

**Leenie Hobbie & Jon Falcone**

Where: Via Skype

\*\*\*

Date: October 20, 2020

Location: Rio, Lost River & Charleston, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 36:38

**Leenie Hobbie of Rio** in Hampshire County and **Jon Falcone of Lost River** in Hardy County were participants in the 2020-2021 West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program. **Hobbie** led an apprenticeship in **traditional Appalachian herbalism** **Falcone**. Hobbie has been a family herbalist for over 30 years, originally learning the tradition from her grandmother, who used both garden-grown and wild harvested plants at her home in the mountains of Southwestern Virginia. She has studied with acclaimed herbalists across the country and has taught the tradition within her community in Hampshire County. Falcone is a novice herbalist who hopes to apply his skills to his future homestead in West Virginia.

See our feature on Falcone's apprenticeship with Hobbie here: <https://wvfolklife.org/2020/10/26/2020-folklife-apprenticeship-feature-leenie-hobbie-jon-falcone-traditional-appalachian-herbalism/>

The West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program offers up to a \$3,000 stipend to West Virginia master traditional artists or tradition bearers working with qualified apprentices on a year-long in-depth apprenticeship in their cultural expression or traditional art form. These apprenticeships aim to facilitate the transmission of techniques and artistry of the forms, as well as their histories and traditions.

The apprenticeship program grants are administered by the West Virginia Folklife Program at the West Virginia Humanities Council in Charleston and are supported in part by an Art Works grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. West Virginia Folklife is dedicated to the documentation, preservation, presentation, and support of West Virginia's vibrant cultural heritage and living traditions.

JF: Jon Falcone  
EH: Emily Hilliard  
LH: Leenie Hobbie

00:00

EH: (to Leenie) I already interviewed you, so some of these questions I'll just get some background material from Jon and then we'll move into the apprenticeship and that sort of thing.

LH: Okay.

EH: So to start off, why don't both of you introduce yourselves and tell me who you are and when you were born and where you live?

LH: Do you want to go first, Jon?

JF: Sure.

LH: Okay.

JF: So my name's Jon Falcone. I was born February 17, 1996 and I live in Lost River, West Virginia.

LH: And I'm Leenie Hobbie and I was born December 28th, 1960 in Alexandria, Virginia and I now live in Kirby, West Virginia.

EH: Alright, and Jon, why don't you tell me a little bit about your family background and then how you got interested in herbalism?

JF: Well with a few exceptions, we are more or less city folk (laughs) and we were living in Northern Virginia up until about 2004 when we moved out here to Eastern West Virginia and I have some outdoors people in my family but for the most part it all kind of started after we moved out here.

EH: And...oh, go ahead.

JF: Yeah, we moved out here and it's just sort of a common thing in my area for people to forage edible mushrooms and ramps in the springtime and things of that nature, so that's kind of what got me going.

EH: What brought your family to Lost River/Eastern West Virginia?

JF: In the 1960s, my grandfather purchased some land out here and we'd come out on the weekends as long as I can remember and after a time, just kinda needed a change and we moved out here. Originally it was supposed to be temporary. And I don't know, we just kinda really fell in love with the lifestyle out here and we've been here ever since!

EH: What did your grandfather do? Do you know anything about what led him to West Virginia?

JF: He was one of the outdoorsy people I was referencing earlier. And yeah, he was a pretty avid hunter and I think that was the big draw there. He was originally from Maryland and he was a mason, so yeah, that was his job.

EH: I see. And for both of you, what role would you say this tradition plays in your everyday life and the life of your community?

03:21

LH: You want me to go first Jon?

JF: Oh yeah, I'm just thinking on it for a second.

LH: (laughs) Alright! This is a good question right at this time. Just this past week, and I said I don't know if it's a trending topic or something, but all of a sudden on social media I began to see lots of people posting pictures of their apothecaries. And, which is just basically a way of storing the herbs that you preserve in a variety of forms and sometimes your resources like books you use and things. And a lot of people had so many beautiful, beautiful pictures and I was excited that there were so many people in my local community who were actively integrating herbs into their daily lives. So I went to, in my excitement, I went to take some photos of my apothecary, but I realized that in the last 35 years, my apothecary--there's nowhere in my home or around my home outdoors that isn't part of my apothecary! And so it wasn't this really beautiful picture like some of the people had shared and I was so inspired by, but I realized that I could walk into every single room and take photos of herbal things that were throughout my home and that began some conversations with younger herbalists and I feel--I mean just like in Jon's age range--20s and early 30s--and that made me feel so elated that from the very beginning when I offered my first wild herb identification walks, which was about 32 years ago? I always said my vision was for an herbalist in every home. And now I feel like I'm living to see that! It's unfortunate that maybe the impetus was a global pandemic, but the fact that people are wanting to have common herbal remedies that they've gleaned right outside their door and prepared to care for their families is really meaningful to me.

EH: Nice. Yeah, I would love to see those apothecary photos if they're folks from West Virginia.

LH: Yeah!

EH: That would be a really cool collection.

LH: Oh, I'll be happy to do that. I'll ask for permission today from some of them.

EH: Great! Very cool. What about you, Jon?

06:15

LH: I can't tell, but it looks like his mic is off?

EH: Oh, okay.

JF: Sorry, I've been having some issues on my end. I actually dropped from the call there for a moment.

EH: Oh, it's okay. Yeah, So I was asking about the role that this tradition in your everyday life and the life of your community?

JF: Yeah so, of course it's a way for me to just connect with nature on the day to day. I very much enjoy being able to go out there and there's still so many things that I haven't identified and haven't learned about yet, so for me to be able to go outside on any given day and just be able to find so many things that I can learn about and make use of is big for me. And in terms of my community, it's just a great way to get out and socialize with people, I would say. A lot of my friends, we've gone out and hunted for more!

mushrooms and things like that and it's just a great way to get out and do some enjoyable things in nature for me.

EH: Nice. And a lot of people have been turning to that more in the pandemic, with it's harder to convene safely indoors, so a lot of people have been gathering outside.

JF: Right.

LH: And I have to say, since we started this too, Jon because he has such a passion for mushrooms and really know more about mushrooms than I do, but they keep coming in so that's expanding my own apothecary just because he keeps finding good mushrooms and sharing them! (laughs)

EH: Nice! What would you say or recommend for a basic apothecary in someone's home, maybe like first aid of just kind of general herbs and preparations of them that you feel people, every person should have?

LH: Right. I feel very passionate about that because I feel like over the years we've kind of lost touch with that kind of everyday self-care and we're very fortunate to be living in a time when we have access just to the latest medical technology, but as we've even seen during this pandemic, there are times when small everyday things happen and you don't want to go to the Emergency Room! Because you got a cut or because you got, you know, just some minor thing that used to be very common for people to take care of at home, but I've noticed especially in the last couple decades where even headaches or a mild cold, people automatically go to a doctor and so, and I'm definitely not anti-doctor. So I think for every family, for every individual, their apothecary, their basic apothecary or their basic natural first aid kit is gonna look a little bit different based on what they do. For example, you know, if a family is very prone to respiratory illness or allergies, then it's gonna be reflected in the herbal teas or syrups or tinctures that they have on hand. If someone, a different family has lots of issues with digestive problems or maybe someone in the family has colitis or something like that, then the everyday items they would have on hand and want to really stock up on would look a little bit different. But there are common things and I'll just use one example, this last week I got this really big splinter in my foot. Probably the biggest one I've ever gotten! (laughs) And it broke off and my husband's a woodworker and he's really good at getting splinters out and I couldn't believe it, he couldn't get this splinter out--it was just stuck. And I hate admitting it, but I cried because I was so disappointed. I kind of limped around all day and I thought, "Oh when he gets home, he'll get it out no problem." And I should have right away turned to it, but when he couldn't get it out, I said, "Okay, go outside and gather some plantain," which is this great very common plant that's outside of everybody's door. It's as common as dandelion. And I just soaked it in some hot water and then put it on as a compress and put a sock over it and went to bed and the next morning, the plantain had pulled that splinter completely out. It was amazing (laughs).

EH: Wow!

LH: Yeah! And so there is something known as black drawing salve that people use to draw out splinters and the top ingredient that's in black drawing salve is plantain. So definitely you know that the very next day I went ahead and said, "I need to restock my drawing salve." I didn't have any on hand and that's why I used fresh plantain. But that's probably an everyday common thing that lots of people would need to have some type of drawing plant on hand for, and that would be a perfect apothecary stocking item that you'd have in your medicine chest in the bathroom or something, so I definitely look to things like that. And then you know, suit it to your specific needs as well.

12:37

EH: Right. Yeah, so why don't you describe what you've done so far in the apprenticeship and talk a little bit about how you've adapted, you know, during the pandemic, what you've been studying and learning and collecting.

LH: Okay. Yeah, I know that everybody has had to adapt and especially when you're talking about a traditional apprenticeship, you're definitely talking about doing something in person, very hands-on and that's absolutely what we had planned. The one part that we've had to adjust to not being able to do is--I really wanted to connect Jon with lots of other herbalists. So we had field trips planned for each month and we only got to do one. The very first one, which was the basket making. And that was wonderful and we were super excited, ready to kick-off and so since then, and actually most of the events that we were going to go to like Herbal Growers and places like that that we were going to go to, their events were all cancelled. So that element of the apprenticeship has not been able to happen. And that's a disappointment, but I said to Jon, as far as I'm concerned, nobody foresaw this and at whatever point, whether it's a year from now or 3 years from now, we can still do those things. I'll still make sure that he can connect with other herbal growers and collectors and farmers and practicing herbalists and clinical herbalists and things like that. So we both had to mostly work from home. Currently what we're doing is meeting just once a month, just to minimize the risk. I fall into a high-risk category being 60 and my elderly mother who lives alone is a person who I'm particularly concerned--I'm an only child too--so I'm particularly concerned at keeping her safe and yet always being to her when she needs me. But that's been very good. So far we've been able to meet outdoors. You know, we wear masks. Our hands-on stuff maybe isn't quite as much. For example, our last meeting last month in September, we gathered goldenrod and made goldenrod honey, which is very good for allergies. Seasonal allergies.

EH: Nice.

LH: And so we were able to do that outdoors. That was when Lisa [Elmaleh] came and took the photos too and that was a really, you know it happened to be a beautiful day. We've been really lucky when we do meet that they have been nice. We haven't come indoors and done some of the more involved preparations, but I, the ones we've done have been really useful and if it's something more involved, I usually create a Google doc, send it to Jon and he goes home and makes that separately. And if he has any questions, but he's done great. He's made dandelion jelly, he's made salves and like I say, he's always going out for mushrooms, so he actually has made some things that you know were not new to me but just things I hadn't planned to do in the apprenticeship, so that's kind of expanded it. But we both feel like we're making do, kind of like everyone is.

EH: Right, right. Jon, do you have anything to add to that?

16:45

JF: I feel like that was pretty thorough! Yeah, just a lot of changes. About the story of the year, I suppose. But I feel like we're just kinda getting to the core of it and focusing on the plants and just being out among the plants and that's the main thing, right?

EH: Right.

LH: Yeah.

EH: Right, I think, also thinking about the presentation in your local community, we could move that to a digital platform if you were interested, and Leenie, I know you do those beautiful drawings. We'd be happy to put some materials up on our website as part of that digital exhibit since people aren't able to meet much in person.

LH: Right. That would be good. I have met only one time this summer, which I think we're gonna do our next one as a zoom meeting, but the photographer who was gonna, who actually already has been taking some of those pages and kind of making them more print ready, so they're easy...you know, so they don't have the folds and the quarters and all that kind of stuff. And he's been working on that as kind of a book project, a long-term book project, so I think I would be able to send you much better quality prints like that and Jon has some good photographs that he does as well of plants, so I feel like this could be included too.

EH: Definitely. What do you see as the benefit of the apprenticeship to you and also to the tradition and maybe your community?

18:56

JF: Well, it started a lifetime of learning of course. And just having access to all this wild food and medicine is big to me and my goal is eventually to start a homestead, and be as self-sufficient as possible, so having these resources on hand is huge in that regard.

EH: Right.

JF: So community-wise, as I said earlier, socially it's great to be able, in the future, to do herb walks and things of that nature would be good, but I would just like to, much like Leenie, I'd like to get as many people into doing it as possible because I just think it's a great thing.

EH: Nice. Yeah, what do you hope for the future of this tradition? And what do you think is needed to realize that?

JF: Well with the rise in popularity, I would hope that people are keeping sustainability in mind. It's great that a lot more people are getting into it. I want to make sure it's there for future generations.

LH: Yeah.

JF: I think conscious collecting and just being mindful is something that I would like to encourage people to do.

LH: That's really great Jon, and well you know that was from (laughs) our very first meeting, and everybody develops their own relationship with the world around them and that's why I usually very much so emphasize right-outside-your-door herbalism, because I feel like if you are stepping very close to home, right outside your door, it's easy to see the impact. If you rush out there and collect every single specimen of a certain species and you use it and then you notice the next year, "Oh my gosh, there's no yarrow here." You know (laughs) you realize that when it's far away or exotic, we don't, even when we're purchasing things, we don't always understand the impact that we have. But also stepping right outside our doors is something we can do every day and that relationship with your immediate environment is going to sustain you so much longer, in many more ways than just the active constituents in a plant. And so it's almost like a self-teaching (laughs) tool that people can learn to use because it is close to their home. They're not, they're gonna want those plants that they find effective and useful to continue to be there and so they're gonna be much more conscientious about not over-harvesting or not you know, spraying herbicides or all kinds of things that impact their local environment.

EH: Do you see ways that global warming and changes in the environment are impacting access to plants and materials that you would normally collect, or even like access to land that you might forage on?

23:06

LH: Absolutely, and one of the I guess most pressing that I'm feeling right now is the impact of pesticides because our pollinators are disappearing and this year in particular, it was a very bad year for the honeybees. It was a weather pattern thing. It wasn't about a pesticide this time.

EH: Oh wow.

LH: It was that we had a horrible spring, in terms, from the point of view of a honey bee, in order for the queen to mate and begin to start her brood, she has to have a 2-week window where she flies and it has to be warm with still air and sunny and we had a very wet spring. We had actually the opposite. It was windy, it was damp and lots of rain and that continued just for months and so many of the queens never mated and I know the beekeepers I've talked to out here, anywhere from, they lost anywhere from 40-80% of their hives.

EH: Wow.

LH: And so that affected what got pollinated and we definitely, even in our own garden, we saw that the difference when the bees weren't there, just in fruit production and all because of pollination, it just did not happen. And so everything was very, very late. I know Jon noticed that too. The bloom times were incredibly late and some things didn't bloom at all! Or locust didn't bloom this spring, a number of things. And so that's definitely related to climate change and that's gonna take a long-term. I know all the beekeepers are really working hard to tend to their bees and hoping that we'll have a good spring next year and that we'll have a rebound. It's just such a delicate balance.

25:31

EH: Jon have you been building your home apothecary and if so, what is in it?

JF: Yeah, so this spring I was really wanting to beef up my apothecary, so I've gathered plantain, yarrow, Leenie gave me some comfrey, and yeah, I've mostly been like Leenie was saying, I've mostly been gathering stuff out of the yard and that's about what I've got!

EH: Mmhm. Nice.

JF: The plantain's a huge one. I use that all the time. Beestings and everything. I'm using it a ton. I can't recommend the plantain enough.

EH: Nice.

LH: Yay! I agree! (laughs)

EH: And that's--I mean it's everywhere. So common--in most urban yards too.

LH: Yep.

EH: Well, do you, well I guess is there any other ways that you've seen COVID impacting the apprenticeship but also the tradition and that tradition of herbalism--you spoke about that in various ways, but positively and negatively?



LH: Yeah, I think that...I do feel a little bit nervous. One thing that has changed is prior to COVID, I always prepared some products--elderberry syrup for example--a couple other elixirs and fire cider that I've been making and selling since the early 90s, so for a pretty long time. And I scaled way back because early on in the spring as soon as I would make a batch, people would buy it immediately, but I would have just 2 or 3 people who would buy everything I had--like kind of hoarding it, you know?

EH: Uh-huh, right.

LH: And I think that it wasn't you know, I don't think it was consciously selfish. There was just this panic. And so I actually quit promoting any of my products at all. Any of them. And I still make them. I make them for my family and community, but I never announce that I-- "Oh I have a fresh batch of this or that or the other." And because I really wanted to make sure that it was gonna be there and be available to people when they needed it and not just have it sitting on a few people's shelves (laughs) and not being used. So that's been a kind of negative thing. Of course that's impacted me as far as an income source, but it made me really nervous how quickly just a few people would buy up anything I made. It didn't even matter what it was. They just wanted anything at all that I made. (laughs) And it's never really been that way before. And so that's been a negative impact. I've tried really hard instead to share more recipes with people and encourage people to make their own whether they've purchased the herbs to do it or they went outside and got it themselves. And I have seen a few of my very close neighbors for the first time, use the elderberries in their yard for example and they made--I have 3 very close neighbors who for the first time made elderberry jelly and elderberry syrup right from their own yards, sustainably harvested. And that made me very, very happy because I think they'll probably continue that even once COVID isn't such a driving motivator. But it did, I would say there was that one negative impact where people were so panicked they wanted anything that you know, had any hope whatsoever.

EH: Right, right. It was kind of a fear-motivated. (laughs)

LH: Yeah, and you know it troubled me if I knew somebody--"How many jars do you have? Okay, I'll take all ten of 'em!" You know? (laughs) And I'd think okay, there's two people there. You don't need 10 quarts of (laughs).

30:26

EH: What about you Jon?

JF: Sorry, could you just repeat the question one time?

EH: Yeah, COVID's impact on the apprenticeship or maybe also on the tradition of herbalism and how that manifested in your own community?

JF: Yeah, I think it was mostly just a big influx of people wanting to learn about it, which is awesome!

LH: Yeah.

JF: Plenty of panic of course, but yeah, I think that's the big thing to me is just a lot more people interested in acquiring their own food and medicine. And I'm just really happy about that.

EH: Right.

LH: Yeah.

EH: And Jon, what are the things you feel you've gained from the apprenticeship?

JF: Ah, a teacher is the huge thing. I don't like the term self-taught, I'll say I was self-learned previously and it was great but the big thing Leenie taught me--how to properly key stuff out and how to properly identify stuff and that of course is the huge thing.

EH: Right, right.

JF: I would be lucky to learn about 1 or 2 plants a year before hand but now I'm pretty confident to take my field guide and other resources out there and ID all kinds of stuff.

EH: Nice. Well is there anything either of you would like to share that we haven't talked about?

LH: Well you mentioned about having a digital format for presentation, and of course nobody knows how anything is going to go. Should I still pursue the local...I mean I know they would still do an exhibit at the River House, but it is indoors, so depending on what's happening in March, we may or may not be able to share that publicly. Currently they are offering--I think there's an artisan spotlight and highlight in their outdoor space right now. I think it's this Saturday if I'm not mistaken and they have had a couple of outdoor concerts, but they have to limit the number of people to something like 20 people or something. So it's you know, it is a very limited thing but I guess we'll just play that by ear and see what's happening in late winter.

EH: Yeah that sounds good. I mean if you think it could reach some people locally I think it would still be worth pursuing and then we could do a digital version like we talked about, but yeah, that sounds good to me. And if it also seems like it's not worth it because they've shut down, outdoors, and that kind of thing, then we can just move to a digital presentation.

LH: Okay.

EH: And as for the showcase in Charleston, I am basically also still waiting to see. I think you know, some of the people who are musicians, they may want to wait and just do it, even the apprenticeship year will be over and our grant will be over, they might prefer to do it in person, but you know, I think it could be interesting to do a digital showcase in that way people outside of Charleston could access it as well. So I'm just kind of waiting on that. And oh Jon, I still need your artist profile and I don't think I have the liability form either.

JF: Jeez, I'm sorry, I meant to do that so long ago.

EH: That's okay. So yeah the artist's profile, once I have it then I can set up an apprenticeship feature on our blog. I've started publishing those. And especially now that Lisa sent me the photos, I think we just need the artist profile and then we'll be good to go.

JF: I'll work on that today--I'll get it to you. Sorry about that.

EH: Oh no problem. Well thank you both and I'm sorry that this has been such a weird year for your apprenticeship, but it sounds like you're adapting as well as possible and still able to teach and learn quite a bit.

LH: Well thank you, Emily. I can't even imagine how you're managing your job at all!

EH: It's weird. I mean the job is so focused on face-to-face interaction that it is weird.

LH: Absolutely.

EH: ...doing this over Skype, but you know, it's better than not having Skype, so.

LH: That's right, that's right. Well stay safe.

EH: Yeah, you too. Take care both of you and thanks again for your time this morning.

JF: Thank you, have a good day.

LH: Thanks!

EH: Alright bye!

LH: Bye-bye!

(36:38)

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW