbie Adams and Daryl Royse have a special appreciation for the social satisfaction of sharing food – whether it's serving a family recipe at their restaurant, selling to customers at the farmers' market, or putting up chow chow and spaghetti sauce that become legendary family favorites.

The narrators in this chapter most optimistic about the economic viability of farming are in more supportive food system roles than directly farming. Daryl Royse sees the possibility of farm to table restaurants creating more demand for farmers and products. Harry Collins envisions a community kitchen where people are creating value added foods for their households and to sell to wider consumers. Shad Baker, who is a blueberry grower but primarily an extension

⁶⁸ Shad Baker, interview by Abby Huggins, August 8, 2016.

agent, hopes for abandoned mine land to be used for such enterprises as fruits, nuts, livestock, and maple syrup. Like others, these three narrators also connect family history with food and farming. Their roles are important in the value chain of food as it reaches consumers through avenues beyond direct to consumer sales at farmers' markets.

While all growers in this section are benefiting from the economic opportunities of their sales, farmers like Maggie Bowling and Shane Lucas are farming full time for their livelihood and dedicated to making a business out of their farming operation. David Fisher came into farming with a motivation to feed his family and earn a living after suddenly losing his job in the steel industry. While he continues to raise chickens for eggs and meat, he is exploring other avenues for income. Interestingly, the narrators most cautious in their interviews as to the opportunities for farming in the region are these three who are farming or have attempted to farm full time. Maggie, Shane, and David offer insight into the barriers and challenges of farming.

Access to land, especially where Shane and David have raised gardens in Letcher County is especially difficult. Shane's property is thirty-nine acres but he is able to farm on two. David spoke specifically to the challenge of finding land to farm on that wasn't connected to a mining company or family land. Maggie farms in Clay County, which offers more bottomland as the space between mountains widens towards Central Kentucky. Yet, she also spoke about the added barrier to flat land in Eastern Kentucky, as opposed to other parts of the state or region. Maggie and David both spoke of the challenges of labor. When David was farming full time, he was sometimes working eighty-hours a week. Maggie talked about having limited time working in the field to do her own deliveries and having to do record keeping and communication until late in the evening. While Maggie has an online buying club marketing system that works well for

her, Shane identified marketing as one of his biggest struggles. He grows vegetables well but is still exploring the best system for sales. He would prefer to specialize in crops such as lettuce and tomatoes that he can sell wholesale to restaurants, schools, and other institutions, rather than growing a wide variety for the farmers' market. He expressed a curiosity about collaborating with other farmers to market their products together and provide more vegetables in bulk. Although Shane didn't use the phrase "farmers' cooperative," he was describing the possibility of cooperation that could allow a collective of growers to leverage their products together for bigger and more consistent markets. Although a cooperative model may pose challenges among independent minded farmers who are geographically spread out, I am curious about the possibilities of Shane's ideas for planning and marketing with other farmers.⁶⁹ As Daryl Royse mentioned in his interview, restaurants are looking for consistency from farmers to offer consistency to their customers. The challenge of consistent product relates back to access to ample amounts of land for crop successions and rotations.

Farmers interviewed also talked about challenges with direct customer expectations. David recalled a memorable story of a customer who thought his pepper prices were too high. He realized he couldn't sell vegetables for what consumers wanted to pay and be fairly compensated for his labor. Several narrators mentioned a tradition of folks giving away extra produce, passing along excess beans, tomatoes, or other crops to their neighbors. While this practice contributes to social capital, it can pose a barrier for farmers wanting to make a living from the work they've

⁶⁹ For more on fundamentals and models of successful cooperatives see: Birchall, Johnston. "Rediscovering the cooperative advantage: Poverty reduction through self-help." *Cooperative Branch, International Labour Office*. Geneva: 2003. <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/coopinfo/Rediscovering%20the%20Cooperative%20Advantage.pdf>.

invested their time and energy into. In talking with Debbie Adams about this, she expressed that they simply plant extra to be able to feed themselves, sell to customers, and still give some produce to neighbors.

Though David was very frank about the barriers to farming, he was nonetheless optimistic about the future of the region for his grandchildren and successive generations. Though Shane and Maggie are still waiting to see if they can make long term careers out of farming, they are investing in the idea of farming for economic benefit. This series of interviews communicates several opportunities for food as a part of wider economic transition in Eastern Kentucky, including farm to table restaurant sales, community canneries where foods can be preserved and marketed to a larger customer base, development of abandoned mine lands for food production, farmers' market support programs that increase food access, and grower support programs such as Grow Appalachia that provide training and resources for home gardeners and small scale farmers. Each of these avenues for support warrants further study and implementation. Economic diversification in the region will require a variety of approaches and participation from a breadth of sectors.

Community Farm Alliance (CFA), a statewide organization that has been involved with grassroots organizing among farmers since the 1980s, continues to be committed to supporting local food systems through locally driven projects and policy work. CFA is currently involved in connecting farmers with buyers and increasing opportunities for local food access at farmers' markets.⁷⁰ In February 2017, they organized the first Eastern Kentucky Farmers' Conference

⁷⁰ See "Community Farm Alliance 2015 Farmers Market Support Program Final Report," *Community Farm Alliance*, accessed February 27, 2017. <http://cfaky.org/test/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2015-FMSP-Report-Final-.pdf>.

where farmers and farmer advocates assembled for skill sharing and relationship building. As energy around sustainable farming grows in Eastern Kentucky, such networking opportunities for farmers can create spaces for collaboration and collective voice. Martin Richards, executive director of CFA has written about the prospects of a local food system movement in Kentucky:

Local and regional food systems offer an enormous potential for creating new economic development, addressing individual and community health issues, and creating local wealth. They also can significantly contribute to greater food security in the face of economic and natural disasters, and provide the desperately needed “resettling” of America. The creation of local and regional food systems requires foremost, more farmers, and with them, the infrastructure, capitalization and market development that supports them. Local and regional food systems also must include across the board equity and parity for farmers and consumers alike.⁷¹

These stories of farmers and food entrepreneurs demonstrate connections between the heritage of the past, the successes and struggles of the present, and hope for viable local food systems in the future. Together, they raise the significance, challenge, and possibility of small scale sustainable agriculture in Eastern Kentucky. The following chapter will highlight voices of

⁷¹ Richards, Martin. “The Benefits, Opportunities and Challenges of Creating Local and Regional Food Systems in Kentucky.” *Sustain.*, Fall/Winter (2013): 10-17, <http://cfaky.org/test/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CFA-SUSTAIN-27.pdf>.

community activists who are working for social justice in the realm of food as well as health, theater arts, queer liberation, and youth engagement.

CHAPTER IV

GROWING COMMUNITY AND JUSTICE: STORIES OF ACTIVISM

As I became immersed in the community in Letcher County, I got to know people who are making valuable contributions through their work and volunteerism, connected to food and beyond food. This chapter serves to shed light on poignant moments in oral history interviews with people whose passion for growing community emerges as their strength. As Valerie Horn reflected during her interview: “I personally am just as interested and engaged and intrigued in growing community as growing gardens. I see the gardens as a tool to grow a healthier, stronger, more vibrant community.”⁷² Although food was the initial entry point in this project, as folks recommended other folks to talk with, themes expanded to include this subset of intentional and accidental activists, who engage with their communities on wider issues of art, health, equality, and justice. This is not to say that other narrators in this wider project are not contributors to their families, neighborhoods, and communities. On the contrary, everyone I interviewed could be considered an activist, giving to the place they live various ways, especially as they nourish people and care for the land. The seven narrators that follow express particular motivation to create public spaces where all people have a presence and voice at the table. While this chapter is

⁷² Valerie Horn, interview by Abby Huggins, August 4, 2016.

less food-centric than the previous two, it remains rooted in voices of people who are mindful of the past and dedicated to the future through the ways they live in the present.

This collection of interview excerpts begins with Valerie, a connector among food-based initiatives in Letcher County, who helped spark connections with other interviewees in my wider project. It continues with Val's mother, Carol Ison, who was one of the founders of the Cowan Community Center and remains an active leader with heartfelt interest in growing community theater. Next, I include excerpts from Brandon Jent's interview. Brandon, at the time of our interview, was connected to both Valerie and Carol through his role as a VISTA with Grow Appalachia and the Cowan Community Center. He is deeply passionate about issues of justice, representation, diversity, and activism. Alexia Ault and Devyn Creech are both young leaders in the Higher Ground Community Theater Group in Harlan County. Their interviews discuss community engagement through oral history based theater, which provides a forum for community conversation surrounding issues such as prescription drug abuse, LGBTQ+ equality, coal mining, mountaintop removal, and outmigration from the region. Finally, I share excerpts from two people involved with both local and regional activism – Sara Estep who worked as an organizer with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) and Kendall Bilbrey who coordinates The STAY (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) Project.

The majority of the narrators in this collection of community growers identify as women. One person identifies as queer, transgender, non-binary and another as a man who grew up in a feminist household. Acknowledging that the men interviewed in my larger project do make meaningful contributions to their respective communities, I see a trend in women, queer folk, and queer allies who are intentional in their outward community involvement. The scope of this

overall project is limited to the stories certain people shared with me in a specific place and particular moment. My aim is not to make sweeping generalizations, but to value the stories and insights of individual people. I desire to take an approach of sensitivity, especially in matters of Appalachia, a region that has been oversimplified and over categorized throughout history. With that understanding, I identify relevant themes that emerge from narrators' stories while largely allowing narratives to speak for themselves.

In *Our Roots as Deep as Ironweed*, Shannon Elizabeth Bell exemplifies a balance between narrator voices and oral historian interpretation. While centering her text largely in the voices of female narrators, Bell also offers commentary on how these stories speak to wider feminist and environmental movements. Bell discusses the theme of motherhood as a motivation for activism among the women she interviewed. However, she widens the notion of motherhood to define a "protector identity," that unites these women in a sense of duty to care for their respective land, families, communities, and region. Bell writes in her introduction:

In this book I contend that it is something greater than a "motherhood identity" that motivates and legitimates the activism of many Central Appalachian women; rather, it is more precisely a broader "protector identity" that drives their fight against irresponsible mining practices. This protector identity both encompasses and extends the motherhood identity such that many women perceive the moral authority for their activism emanating not only from a calling to protect their children and grandchildren from irresponsible mining practices, but also from an obligation to protect their communities, their heritage, their family homeplace, and the physical landscape that surrounds them. Through my analysis, I seek to explore and understand more deeply the ways in which women activists

mobilize this broader “protector identity” as a resource for the environmental justice movement and for their activist activities.⁷³

Through the narrators’ words and her own, Bell explores different reasons why women became involved in environmental activism, often as reactions to the environmental impact they were witnessing in their own homes, communities, and region. The stories of these women demonstrate an active commitment to fighting for justice for a broad family, stretching the boundaries of kinship to protect all people facing oppressive systems in their community, region, and beyond.

In my interviews with the community activists included in this chapter, I notice a similar theme, sometimes connected to parenthood or grandparenthood, but often transcendent of biological family. The people I interviewed who dedicate their work and lives to their wider, chosen families exhibit a commitment to honoring place and co-creating viable, sustainable communities. I do not claim that this sense of compassionate dedication to community is inherently feminine. However, I do notice a trend in female engagement in local and regional advocacy within the set of people I interviewed. Many narrators reflected upon women who they draw inspiration from in their own work. Brandon Jent and Sara Estep both claim to come from feminist households, with role models who may not have necessarily called themselves feminists, but were vocal, determined women, claiming their own autonomy. Carol Ison remembered the strength her mother showed in raising her family, mostly as a single parent. Valerie Horn also recalled the influence of her grandmother, aunt, and other women in the community from her childhood. Alexia Ault realized a lived sense of compassion that she and

⁷³ Bell, Shannon Elizabeth. *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 9.

her mother inherited from her maternal grandmother. And, Kendall Bilbrey commented:

I think that Appalachia is one of the areas in this country where a lot of it is ran by women. So many people have been raised by their grandparents or by their mother, single moms. The woman is often the head of household if you look at a census data. And, you know, I think that happens in a lot of low income or cash poor communities. I think that's something that's really unique and awesome is that we have so many women that are running shit, whether they want to be necessarily in some situations.⁷⁴

Throughout this entire interview project, an overarching theme emerged in which narrators expressed an appreciation of the place and people they come from that informs their present actions and future visions. As Brandon Jent profoundly hoped, “I want something that was important to people before me to be important to people after me, through me.”⁷⁵ The excerpts that follow speak to this concept of “before, after, and through.” Some narrators’ stories honor those who have come before and continue to inspire them. Some talk about the present work they are a part of in their communities. Some envision their hopes for future communities they are helping to create, both for and beyond their direct families. Though nostalgia can be a natural element to oral history, I hope to illuminate the role these activists are playing in shaping relevant, vibrant, and evolutionary communities.

VALERIE HORN

Valerie Horn helps coordinate many of the farmer support and food access programs in Letcher County. She graciously connected me to many other folks throughout the community.

⁷⁴ Kendall Bilbrey, interview by Abby Huggins, June 28, 2016.

⁷⁵ Brandon Jent, interview by Abby Huggins, July 18, 2016.

During our interview, she shared about growing up on Cowan Creek and the organic, intergenerational interactions she observed among family members and the wider community. Though structures are in place now to create intergenerational space in Cowan, when she was growing up, those were naturally a part of life. She reminisced about time spent with her aunt and grandparents, as well as her parents' community activism. She discussed her career as a teacher and counselor and the importance of education in her family. Val talked extensively about the different programs at the Letcher County Farmers' Market including the summer feeding program, walking program, kids' programs, music performances, FARMACY program, and EBT/WIC/Senior vouchers.⁷⁶ She also shared her personal vision for improving the farmers market with a larger collaborative board with a wider breadth of stakeholders that strive to make the market a welcoming, comfortable, community space. Val spoke fondly of her granddaughter, Eliza, and offered her hopes for the world Eliza is growing into, where she has choices, opportunities, responsibilities, and voice.

I personally am just as interested and engaged and intrigued in growing community as growing gardens. I see the gardens as a tool to grow a healthier, stronger, more vibrant community. So, I try really hard and probably sometimes even give too much attention to community aspect of it versus the bugs on the vines aspect of it. But, if we have more support, we can cover all those bases, all those bases well and have a very comprehensive program... Once we're there, we can begin tearing down some other barriers that keep us from growing and working together in other ways.

The thing about Grow Appalachia that's nice is it's not based on income, so eating is a

⁷⁶ "Letcher County Farmers Market." Accessed December 5, 2016.
<http://www.letchercountyfarmersmarket.com>.

very very common denominator and few people can criticize growing fresh food. Now, it appears we're finding people who can, but at least when it comes to selling fresh food is where maybe we draw the line. But, as far as growing and eating fresh food, most people, almost 100% are on the same page on that. When we talk about selling and someone making money from it, the lines get blurrier and we got some division there. But, we will live with it. But, like with this program, there may be a former coal operator - and I use this example because it just sticks out - and Sierra Club and they're deciding how much spices to put in their pickles together. And otherwise, those two people normally would not cross and they would not normally be working on a project together and I like seeing that happen.

The Farmers Market is, I would venture to say that there's probably not a more accessible market, I'd say in the country. I haven't been all over the country and I don't know. But if there is a more accessible market, I'd like to visit it and learn what they're doing that we aren't. So, we want our market to be as nice and as good as an experience as it can be.

The biggest program that our market has that we're most proud of that has made this most difference is the FARMACY program. F-A-R-M-A-C-Y. And that is sponsored as a group effort, however, Mountain Comprehensive Health Corporation [MCHC] is the funder for the program, or procures funding for that. We began a partnership with MCHC the first year with a simple ask for t-shirts and bags and got an easy yes. The next year we asked about the food booth because when the Summer Feeding Program ends, we're not reimbursed that for those meals that come there. So, MCHC said that they would pay for those meals so we could continue to offer the meals to 18 and under.

So, that was the second year of the summer feeding program and we went back to have

our talk last year, it was t-shirts, yes, bags, yes, summer feeding program, yes. I said, there's one more idea I was thinking about that could really make a difference. And so we talked about, I shared the idea of the FARMACY program where folks with diet-related health issues could be written prescriptions for veggies at the market. I had spoken with folks, had a conversation with folks at Wholesome Way in Connecticut that are doing this, and our model is pretty similar to theirs - \$1/day per family member for the market. So a family of four would get \$28/week every week that the market is open throughout the season. Our intent was to start small, maybe 10-15 families and I had asked and thought that the project might be \$5,000, we could do maybe 20 families for \$5,000. But, MCHC really liked the idea, their doctors really liked the idea. Doctors wrote prescriptions for that. And we soon realized within three weeks that \$5,000 was about gone. So, we had to start scrambling again. Mountain Comp. immediately put up more money for it to get us through the crunch, and then in talking about it with other places, folks became showing interest to us.

So, it was clear early on that it was something other folks valued, and particularly I'm talking about other healthcare providers... all those folks who are providing Medicaid to folks in our region, want a healthier population, and would rather spend money on the front end to keep folks healthier than the treatments that are required down the road from that.

So, we're collecting, we did collect data from that last year and saw positive results. It was the first year and we started quickly, we had a decision mindset that we wanted to do it, so we did it. And did collect data from that. But this year, we're hoping to have much stronger data as contributors are requesting that. It's also funded this year by a FINY Grant, a USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Grant. That's a pretty, pretty big deal to receive that grant. Hopefully,

someone will be applying for that again. And, it's already stretched to other communities this year. It's in Owsley County also, which has the distinction of being listed as one of the poorest counties in the country. I've been there and I've met people and I know people there and I wouldn't care to [or mind to] move there next week. But, that's the way they're billed. And, in Bell County at another MCHC clinic their models are different, more of a CSA model, but their patients are getting access to those fruits and vegetables.

As I said, my granddaughter is four. Callie [Val's daughter] has been teaching some canning classes at the community center through Grow Appalachia and brings her daughter, her four-year-old daughter with her. And, someone was telling me yesterday that Eliza, the four-year-old, had been talking to them about working at the community center and how much she liked working there and that she was very serious about being four and believing that she's working at the community center teaching canning classes. So, that's at least four generations of us that actually right now believe we're working at the Cowan Community Center [laughs].

So, I'd like her to know her heritage and her culture, but would like her to know other cultures and opportunities as well. And just amplify that choice that we talked about. That there would be choices for her if she decides she needs, wants to, live in these mountains that she can have income and health and be here. And then also, that if she does leave she takes with her lots of pride and is met with acceptance and not judgement from other people. Really pretty simple.

I would hope that she grows up feeling that she has a voice. And that her opinion might matter and that at the very least, people will listen to it. I would hope that she would grow up and want to be a contributor too. That if she's four now at the community center and says she's working to teach canning lessons that that would only grow. And she would find ways to benefit

from being here, all those things to benefit. That the place will - that no matter what anyone, everyone, how much money should be, could be fed into here, which we can be very skeptical about - it will never be right without the majority of the people working here to make it better. So, I hope that she takes on that responsibility, not to the point that it makes her sick and makes her stressed and keeps her from doing things that she should otherwise. But, as she can.⁷⁷

CAROL ISON

Carol was one of the founders of the Cowan Community Center⁷⁸ and is currently instrumental in the Cowan Theater group. She is also the mother of Valerie Horn. The interview flowed gracefully, as true to Carol's poised nature. We sat in her living room as she recounted stories about being raised by her mother on Cowan, having polio as a child, admiring an influential teacher, meeting her husband, finding opportunities for education, being a teacher, being involved in the community in ways beyond teaching, and helping start the community center. She is very passionate about the Cowan Theater group and is hopeful about its potential to grow and contribute to the greater community.

From my sixth grade year on, that's probably some of my favorite memories about life. In the sixth grade, I met my favorite teacher and that's one of the things that I attribute to having done anything with my life. It was in the sixth grade that this new teacher came to Cowan. And that was at a time I had just come home from Lexington from my first surgery [for polio]. My

⁷⁷ Horn interview

⁷⁸ "Cowan Community Action Group." Accessed December 5, 2016.

<http://cowancreekmusic.org/community-center/cowan-community-action-group/>.

brother was still alive then, but he wasn't able to walk to school and he was having difficulty. And so, my mom knew we were going to have a really hard time going to school. There were no buses, there were no family resource centers, no social workers to come out and help you. So, my mom went to see the superintendent to see what he would offer in the way of help for her two children. Well, he was not very encouraging to her at all. He just said "I don't know, anyway, I don't know anything that I can do." So she had heard there was a new teacher coming and she contacted him. His name was Mr. Crase and she told him about the situation. And he said, "Well, I can drive up to the mouth of your hollow and I can pick them up in the morning if they can get down to the store at the mouth of the hollow. I can pick them up and then I can bring them back there in the afternoon." And he did that. And he did that almost until my brother was unable to go at all because he died that same year.

But anyway, this Mr. Crase, he taught three grades in one room: sixth, seventh, and eighth. And I loved every one of the classes. I'd listen to my lessons, then I'd listen to the seventh grade, then I'd listen to the eighth grade. And it would always fascinate me when he'd be teaching something in the seventh grade or eighth grade and he would ask questions about it and sometimes some of them wouldn't answer and I knew the answer [laughs]. So, that was always very exciting to me to get to answer one of those questions.

But, the main thing Mr. Crase did for me, he started talking to me after about two or three weeks after he had been there. He started asking me "What are you going to do with yourself when you grow up? What are you going to plan to be?" And I always said, "Well, I don't know, don't have any plans, don't know what I could be." Because going to college was as remote as going to the moon would still be. And he said, "Well, you know, you really could go to college,

there's a way you could go to college because you have had polio, there's a program that would pay you and pay your full scholarship to go to college." So, he said, "And you know, you'd make a good teacher." And he started encouraging me in that. And he planted that seed. And from that time, I never doubted that I would go to college. He taught me all three years, you know, sixth, seventh, and eighth. And we always talked, when you get ready to go to college, we'll do this and so.

Well the years passed. I graduated from high school and shortly after graduation, I still was not enrolled in college because we didn't have counselors and no plans were made, you know, to help me. But I still knew some way, I was going to go to college. And I knew that the office that would pay for my college was in Harlan. And that's, you know, a pretty long way from here and we didn't have a car in the family. But my mom got one of my brother in laws to drive us to Harlan. And on the way to Harlan, we had to go by his [Mr. Crase's] home and he was running a little store at that time, a little grocery store, as well as teaching. So we stopped at his little store on our way to tell him we were going and maybe to get directions for the office. When he found out where we were going, he said, "You send your driver back and I'm going to take you all to the office. I will go with you." And he even had family visiting that day from Indiana and he was in the store working. But he said, "I'll get someone else to work the store and I will go with you." So, he put us in his car and he drove us to Harlan and he evidently knew where the office was because he found it with no trouble. He went in with us. He did most of the talking and by the time we left, my tuition and all of my plans for college were in place. And I went to college that fall on rehabilitation. But, as we went back home, when we neared home, my mom said to him, "Well, Mr. Crase, what do I owe you for today?" He said, "Jane," that was

her name. "Jane, you don't owe me a thing. But Carol, your job is to pass it on." And I always remember that. I think I have been able to many times and I always think of him.

We've got what's known as the Cowan Creek Mountain Music School. It celebrated its 15th year this past June. We had 152 students enrolled and its purpose is to preserve and promote the traditional music of the mountains. And, one year, we won the governor's folk art award for our work in doing that. And we just think our music school just grows and grows... So, we think our music school has definitely, has been a success. And based on that, we want to develop a community theater because we believe if the music school worked, that a theater would as well. So, we are in the process, we've had three or four runs of a play that is based on people's stories here in Letcher County and that's what we sort of want to concentrate on are story plays. People telling their story about life in the mountains and problems and successes and all of the things that make up life here. We want our stories to reflect that. And we're in the process of doing that now. I hope we'll be as successful with that as we have been with the music school.

I think those roles [of the arts] are needed to help the county come back to having a life after coal. I don't see very many industrial things happening here. Maybe it will, but I don't see it. If we could, I think in this region, in this county, if we could develop tourism and sort of have it on the small scale as it's done in the Smokies or some of the other mountainous regions where people flock to experience things that are unique to that region. I think that's about the only thing we can hope for. And I think that if we had a theater that had a good play running all the time, I think that would draw people. And I think that the music and all of the art, and when we have our camps at the community center. Like we have an art camp in the summer. I think people really

love the idea that they can have something beyond just the daily ordinary grind of things. I think those things will give hope to people.

I think if all we think about are the lack of coal and what it used to be and how awful it is that we don't have mining jobs anymore, I think we have to move on. I think we have to rethink, revision our community. And I think the arts are a major part of it. That's not very well said, I'm sure, but that's just sort of how I visualize that we could help people. I think it helps people to go to a good play and take their mind away from the ordinary. One woman talked to me this week, and I really appreciated her words. She's someone who grew up here when I did. She knows how empty our lives were. She knows how few opportunities we had. I mean, it was just rare that we got to go to a movie. And she knows how important it is to have cultural events in the community. And she said, "You know Carol, I'm a really hard sell, but I loved the last play you did." She said, "I thoroughly enjoyed it. I enjoyed it as much as any I've seen, and I have seen a lot." Because she left here and went many places. And she said, "You all have got to keep on doing it, you've got to keep this going in this community." And, I think that people really need that. Right here in our community, a lot of people don't know it now. Because we don't have many people from right here on Cowan itself participating. But, I think if we make it regular, if its ongoing, I think they will come to it. I think one by one and family by family, people will be drawn into it and it will become a part and a way of life for this community.

I hope that there is something that is being passed on, some memories of past life. I hope they [young people] will gain some understanding of what life used to be here. I know it's important to be in the now, but I want them to at least have an awareness and a memory of what life used to be. And I want them to have an appreciation for that and a respect for it. And I want

them to have a pride in their community. I want them to realize that there are people here who really want to make it a better community. I know some people say, "Well, we're never going to be any better, we're always going to be a welfare generation, we're always going to be this or that." But I want them to believe that this community is as progressive and as - and that it's doing the best it can. I want it to be passed on that there are people trying to make opportunities for them and trying to give them confidence and assurance that they can be as prepared as anyone if they have to leave here, they won't leave with such poor self-esteem and lack of self-confidence that they struggle half of their lives to achieve what they want. I want them to leave with confidence and pride. And then, if they go away, to think back and think, "Hey I've got a good community back home. If I want to go back, there's a good community." Even though jobs are lacking and a lot of cultural opportunities, I want them to believe we've got some unique and wonderful things that other communities don't have. And I think that's what I'd like to pass on.⁷⁹

BRANDON JENT

Brandon is a young person from the community of Colson, who was serving as a VISTA with the Cowan Community Center and Grow Appalachia at the time of our interview.⁸⁰ I had the pleasure of getting to know him through Grow Appalachia, the Letcher County Farmers' Market, and Cowan Community Center events. Brandon needed very little prompting to talk about where he is from and what that means to him. He talked extensively about his mamaw, who he calls Darlin'. He also told the legendary story of Martin Van Buren Bates and Anna

⁷⁹ Carol Ison, interview by Abby Huggins, July 20, 2016.

⁸⁰ "Cowan Creek Community Center," Grow Appalachia, accessed December 5, 2016. <https://growappalachia.berea.edu/partner-sites/cowan-creek-community-center/>.

Hannah Swan Bates, the “Giants of Letcher County,” who were his ancestors. Clearly passionate about contributing to his community, he has been involved with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), Appalachian Media Institute (AMI), Cowan Community Theater, The STAY (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) Project, and the local radio station WMMT. Brandon returned to school at the University of Kentucky this fall to study sociolinguistics. He is an example of emerging youth leadership, committed to making the region an inclusive, viable place where others have opportunity to stay.

You ask me for one story, I give you three, and I've probably not finished one of those that I've said. We'll get to it. My mamaw, God, I love that woman. I call her Darlin'. I don't call her mamaw or grandma or anything. It's Darlin' and it has been that way since I was twenty-one months old. So, like I said, I was born in Florence, Kentucky, which is about thirty minutes away from Cincinnati. But my dad and his family are from Hazard and my mom and her family are from Letcher County. They moved up north for factory jobs and I lived there until I was eight or whatever. None of this is important to my mamaw, except that she used to visit all the time and we would come down here.

I always had some sort of connection to the mountains. Either my family was all here or I was coming down here or they were coming up there or whatever. It wasn't at all separate in any way. It didn't really feel like there was a distance even though there was four hours of distance.

But, my mamaw used to play this game when I was younger, her and my mom would sit with their legs out in the floor with me in the middle and try to get me to walk back and forth between them. And my mamaw would hold out her hands and say, "Darlin', darlin' my true love, come a swooping like a dove." And I would run to her and that's what got me walking. And then

fast forward to when I was like six. We're still playing this game but I'm standing on one end of the living room and she's sitting in her lazy boy recliner and she's on the edge of it with her arms out. "Darlin', darlin' my true love, come a swooping like a dove." And I'm running from one end of the living room to the other. And then I jump in her lap and hug her.

And so I guess, I was back home, they lived in the house that I live in now, her and my papaw did. And either - I never remember this part of the story - she was either downstairs and I was upstairs or vice versa. But, I was with my mom, wherever I was. And I said, "Hey Mom, where's Darlin' at?" Or something like that. And I was basically meaning, I wanted to play this game, but that stuck.

So, I call her Darlin', my mom calls her Darlin', my two sisters call her Darlin'. And that's it. The interesting thing is that my uncle and his kids don't. It's mamaw to them. So, for a while, I was trying not to confuse my younger cousins and I would say mamaw in front of them and I got to where I said mamaw all the time. And this was recent, just like a couple years ago, and Darlin' said, "I ain't your mamaw, I'm your Darlin'." And I think about that too in contrast to when I was like eleven or something and Darlin' asked, she's like, "Brandon are you sure you don't want to call me grandma or mamaw or nothing because I know you're getting older and I don't want you to be embarrassed or whatever." And I just looked at her and I was like, "You're Darlin'." So, it went from her asking me if I wanted to call her mamaw to her telling me you can't call me mamaw.

She is, she has always been, a real hard worker her whole life. All the women in my family, I come from a family of really really strong, incredible independent women. And, I see that most in my mom. I guess in terms of, I've experienced it more in my mom in the sense that

she's taken on the role of both my mom and my dad because my parents are divorced. In her whole life she couldn't let a man outdo her. So, she always worked. She worked for DHL and for Wal-Mart, doing shipping and unloading like pretty manual labor stuff and made sure she did it just as good if not better than a man. Most of the time was better than a man. Would never let a man outdo her. Would never let a man speak to her in any sort of way, like, you know, she was just as good as a man, there was no difference with her being a woman.

And, so basically, I grew up in a feminist household without her realizing it. A lot of my beliefs now stem from the fact that she was so strong and she saw herself and others as equal when other people maybe wouldn't have or were taught to not. And by the same token, my upbringing was a little weird too. This is still straying away from my mamaw, but we'll get back to it. But, my upbringing was a little, I can't even say weird. It was unique in the sense that I wasn't brought up in a traditional masculine household or with traditional masculine expectations. So, my mom is an extremely emotional person and all of us are too. I was allowed to cry and a lot of kids aren't. A lot of boys aren't. My mom asked me how I was feeling all the time, wanted to know how I was feeling, wanted to know what I was interested in. Nothing was really bottled up. I always felt like I could come to my mom for anything, I could trust her and confide in her with anything. And she always supported me. And it was nothing but love and support on her end always. And guidance when necessary. And a lot of boys don't have that. A lot of people in general don't have that. But especially in an area where we are in the rural South, we are in the mountains. You know, there is this notion of traditional masculinity that is still prized and important as it is with the rest of the nation. But I think especially in the rural South. There you're expected to act and to talk and to walk and to look a certain way. And I usually

don't. And I think that came from a strong female presence that made me a stronger man, in a lot of ways. So that's cool. My mamaw wouldn't have raised me that way [laughs]. But, my mamaw is still - there ain't a man that could outdo her either. I thought for a long time that she was immortal and I think she did too. That she was invincible, there weren't nothing that could slow her down.

There was just something that I knew that was in the back of my head that people from away from here think I'm stupid or that this place is stupid and backwards and ignorant and racist and whatever. People think that the way I sound reflects that, the way that I talk, my accent reflects that. And also that I had to leave here, like that there wasn't nothing for me here, that it's a ghost town, that this is as good as it's ever going to get and that's it.

I had folks from all sides telling me, you need to get out of here, you're a big fish in a little pond, you need to, you're so smart, you're so talented, you're so this that or the other, whatever, pushing me out the door, basically is what I'm trying to get at. And it was never out of a place of malice or out of not loving this place, but it was prioritizing wanting the most for me and for the younger generation here. We've been told and we've been taught to feel that that's leaving here.

AMI [Appalachian Media Institute, through Appalshop] was really the first thing that sparked it. That's when I decided I have to come back. Before that, I thought, oh I love this area, I'm proud of this area. The first thing I ever told folks, even in Lexington, "I'm from Southeastern Kentucky, hi." I considered myself Southern then, but then I realized that Appalachian is a word that fits better. And I've always said that Appalachian is Southern but Southern isn't Appalachian. Like the difference between whiskey and bourbon. That's us. We're a bourbon. But,

being back, it took me coming back for a summer to realize that I want to come back for a lifetime. And, I am so ready to do that. And I'm trying to find ways now to figure that out. Having my own STAY conversations in my head... And I'm so excited to know that I have an end goal because my life has always been a big question mark, especially through college. I still don't really know what I'm going to do when I grow up or my job or what's going to put food on the table. But I at least know that I'm going to come back to these hills and I want my last breaths to be here. I want to end where it all began, which is right here. That's where my roots are and my branches are going to circle right back around there too and it's going to be great.

I've been thinking for a long time now that there is something that I wanted to take back with me. My mamaw talks all the time now about how she doesn't know how much time she's got left and she wants to pass things on. She's like, "Brandon, I'm the only one in the family that knows this genealogy stuff. You better talk to me and tell me, figure out what you want to know before you can't." And I'm like, "Well, damn, ok fine." And she can, she can tell me almost every single family member on her side of the family going up until they got off the boat. All their sisters and brothers and who their mommy and daddy was, on and on and on. And had to for a school project once for me. But I went to her, she knows.

But, I was thinking, do I want to know how to cook something? Do I even want to know how to quilt? Anything that I can pass on to someone else to keep something that is so near and dear to me alive. And although the traditional stuff doesn't mean - me having lived here is passing it on. But, I want something that was important to people before me to be important to people after me, through me. And so, at the [Cowan Creek] music school, I did harmony singing. I'm not the best singer and I'm never going to be the best singer, and I don't ever know if I'll be a

good singer. But, I'm singing. And that's something that was kind of lost in my family for a while, at least through my direct family. Darlin' says that we come from a family of pickers and singers and music makers and all kinds of stuff but it never got to her. And my mom sings in the car a little bit, that's it. She actually says she remembers her mamaw singing beautiful, she would sing all day, every day. Tears well up in her eyes talking about how beautiful it was and how she wishes she could hear her mamaw sing again. So I think that's important.

So, I'm at a learning curve, it doesn't come to me as natural. But I bought a banjo this past weekend. I don't know if I got to tell you that, but I did... So, I'm going to try to pick up an instrument and work on my singing because maybe traditional mountain music is the thing that I pass on and there's a lot to pass on from a lot older than just my mamaw and papaw.

My vision for my community and for the region at large is definitely more of a youth presence. I want economic transition work to really be at the forefront of a lot of things, I think that needs to be a priority. I think we need to do exactly what we've been doing and shift away from coal as our mono-economy and to be diversified in terms of local and regional economy and what that looks like. I think we can create more opportunities in the area through economic transition and for ourselves and by ourselves. And I want more people to consider the option of staying. I'm not asking anyone to stay or to go. And that is a decision you make on your own and you should make on your own. But I want people to know that that is an option. And I want them to see what that looks like if that's something that they want or don't want and to figure out why and then to plan accordingly because there's so much power in that process that is so beneficial. Just realizing why and untangling yourself and detaching yourself from all of these things that have been used to oppress us through media and through centuries of forced isolation, really.

And through just being shit on, I don't know how else to say that, I apologize. Years and centuries of just not being equal to the rest of mainstream America. To detach themselves from that and just realize, to see Appalachia for what it is, good and bad. To see the space that is made for them in this area, or the spaces that they have to make for themselves in this area. To find out why or why not, the history behind that and then to move forward accordingly.

I want our communities of color and I want our queer Appalachians to be more visible and to be accepted and loved in the way that I know they can be accepted and loved. Because at the end of the day, this is a loving and caring place and a giving place and a protective, clannish place that is really, not just takes care of one another, but watches out for one another and protects one another at all costs. I want more visibility so that they can use their narratives to educate others than might not understand or that might be scared of the unknown aspects of that. To realize how this fits into the way that we're all raised here, which is to love and to care about one another.

And I'm trying to think, what else do I want? I want this place to be exactly what we envision it together to be. Good or bad, positive or negative, progressive or conservative, whatever. I want it to be collaborative, which is another thing that we're taught to do is to work together. I want it to be together, I want us to all move forward and I want us to make this even more incredible than it already is. And I want for people to know how incredible it is. But that is a minor thing, I want that to be a result of the incredible things that are happening here. Because I really don't care one way or another if the rest of the United States knows.

I've said before that I've always kind of loved how Appalachia is like, especially this area is kind of like a hidden gem in a way. Because I think you do have to take the positive with the

negative in order to live here and appreciate it for what it is. You can't just look at the headlines that are displayed on national media, which are almost always, definitely always negative. And you can't even look at it on a local level at always positive. Or get caught up in being so inspired and so amazed at the, feel so comforted like I do in the work that's going on because there's still so much work to do and we can't, not to lose track of that. But, I want, I don't know, I want the best for this place whatever that looks like it is. And I have my own visions and opinions of that and I've shared quite a few of those but I want other folks' opinions and visions. I don't want it to just be mine. I want it to be the multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, crazy, insane, good and bad, gray area place that Appalachia has always been and always will be. ⁸¹

ALEXIA AULT

Alexia is a VISTA with the Higher Ground theater group in Harlan County⁸² and does a lot of the behind the scenes stage management and event planning. Alexia has lived in the area four or five years. She has lived in Bowling Green, KY as well as other states in the South. She has a strong connection to this place, largely through the chosen family she found with Higher Ground. Alexia thoroughly explained the origins of the theater group, her connection to it, and how she sees it making an impact on participants and the community. She also talked about the place of the arts in a changing, creative economy. She discussed collaboration among different community based organizations, art forms, and ages. She mentioned The STAY Project, It's

⁸¹ Jent interview

⁸² For a reflection on arts based social activism through the Higher Ground Theater Group, see Mullinax, Maureen. "Resistance through Community-based Arts." In *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, edited by Stephen L. Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith, 92-106. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

Good to be Young in the Mountains, the Eastern Kentucky Social Club in Lynch, the Rural Urban Exchange, Appalshop, Roadside Theater, Cowan Theater Group, and other theater groups in Owsley and Clay counties. She sees the significant difference Higher Ground is making for young people in Harlan County in providing opportunities for expression, engagement, and employment. Alexia also explained the process of collecting community stories and transforming them into a script for a play. She described the Hurricane Gap institute and its role in forming bonds and networks. Alexia is very passionate about Higher Ground, but commented that what it has provided for people and the community is most important over the formal organization.

Higher Ground started in December of 2000. A group of students and some faculty and staff from Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College went to a first annual conference called the Appalachian Teaching Project, which is hosted by the Appalachian Regional Commission and East Tennessee State University. And so, this group was in DC and they were talking about ways that they'd like to see their community grow. And they really wanted a way to use oral history to empower people to tell their own stories and to deal with obstacles that they saw in their community, primarily prescription drug abuse. And so they went back, they wrote grants and started this project. Rockefeller Foundation Grant was one of the first grants to do a photography and oral history project. And they worked with community groups, churches, college courses, elementary school classes, different groups around Harlan County to record these stories and take photography to accompany the stories. And then, they created what Robert [Gipe] refers to as an interactive exhibit. Because they would post the

pictures and post the stories and people would doodle on them, [laughs] draw faces on people. So, it was a little bit informal.

But they did that for several years and then in 2003, they started writing a play. That play premiered in 2005, it was called *Higher Ground*. And it compared the flood of 1977 in Eastern Kentucky to the flood of prescription drug abuse. And at that time, there weren't a lot of people discussing drug abuse in Eastern Kentucky, it was kind of a taboo subject. But, *Higher Ground*, I think, really tackled it and started talking about it in a way that ways safe, talking about it through theater and art. And, the way that Higher Ground incorporates people from the entire community, from all walks of life, different regions, different races, religions, ages, makes it a little bit more accessible to the audience. So they performed that show and then they took the name from the first show for the organization, that's where the name Higher Ground comes from. Since then, they've done five other shows. The second show was *Playing with Fire*. which was primarily about coalminers' issues, playing jokes in the mines and telling stories. *Talking Dirt* was about land issues and deciding whether to stay or leave the region. *Fog Lights* was about intergenerational issues and making a place for the young people in this region. *Find a Way* was also about intergenerational issues and finding a way to stay. It was kind of like the second half of *Fog Lights*, it came out very much from the themes and message of that fourth play. And then, most recently, we've produced a small play called *Life is Like a Vapor*, which was a comedy about a character from *Find a Way*. So, we've done several plays and we continue to do different community arts projects like tile mosaics, photography, murals, and we incorporate visual arts into the plays to tell those themes and stories and another dynamic. So, that's my elevator speech for Higher Ground.

So, it's been really rewarding and I don't think I would have stayed in Harlan County as long as I had if I hadn't been involved in Higher Ground. Harlan County and this region in general are very much, they're very insular, not that they're not welcoming to outsiders. But, family ties are so important that sometimes when you don't have those family ties to the region, it can be very hard to make a place for yourself here. And so, because I joined Higher Ground so early, it became my family. A lot of people say that about Higher Ground, it's like a family. But, I had joined in the spring of 2012, joined Higher Ground for that *Talking Dirt* production. And I hadn't seen my family in a few months and I remember I walked into rehearsal one night and I was really homesick. And one of the cast members just walked up to me, she's an older cast member, her name's Frieda and she's had a couple strokes and she's not really mobile and she just has this way of just walking up to you and she'll hold her arms out to you and just walk slowly towards her with your arms out and you can't help but just go in for this big hug. And so, she gave me this hug and started telling me about her cats and stuff and that was exactly what I needed at that time, was just a hug, and realized that that's my family and that's where I'm supposed to be. And they have been since then. It makes it easier for me to stay here, to be away from my immediate family. I hadn't seen my family in seven months when they visited, they visited this month. So, it's hard but it's worth it and I don't think I could leave it now, I don't want to. But, it's definitely hard.

I didn't really expect to stay here. My grant was a three year grant that was extended for another half of a year. So, I was supposed to leave at the end of 2014. And, I remember driving into work one morning and I live in Lynch, and I was driving over the hill, coming into Benham and I just looked up and I just felt like it was home. It just felt so warm and inviting and

perfect... But it just kind of hit me that this place was where I was supposed to be. And so, I've tried my hardest to stay and that feeling's just grown since then.

It's not always easy to stay... But, I stay because the people, because this is my community and because there's so much opportunity here. I would hate to leave this place and feel like I was missing out on all the amazing things that were going on, whether it's the collaboration between organizations like STAY and Appalshop and WMMT and Cowan that's so unique and it's so vital to the change. We're seeing, a creative industry develop in this region. We're seeing people revitalize those buildings that are abandoned downtown. I want to see that and I want to be part of it. I don't think I could stay just for those reasons unless I had a family here. And you know, having Higher Ground makes it possible. It's really really hard sometimes to be here. To miss your family, to work so much, but I see how valuable it is and I think other people, not only in the community, but outside the community, recognize how valuable the work is that Higher Ground does and that other organizations and people in Eastern Kentucky do. It's a really interesting point in the history of this region and it's not easy with the downturn of the economy, but there's so much opportunity for something amazing to happen here. And I think it will, I think it's happening right now. So, I want to be here for it [laughs].⁸³

DEVYN CREECH

Devyn is a young person who has been a leader with the Higher Ground Theater Group in Harlan County. I interviewed Devyn on top of Pine Mountain at the Creech Overlook at Kingdom Come State Park. She talked about her family, especially her love for her Papaw Eddie

⁸³ Alexia Ault, interview by Abby Huggins, July 26, 2016.

and the common ground they share. They are both artistic through writing, drawing, and playing music, but don't necessarily call themselves artists. Devyn also expressed a sense of family in Higher Ground Theater Group, which keeps her connected to that community and provides an outlet for her creativity. She discussed types of issues raised by the plays – prescription drugs, LGBTQ+ identity, mountains as home, challenges, and the choice to leave or stay.

My papaw Eddie is my dad's dad. And he in my family is the person that I feel like is the most like me. And, I feel like we're also both kind of not really outcasts, but we're both very different from the rest of our family. And that's something that we kind of get picked at for. But, my papaw Eddie was a coal miner and he was in the navy. And he has spent a lot of time, like I've see him draw a lot and write music. He used to play but he can't play guitar anymore because of the arthritis in his hands, which is really, really sad because I know that he wants to. Anytime I bring my guitar around, he lights up and often tries to pick around on it, but he has a really hard time.

But, he has had to work his entire life, even as a really, really young boy he never had a dad. His dad, Judge Creech, died when he was a baby. So, he kind of spent childhood doing whatever he wanted and then when he was old enough, immediately started working. It was always labor jobs and he went into the navy in his 20s and then he met my granny in Maryland whenever he was stationed in St. Mary's County. And he brought granny back to Harlan County. They dated for three months and then decided they were going to get married and she was going to move hours away to somewhere she'd never been or seen. And I remember my granny always talking about coming over Black Mountain for the first time and seeing all the mountains and it's drastically different in Maryland, it's really flat, it's a lot of farmland. And she said that she just

felt tears well up in her eyes because it was the most beautiful thing that she'd ever seen and that story has always really stuck with me.

But with papaw, I feel like he spent so much of his life working and trying to be what he needed to be as a man that he didn't really have enough time to be as artistic as he really is. And I feel like that's where I get a lot of my art is from papaw. Because my whole life, I've always been able to find little drawings or songs or poems and stuff that I've seen him write and it's like stuff that he doesn't show anybody, but he still does it. And that's why it's like to me he just doesn't feel like, he doesn't identify as an artist, even though he very clearly is and he's really talented. Even now, he's in his mid-sixties and can hardly walk around but still is always writing and drawing and playing harmonica. So, poor old papaw just never had room for that, I guess.

And he told me, he also would tell me tons of stories and these were never like traditional storytelling like around here that a lot of older people usually do. He would make up stories about aliens and how he's been contacted by aliens. And now as an adult I'm starting to believe that maybe they're not all false. But he also talks about seeing sea monsters at sea whenever he was in the navy. And he was a mechanic on a ship and I think during the Vietnam War. And he has told multiple, multiple stories about seeing sea monsters or being attacked by sea monsters and how the government says that he's not supposed to talk about it [laughs]. So even if it's not true, he still knows how to spice it up to make me kind of be like, "Maybe he's telling the truth and he can't talk about these aliens and sea monsters."

The thing that Higher Ground does really well I think is we've built a really big trust in the community. They really trust us to talk about these issues. It's really hard to talk about these problems in a place like this. People are very proud and they're very quiet, they don't want to

bring attention to these things, they don't want to ask for help even if they need it. It's just a part of the culture. And, Higher Ground has never told people what to do. It has never said, "Ok, well, so, this is bad and this is good and this is right and wrong, you should do this." It's always presented these problems and presented characters with really diverse belief systems that cover plenty of ground for everyone around here and it's just been a discussion more than anything. It's been a storytelling of this character's life.

And I think that, I mean I have seen - like with my grandmother, I played a character who was one of the girls in the same sex relationship and was also addicted to Percocet. And she was kind of like, "How could you have played a gay character?" And I framed it to her like, "Well, my character was also addicted to drugs. So, would you rather me be addicted to drugs or gay?" And I saw, it was like I blew her mind when I said that because it's something she hadn't fathomed because she was so stuck in her beliefs about homosexuality.

We've also seen, I mean, our light designer Nick Cornett always tells this story that after *Taking Dirt*, which talked a lot about mountaintop removal, how coal miners had come in to see it, still covered in dust. Like got off their shift and come in halfway through the play to see it. And then so many people were talking and so many coal miners in our community were talking afterwards, just standing around in the auditorium that they had to make them leave. They had to make them go out into the parking lot. And people went out into the parking lot and kept talking about it. And that is a huge accomplishment because, like I said, people don't want to talk about these things. Not with their brothers, their sisters, their wives. It doesn't matter who you are, they still just want to keep it swept under the rug. And I've seen that. I've seen it in my own family. I've seen it in the people that have worked with Higher Ground's families. I've seen people come

and their lives be changed. Even if nobody that comes and sees the plays goes home with anything, I know that the people, all the volunteers that act for us, all the people on our crew, they're all heavily influenced by Higher Ground and what it gives them. We've got a space that people who probably haven't been able to chase their dreams of being a famous actress or artist, they get to come and they get to work on sets and help with writing and act. And these are like moms and these moms bring their kids. These people who, like I said, they'd never thought they'd get to do these things, and now they're getting to do it. And if you provide a space for creativity in community, that does so much for individuals.

I really hope that this place can just grow. I'm still trying to figure out what I think is going to be the best option for this place. It's really hard to think about the future whenever people are so stuck and rooted in the past. In order to even talk about it, you have to get them to accept the present, which is surprisingly hard, especially when it comes to the lack of, our now declining industry. Because people have been used to this boom and bust cycle and we're at a point where it's very very possible that there's never going to be another boom. And so we've got tons of families just kind of waiting it out. Not addressing the problem, not talking about it. And I just hope that people around here can become more open to change. And not see it as a threat. Which I think is very small. I don't really think that we're going to become a multimillion dollar area or a huge tourist attraction. We're not suited for any of those things and I don't think the people around here would like it anyways. But, I just really hope for the future that people have options. And, that includes leaving too. I think that it should always be an option, like if you don't fit here, if you really don't feel like you're a piece to this puzzle, you should go find the puzzle you are a piece of. And it's just really hard to think about, I think.

[The mountains are full of] people and adventure and this soul. It's hard to explain, I think, because I think also if you're not from here, the emptiness can be true. I think that one of the key things to this place being full and being amazing is the fact that it's your home and it provides this feeling of comfort and safety that no other geographical area has ever provided me. But the people around here are really really amazing and they're, more than anything, what I'm invested in, and their lives. And I think that's why the storytelling is so important to me. Because everyone around here has lived an adventure, their whole life has been an adventure. You can talk to anyone and they'll tell you all of these stories about just growing up and being here and it's always interesting and meaningful. And I don't know if it's tradition or place, I don't really know what it is. But I just know that anywhere else I go, nobody seems as genuine. Not that's like always true, like every person I meet in every other place isn't genuine. But to me, the people here are very very special. Like I wouldn't trade them for the world. [laughs] But this place is also extremely beautiful, everywhere you look. And when you grow up surrounded by that beauty, you don't appreciate it. You really don't. Especially when it's being destroyed in front of you all the time by industry. So I've been to other places, I've been out of the country, and I still think this is the most beautiful place in the world. I'll probably have to see the whole world and still say [laughs] that this is the most beautiful place in the world.

If I ever do leave, it's not because I want to it's because I have to, that's really it, I think. I really can't imagine a situation in case I would have to, it would have to be pretty dire, this place would probably have to explode, just the entire region. [laughs]⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Devyn Creech, interview by Abby Huggins, July 28, 2016.

SARA ESTEP

Sara was an organizer with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC)⁸⁵, who I met through Kendall Bilbrey and the STAY (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) Project. Though Sara worked for KFTC at the time of our interview, these words represent her own personal perspective; she doesn't speak for the entire organization. Sara shared about growing up in Knott and Perry counties, admiring her grandmother Gigi, becoming involved as an organizer with KFTC, and being a mother to her daughter Lily. She specifically discussed campaigns she has been a part of through the Letcher Governance Project⁸⁶ advocating against the construction of a federal prison in Letcher County. Sara cares deeply about the community and is taking a leadership role in environmental and social activism both locally and regionally.

My friends are amazing. So smart, smartest people I've ever met. So amazing. I'm not just saying that because they're my friends. I'm saying it because they actually are really really smart [laughs]. The collective experience that they have is incredible, the different things they've been involved in and the issues they've been fighting around is amazing. And so, they were my friends before that and before I realized the full extent of how incredible they are in their political beliefs and actions, walking the walk. I meet lots of people who talk the talk, but my friends walk the walk and that's really cool. So, I aspire to be like them. And, to be a truth

⁸⁵ For an overview of the history and philosophies of KFTC, see: Szakos, Joe. "Practical Lessons in Community Organizing in Appalachia: What We've Learned at Kentuckians for the Commonwealth" In *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*, edited by Stephen L. Fisher, 101-121. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993; "Kentuckians for the Commonwealth." Accessed December 5, 2016. <http://www.kftc.org>.

⁸⁶ "Letcher Governance Project," accessed December 5, 2016. <http://www.letchergovproject.com>.

speaker and the more people I meet, the more I just feel like not being intimidated or silenced or apologetic about how I feel and what I think. And my friends are a big part of that.

Meeting people who see that everything is, for lack of a better word, fucked [laughs]. Like the whole system is wrong, the whole system is guilty. We need a real restructuring and we're such a young country, but we've inherited, it's crazy, the way that our country is structured. It's really young but also like, kind of like we got here without really earning it, I feel like, like a little brat. And, I don't know, it's weird and it's complicated. But, I do think that it's easy to also get sucked into this bubble of "this is how people think, this is how people are because this is how I think and everyone around me thinks the same way." And, it creates that echo chamber. And we're always calling ourselves on that and checking that and saying, "No we need to be reaching out to these people, we need to have these conversations. We need to, in our communities, be speaking out for ourselves and going back to the new power frame: the story of I, the story of us, the story of we."

And so, I think that finding people who you can definitely say are your chosen family is a real blessing. I don't think a lot of people get that. I definitely feel like I didn't have a lot of advantages growing up. I do think I did have some, obviously I'm white. I have privilege, all these things. And I had one semi-supportive parent, you know my dad helped me get a car. So, if you can get a car, you can work, you can do other things. But a lot of people don't even get a car.

But, to have this family who I know that if something happened to me or if I needed anything, I could ask them and they'd just be there. That's a real luxury, that's a gift and I don't ever take it for granted. That's why I stay, that's ultimately why I stay. If my friends left, if I didn't have this community of people who are just so "woke," - people use that expression

"woke" - I don't think I could stay because I couldn't do this by myself. And I would have to move somewhere it's a little easier I think, to just be. Because it is hard to be here and to think the way I do and to go so against the grain where I think a lot of people don't have that luxury because they're just trying to survive. It is a luxury to be able to have that and to feel like here is where I should be because I'm doing good work. I feel like I am. I feel like I'm doing good work. I feel like I'm making good connections. And I feel like I'm weaving this web of organizing that is organizing and is collective power building. I feel like this is where I need to be. But, the reason I stay is because of my friends. And, people come and go all the time here because for that reason, it's hard and opportunities come up other places. People want to live other places. And that's ok. I don't blame them. If my friends left, I wouldn't blame them. It would be hard, it would suck. But, the reason I stay changes as I get older. As I get older and more stable, it is even more of a choice. When I was younger, it was just kind of the easier option. But as I've got older it's definitely just a choice. And I choose to stay, I choose to make a difference in my community. That's what we need to be doing. We need to be organizing our community.

I think that we are becoming a more conscious society. My generation are Millennials and [my daughter] Lily's generation are called Founders for that reason. We're uprooting all these social problems, collectively. And, I think that they're going to be the ones who get to remake, decide what that looks like because we're seeing that what we're doing now is not working. My generation saw a housing crisis. I think we're smarter consumers. I think we're smarter in how we spend our money. I know that's kind of crazy because that's very capitalistic. But, it is, we see that as a problem. And so, I guess I could really only speak for myself. I do see hope. And, I do see that the world that she will inherit will be more fair. I think that the world that she will inherit

will be less racist. And I think that Lily will see, I want to believe that she will see, world peace in her lifetime. She may be an old lady. But I think that we'll either get there or we won't get anywhere. We'll implode [laughs]. But I believe, I am optimistic. I believe in people. And I think that people are afraid right now. And, people who are older than I am have seen a lot of different realities. They have seen different decades that look entirely different than this last ten years. So, I can kind of understand where that fear comes from and the uncertainty. But, I also see that I am helping to shape what Lily's going to inherit. A lot of people, I meet a lot of great people all the time. I meet more good people than I meet bad people anymore. And that's intentional [laughs]. But, at the same time, that's the only way I can be, that's the only way I can live my life. And I think the world she will inherit will be better than the one I got. It already is.⁸⁷

KENDALL BILBREY

Kendall serves as the coordinator of The STAY (Stay Together Appalachian Youth) Project.⁸⁸ This organization, under sponsorship of the Highlander Research and Education Center, is a network for young leaders and activists in Appalachia. I interviewed Kendall at their home at the time, in Whitesburg, which they shared with Melvin the dog. Kendall talked about growing up in Wytheville, Virginia and the challenges of being queer and transgender. They discussed the roll that STAY plays in creating a safe space for young Appalachians to network, find community, support one another, provide resources across state lines. In addition to Kendall, a steering committee of youth, ages 14-30, from various places within the region communicate regularly about what is happening in their home communities. The organization

⁸⁷ Sara Estep, interview by Abby Huggins, July 27, 2016.

⁸⁸ "The STAY Project," accessed December 5, 2016. <http://www.thestayproject.com>.

seeks creative ways for young voices to envision and shape the region in a way that encourages people to choose to stay in Appalachia. Kendall has also been involved in other regional organizations such as Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) and Southerners on New Ground (SONG).⁸⁹ Kendall criticizes existing power structures and is an advocate for people who have been oppressed in accessing power and influence. Kendall is passionate and committed in spite of the challenges to be accepted and heard in this community and region. Kendall clearly states that they didn't grow up in this community, and they speak from the perspective of someone who has lived other places and chose to live in Whitesburg. Kendall's voice is important and they are facilitating an important moment among young people in Appalachia and the South.

STAY by definition is a network and we're fairly new organization. We've been around since 2007-2008 as a group of people. We've been having events since about 2011, so it's still fairly new. We haven't had a whole lot of resources historically. We still don't have an incredible amount of resources but we have a staff, a full time staff, which is me, which is exciting. And we have a steering committee, which basically serves as our board and so that is young people from all the different states that we serve. And, so that in itself is sort of an opportunity to say, "We're an organization of young people run by young people 14-30 and we are existing here and we're helping to create a space and a network of other young people that are doing awesome things around the region to reach out to each other and reach out to other young people in our community that maybe not are involved in stuff and trying to help create those opportunities."

And so, in some ways, it's a network of people and I think that network can be used for

⁸⁹ "Southerners on New Ground," accessed December 5, 2016.
<http://southernersonnewground.org>.

friendship. I think that one thing STAY does is help break isolation, you know. Like I was talking about going to my first STAY gathering, I was like, wow, there's other young queer people from this region. And I think, especially STAY can be really important for queer people and youth of color because a lot of time it's those narratives that are left out of this region that is often painted as mostly white or mostly straight, mostly conservative people, which is just not true, and it's erasing people. And people have those assumptions or stereotypes about our region. And I think it's really important to have a space that is sort of governed by young people so that there's not an adult saying, "Maybe we shouldn't talk about that," or "Maybe this isn't a real issue for people."

Not even talking about just age, but whenever you provide a space where someone can actually say what they want to say, some really incredible things happen sometimes. Because a lot of times, people just aren't given a space to talk about something and have another person to not only listen but to be able to maybe provide some sort of support or resource or whatever it might be. And so, I think just as a network, we're really good about doing that, about just being able to know people.

And, it's a big, very large region. But it's still pretty small and the fact that if you're going around to a lot of events that are about this region, you're going to bump into a lot of the same people. And so, just having a space that is political, that isn't afraid to talk about the hard issues. I think that we've seen a trend in things like the Appalachian Regional Commission talking about drug addiction and stuff finally. But it's still very nicey nice. And it still does not address the systemic issues. They could say, "Yes, there is a drug addiction problem and we need to create this and this to help support people." But they're not going to say, "pharmaceutical

companies are one of the main reasons for this very specific addiction in our community, the criminal justice system not working and just locking people up and not providing a healing transformative space for people, that is what is causing, you know." It's not talking about capitalism and this mono-economy that is here and people losing their jobs and not having proper health care. They're not going to talk about those and if they are, it's going to be sort of just like, "Oh we don't want to step on too many toes or we don't want to challenge this or push this bucket of power over." And so, we're just like, "No, we want to talk about that."

And while STAY hasn't traditionally been as an organization doing direct actions or lobbying or trying to do any of those changes, we're sort of the space where everybody can come together and huddle about things and catch up with each other and hear about things and we also can help connect other people to different things.

Growing up, I never really identified as Appalachian, I identified more as Southern because that's what you hear. Country music is Southern or whatever. And then, you learn a little bit more that there's the Deep South and there's the Gulf South and there's Appalachia and all the other parts, you're the Southern Studies person, you know better than me. It's just sort of a narrowing down of the boxes that you're in in some ways. But, also being able to see on a bigger level how these things are connected. Some people might say, "Well, what sort of connection does someone in Whitesburg, Kentucky have with somebody in Biloxi, Mississippi or something for example." It's like, "Ok, well, in both areas, in most areas, there's always going to be folks who are being oppressed by some sort of system. And why those are often parallel and not the same, they're often by the same people and they're often you're mining coal in Eastern Kentucky that's being burned in a power plant in Richmond, California. And, you know all these

connections of how people are being affected by capitalism and all these oppressive systems. So, there's like those shitty connections. People are being screwed over by the same people a lot of times. And then there's also still this, there's a large cultural connection too, there's a love of food in the South, there's a love of visiting, and taking things a little bit slow, taking your time going around on Sundays to have dinner or whatever. And then, I think there's also stories outside of those traditions too that are different traditions that aren't talked about. But, I think in general, it's just like, no, I am from this place and I don't look like whatever, like this stereotype is about the region.

Basically, not everyone in Appalachia is a white man with a beard and overalls and when you think that - oh, yeah, I remember what I was saying now - I think there's a lot of stereotypes within stereotypes in this region. So, I feel like lately it's sort of been cool to be Appalachian or whatever. It's becoming this trendy thing, like they're serving ramps in fancy restaurants in New York and doing all this stuff. And there's all this romantization about the region, like it's all just about fiddles and banjos and people growing gardens and stuff and there's not a whole lot - it's all sort of this one similar narrative that people are feeding into. But, when you only focus on that, it's also erasing the fact, ok you're fighting against this stereotype that we're all hillbillies or we're all poor or we're all uneducated. But at the same time, you're still perpetuating a stereotype that this region is all white or this region is all straight people that have these traditional values and family they're raising on their mamaw's farm or whatever. And, you're not acknowledging non-traditional family units that are within the region.

And, actually one of the coolest things about this region is - well, it's not cool because this is not a choice that people have had to make, but I think that Appalachia is one of the areas

in this country where - a lot of it is ran by women. So many people have been raised by their grandparents or by their mother, single moms. The woman is often the head of household if you look at a census data. And, you know, I think that happens in a lot of low income or cash poor communities. I think that's something that's really unique and awesome is that we have so many women who are running shit, whether they want to be necessarily in some situations. But, yeah I think those kinds of stories aren't told enough. That there are transgender and queer people here, that there are black and brown folks here that have been here forever.

And that also, when you think about the fact that a hundred years ago, so many folks that came to this community to do coal mining, there was an enormous amount of diversity - of racial diversity, religious diversity, people coming from different parts of the country to work in the mines. And then, now, you mostly just still see white men in these jobs, but there were women working in the mines, there were black folks working in the mines, and you wonder why aren't these folks still here? And often, more marginalized communities were, they were the last hired and the first fired. And so, they had to go. And it's not just people up and decided, "Oh, this isn't my home anymore, I don't want to live here anymore." People were forced to leave because there was no work. Or people were forced out of their communities because of racism or whatever it is. And so, you have to acknowledge that history too.

And, even more meta is this was not our place in the first place. There is a long history of people who were in this land long before white people came and took it. I feel like that history really needs to be uplifted more. And it's something I really want to educate myself more on is that history of where I am and being able to incorporate that more into my work as well. We can't just have this idea that this is ours and we are Appalachians without acknowledging that,

"Well, this wasn't ours to begin with." Our people came and most likely probably took something. Myself speaking as a white person whose family is from Europe area. It's like, we have to acknowledge the full history and stories of this place, because it is that place. And, it can't just be the same cutesy white people playing banjos and fiddles and making apple pies and shit. That's not everything. That is a big part of it. It's a cool part of it. I'm saying, I love to eat apple pie, I have a banjo sitting right there. But, it's like, it's not who our whole community is. And so, the more spaces that we can create that acknowledge that and create that space for someone else, I think that is what we have to do to be able to create a brighter and more inclusive future.⁹⁰

These story pieces provide a glimpse into the lives of a few people working for good in the place they call home in Eastern Kentucky. Some of these narratives complement one another, others contradict one another. In these stories, we find an appreciation for tradition and a questioning of nostalgia and oppressions of the past. We see idyllic agrarian kinship and unconventional embrace of chosen families. We hear legacies of resilient aunts, mothers, mamaws, and darlin's. We find admirable work through food justice, community theater, LGBTQ+ awareness, political organizing, and regional movement building. We gather hopes for communities where young people will have choice, opportunity, responsibility, and voice. We hear dedication to creating a region that is more fair, just, and open to diversity. The commonalities and differences illuminate complexities of history, activism, and vision among the narrators. This project is an attempt to shed light onto stories from people who honor and

⁹⁰ Bilbrey Interview

question the past, who create and contribute in the present, who are dreaming of and making what the region will be in the future.

Twenty years ago, Helen Lewis reflected on the struggles in the Appalachian coalfields, advocated for human dignity, and beckoned for active participation in the region's resurrection. I close this chapter with Lewis's words, which continue to speak to the heritage of activism that the people I interviewed are a part of in their individual and collective work.

What does the area have to offer? The coalfields are part of a beautiful region increasingly scarred by an industry that has never demonstrated respect for the land or its people. The loss of water and destruction of communities to strip mining has left an area in need of a lot of repair and restoration. The people share a place and a history. Underground and in the camps, miners are bound by a sense of mutual obligation. Traditionally, they have pulled together in times of crisis, and they have endured... It is an area and a people deserving of better than outside garbage, returned coal ash, devastation of the remaining forest, a prison economy, more mining of dangerous thin seams of coal (probably at non-union, lower wages) or greater surface mining or recruitment of low wage industries. We need to imagine more creative development programs to rebuild communities and to repair and restore the region. It is time to be creative, dream new dreams, and develop new models. Let us plan for resurrection, not designate the region as a further sacrifice area.⁹¹

⁹¹Lewis, Helen Matthews, *Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia*, ed. Patricia Beaver and Judith Jennings (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 138.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: LISTENING TO THE EXPERTS

This thesis presents testimony from twenty-five people who were willing to share about their lives and communities in Eastern Kentucky: twenty-five experts in their own experiences and perspectives. These oral histories document specific foodways including saving heirloom bean seeds, making sauerkraut by the signs, sharing produce with neighbors, joining community bean stringings, and harvesting wild edible and medicinal plants. These oral histories record farmers and others involved in food work who are currently exploring the role local food can play in economic diversification. These oral histories document inspirations and activism among people committed to growing equity and justice in their communities and region.

This project is also about storytelling and human connection. It offers the narratives that people shared, in a particular moment and place, about family histories, personal passions and struggles, and hopes for the future. While I have provided context and drawn connections with larger movements, I have attempted to ground this project in the voices of narrators. Appalachian stories have been and continue to be appropriated and distorted to suit a breadth of outside and inside agendas. With sensitivity to that history and present, I sincerely hope this form of oral

history presentation remains true to the interviewees who graciously shared their time and perspectives.

Michael Nobel Kline, an oral historian, activist, and musician from West Virginia reflects upon the importance of recognizing people's expertise in creating their own narratives:

I have been driven to record and preserve spoken voices through a desire to get beyond the limitations and deceptions of the printed page, which have always left me hungry for more. Reaching beyond the scope of traditional scholarly history and journalism, this work focuses on the narrative perspectives of individuals as eye witnesses to moments and events in their own lives, who are speaking from first-hand experience with all the emotion and drama of someone who has been through it, or bearing witness to stories learned and remembered from earlier generations... These spoken testimonials from southern mountain people have little overlap with written accounts about them by missionaries, sociologists, regional planners and feature writers, whose stereotyping and baseless assumptions often work against progressive human development in the region.⁹²

Beyond written text, by including a documentary portion of this project through audio stories, I hope deeper expressions of voice and power are heard.⁹³ The audio excerpt for each narrator mirrors the written text presented in this thesis. The way a person speaks- their

⁹² Kline, Michael Nobel. "A Lifetime of Achievement in Arts for Social Change: Artist statement, community involvement and other reflections." Talking Across the Lines, accessed March 25, 2017. <http://www.folktalk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/TamarackMNKLifetimeAchievement.pdf>

⁹³ "Before Me, After Me Through Me: Stories of Food and Community in Eastern Kentucky." <http://ekyfoodstories.wordpress.com>.

emphases, laughter, tears, pauses - carries meaning beyond the limitations of transcribed words. As Michael Kline continues: “The recorded voice is an auditory window into the soul. The way we speak is the most integral detail of who we are.”⁹⁴

The histories, passions, and hopes expressed in these interviews are different for each individual narrator. Some people see food as a catalyst for gathering and heritage. Some see food as a source of economic possibility. Some invest their thought and energy into things very different than food. Some proudly worked in the coal fields or their family members did. Some are fighting for alternatives to the coal industry. Some spoke fondly of past experiences. Some spoke of challenges they’ve overcome. Some question normative gender roles and family structures. Some people shared their own contradictory, complicated relationships with place, identity, work, family, and community.

Though these interviews represent individual stories, in consideration of the threads that weave these narratives together, I return to the quote from Brandon Jent that inspires the title: “I want something that was important to people before me to be important to people after me, through me.”⁹⁵ Within these interviews, I hear an awareness of the people that have come before and a dedication toward those that follow, with a commitment to actively bridge the two. Individual narrators may express their visions and contributions differently. Nevertheless, there is an attention to roots with a dynamic desire to see place and people flourish as circumstances and opportunities change. These stories are not only about the past, but about active creation in

⁹⁴ Kline, “A Lifetime of Achievement in Arts for Social Change.”

⁹⁵ Jent interview

the present and future. Narrators are imagining communities where farmers and food workers can make a living; everyone can access fresh, local food; theater and art are vibrant; people of color and queer folk are visible, heard, and loved; youth have choices to find where they fit, whether that's staying or going; mountains are reclaimed and full of life again; and the land is improved for coming generations.

This collection of oral histories is relational, not comprehensive, based on people I met and got to know within time limitations of this master's thesis. A more thorough collection would take place over a longer amount of time with deeper community integration and a greater diversity of narrators. These interviews raised curiosity about topics for further investigation including: impact of food access and education initiatives, cooperative and alternative economics, abandoned mine land reclamation, the presence of mass incarceration in rural spaces, historic and current community organizing, Native history – specifically Cherokee, wild herbalism, seed saving practices, communal intersections of food and music, rural queer experience, and racial diversity. I hope this collection sparks interest in learning more, for myself and others who will hear these testimonies. I hope this work of creating spaces for stories to be told by the people of a place continues in ways that complicate, diversify, and expand narratives. These stories were collected before and during a tense national time of extreme polarization, political blame, perpetuated stereotypes, and widespread calls for change. In this climate, there is a need for people to hear one another as fellow humans, to deeply listen to each other's voices, to find common ground, and to work together towards creating a place that can we can leave better than we found it. Though this project concludes, this work moves onward in Eastern Kentucky,

in Appalachia, in the South, in the nation, with stories sometimes unified, sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant, and always intertwined.

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VITA

Education

Appalachian State University - Boone, NC *August 2003 - May 2007*
B.S. in Elementary Education, Summa Cum Laude Overall GPA: 3.98 on a 4.0 scale

Experience

Hindman Settlement School – Hindman, KY *January 2017 - present*
Appalachian Transition Fellow - Highlander Research and Education Center
Collaborating on a Heritage Food and Dance Trail in Eastern Kentucky with the Hindman Settlement School, Appalachian Food Summit, and local communities

University of Mississippi - Oxford, MS *August 2015 – May 2017*

Graduate Assistant

Supported organizational efforts of the Southern Foodways Alliance and Living Blues Magazine
Served as writing tutor for Southern Studies undergraduate students

Perry-winkle Farm – Chapel Hill, NC *March 2013 – November 2014*

Farmworker

Participated in various aspects of vegetable, cut flower, and chicken production on a sustainable farm

Nome Community Center – Nome, Alaska *January 2009 – April 2011*

Mission Intern and Family Support Services Specialist

Contributed to family and adult day care programs, emergency homeless shelter, and food bank
Worked with families seeking support in parenting, relationships, education, employment, and mental health

Grenada Community Development Agency - Grenada, WI *August 2007 – December 2008*

Mission Intern

Worked with staff, parents, farmers, youth, and children to support after school tutoring, adult computer classes, and other community development programs

Conference Presentations

“Past and Present Foodways in Eastern Kentucky”

Southern Foodways Alliance Graduate Student Conference – Oxford, MS, 2016

“Bean Seeds and Beyond: Oral Histories with Farmers in Eastern Kentucky”

Appalachian Studies Association Conference – Blacksburg, VA, 2017