

**Leenie Hobbie**

Where: At her home in Kirby, WV

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Leenie Hobbie (b. December 28, 1960, Alexandria, VA) is an herbalist in Kirby (Rio post office box) in Hampshire County, West Virginia. 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. Hobbie is a 2020-2021 participant in the West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program, teaching traditional Appalachian herbalism to apprentice Jon Falcone.

EH: Emily Hilliard

LH: Leenie Hobbie

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EH: Yep. Okay, so could you introduce yourself and tell me your name and what you do and where we are?

LH: Okay, my name is Leenie Hobbie and I'm an herbalist, a home herbalist, and I specialize in wild foods, common plants of uncommon value. I particularly love to teach and we're in Kirby, West Virginia, even though the mailing address is Rio, West Virginia, at my home!

EH: Could you tell me a little bit about growing up--where you grew up, when you were born, your background--childhood background.

LH: Okay, I was born in 1960, December 28, 1960 and I was born in Alexandria, VA, so the city, but I spent most of my growing up in Covington, Virginia with my grandmother and grandfather. And same Appalachian mountain change but over in Virginia. Very similar terrain and appearance to where I live now. And I always loved nature. I loved being outdoors. My grandmother wasn't a self-identified herbalist, but she did use herbs and wild plants and cultivated herbs and plants all the time. And so that felt very, very natural and that has impacted the work that I've done all of my life because it was very natural for me to include those things in my daily life. Now I'm motivated to inspire others to use it in their daily life as well.

01:51

EH: What are some things that you remember her harvesting and using?

LH: I always remember the spring, you know? I think about that often that when I'm remembering her using any kind of plant, it's always in the spring. So there were a lot of traditional Appalachian herbs that she would use--sassafras and root bark for that and brew up a spring tonic from that. I also remember learning from her to use--she called 'em a bramble tonic. And she would just take the tips of all kinds of brambles, whether it was blackberry or raspberries or wineberries or whatever and gather 'em all up and boil that down the same as sassafras for a spring tonic, and greens in the spring. And it's funny because I just remember it as greens. I don't remember her--I'm sure there were creasy greens, mustard greens, watercress, I can remember from creeks. So I would like to remember some of those fall and other times of year, but when I picture anytime I saw her with plants, I always associate it with spring.

EH: Well, it's a pretty important time.

LH: Absolutely, absolutely. And I guess too, they always had a huge garden and we would move into the season where we were harvesting cultivated herbs, so maybe it did not stand out to me as much as it did in the spring when we would first start to incorporate those spring greens. So...

EH: Right, that makes sense.

LH: Yeah. And I'm sure all the time she was probably using dried things in the kitchen that I probably took for granted, was not quite aware. Like, "Oh yeah! She had dried that." or... (laughs) Yeah.

EH: Tell me about your journey to studying herbalism.

LH: Okay. Well, I had a kind of medical history of having a lot of urinary tract infections and kidney issues growing up and as I told you, my mother said my first urinary tract infection was when I was 10 months old. So I don't remember that, but I do know that I had them frequently as a child. And the last one that I had, I was about 19 years old and I ended up as I did occasionally in the hospital. All they did was put me on an IV--sugar water. It doesn't make sense for a UTI, but anyway! To just make sure that it didn't get into my kidneys where it could do a lot more damage. So I got out of the hospital and I just decided enough of this! It's very painful--urinary tract infections--and you're pretty debilitated. And so I went into a little health food store in Alexandria, VA--had moved back to Alexandria, VA when I was out on my own. I was going to George Mason University and I stopped in and they had a little herb shop area and resources, and so I looked up in some herb books in particular, Jeanne Rose's Herbs and Things, and I looked up urinary tract infections and I bought some herbs that day and I began to brew some teas and that was the last urinary tract infection I ever had. Of course that was pretty inspiring after many episodes of urinary tract infections, so I was eager to learn more. Now it wasn't immediate. At first, I love learning through books, so I began to read everything I could on herbs and start to build a little herbal library myself, but I'm trying to remember. I think it was shortly before having our first child. (door opens)

EH: Hi!

LH: This is my husband Pete.

EH: Hi, I'm Emily.

LH: This is Emily.

06:07

PH: How's it going?

EH: Nice to meet you!

LH: Yeah, it was about a year before the birth of our first child that I started to study formally with Jeanne Rose, that first book that I had read, and another herbalist Jeannine Parvati Baker--they both had correspondence distance programs, and I did both of those. And continued--have had an ongoing friendship and student-teacher relationship with Jeanne Rose over the years. And then I have taken a lot of intensive classes with other herbalists like Rosemary Gladstar, Doug Elliott, I've gone up to probably close to where you are and I'm trying to remember the name of the college campus we were on, but the International Herb Symposium has an intensive every other year. So I try to go to that because it's about a week long, and the top herbalists in the world are there, so I can really glean a lot of information there. I've gone to Augusta Heritage, they have some folk traditional herbal classes there as well. Mostly field classes--you go out and gather and prepare. So. And I'm learning all the time. I continue. Go outside, I think nature's probably the very best teacher (laughs). Spending time, being out there is really important.

07:42

EH: You said you really like the wild plants aspect. Could you talk about some of your favorite plants to harvest in this area?

LH: Yes. Well I always talk about dandelion first as everybody who's around me knows. And the reason that I talk about it first and foremost is because everyone knows it! It seems to be the first herb we learn

as a child, you know? Picking the flowers or blowing the dandelion clocks and so a plant that grows everywhere, that everyone recognizes is a great place to start. Because you're already empowered--you already know something about it. I also tend to choose to talk about dandelion very, very frequently because it is such a misunderstood plant. I don't really know why we've zeroed in on that plant to hate (laughs) and to use all these petrochemicals to try to kill. We can't! But we put all these poisons right in our immediate environment, continually, and yet it thrives. And so who could not be inspired by a plant like that, that you know, despite not being appreciated, not being welcomed, it still thrives and it's full of vitality and sunshine and healing! And so now I see even locally some people kind of coming around because there's been a lot of research done on this plant in recent years and they're finding for example, that a simple water infusion, just like a tea that we're having, of dandelion root and leaf is proving to be in vitro just in the petri dish, not in human trials yet, but effective of stopping the progression of both breast cancer cells and prostate cancer cells. And so that's just one of the many aspects, but it's a wonderful herb, both as food and as medicine. It's really great for balancing our electrolytes. It's great for our kidneys, so of course it's a good plant for me! It's a specific for kidney health and it regulates mineral balance in our body which affects our heart health. So it's a cardiovascular herb too. And all parts of it are edible, there's no poison look alikes. There's just so much, so it's a great place to start. And I always start my wild herb walks with dandelion. And there's lots and lots of other common plants: plantain. All the common plants are my favorite ones to talk about because they're outside almost everyone's doorsteps and I can go anywhere. I can even go in a city and we can do a wild herb walk in the city sidewalks, in the cracks of the city sidewalks--there's all this food and all this medicine. Even if it's in a place that maybe you wouldn't want to eat that because of lead fumes or things like that, for recognition purposes, we can still do those there. And they're my favorite plants!

EH: Nice.

LH: Yeah.

EH: What about some that are more difficult to recog--or you know, less commonly known?

LH: Right, I do, believe it or not, I do focus on those for a different reason. We have some native medicinals around here that are endangered and they're native to Appalachia, like Goldenseal and American ginseng to name just a couple, lady slipper, ghost pipe--some people call it Indian pipe. A lot of these plants are endangered and they're endangered because they're very valuable and so. But they were very important medicine. They wouldn't be valuable if they weren't effective. People are wanting them because they're effective and so I teach about them. I tend to not go directly to that--it depends on the group--but go directly and say, "Oh this is this very valuable American ginseng. If you dig this..." (laughs) So I don't do it quite like that but I love to make people aware of these native medicinals that need to be protected and I encourage anybody who has habitat to plant them. And usually I refer them to United Plant Savers that's devoted to protecting native medicinal plants and a lot of us have great habitat. I mean it's not hard to grow them and I have re-established some goldenseal. I have not found good habitat right near us 'cause we're up on this shaley bank, but the goldenseal does great. But the American ginseng needs a little bit deeper, richer soil. But I do teach about those less likely to come across plants for a different reason and usually people are very open and pretty eager. "Oh I have 20 acres, we have some wooded area." And usually do follow up and get in touch with United Plant Savers so they can get roots or seeds and try to re-establish those in places where they can protect them and they're not going to be poached. So...

EH: Do you work with any invasives--I don't know if you use that word, but invasive species?

LH: Yes, I do. So I'm glad you're bringing these up! Some of my favorites are invasives and so I talked about those common ones like dandelion. Dandelion's not a native to this country. It was brought over

with European. A lot of plants that we think of as native were not actually here before Europeans came. But as long as people are mobile, I think plants are going to be mobile as well, whether it's brought intentionally like the dandelion was or unintentionally, just carrying seeds accidentally, and then they find a new habitat where they don't have pests and things and so they flourish. But what I've seen is that it's not that there's not something invasive. I tend not to use that word but I also don't use the word weed as a matter of fact! I always say wild herbs. But invasives are just plants that they can come in and they fill an ecological niche, you know? They come in and there's open ground and we tend to like in our landscaping these blank slate looking areas, but nature abhors a vacuum and so that's not nature's idea. And so if you turn some soil and put some mulch down or something like that because you think that it's pretty, well nature says, "Oh, loose soil!" (laughs) And so a lot of plants will come in. The thing that's interesting about invasives is that I try to always educate on uses for those plants. For example, garlic mustard is a big one--there's lots of garlic mustard pulls that I get invited to every year! And I keep wanting to hold like a garlic mustard cook-off, so that we gather because it's wonderful medicine. It's incredible medicine. Everything in the mustard family like broccoli and cabbage, this is so good as an anti-cancer food, you know? And so it's deeply nourishing, it's delicious, and it also has all the properties of garlic. And so there's wonderful anti-microbial and anti-oxidant properties are in there. So if you begin to think of it as food, you see that very quickly, I've actually planted garlic mustard out here. I never have enough, you know because we harvest so much of it, we cook with it, we make lasagnas with it and horto pitas the Greek layered pies with the greens, and we make so many things with it that I have very very little. So I know that when we appreciate and use plants, that's the way they move from invasive list to endangered list, to be perfectly honest. We're living in a time, like kudzu is a perfect example that farmers spend 10s of thousands of dollars--it's hugely invasive, yet at the same time that we're doing that, we're importing it to use medicinally. And so if we turned that into a crop that the farmers would actually profit from, the harvest, instead of just paying to try to eradicate it, then, because there is a market there for it, and they're finding a lot of uses. Research is supporting that it's effective in Lyme's disease. And that needs further research, but I'm just saying that that always seems to be what moves it from that one list to the other. There was a time when goldenseal would have probably been considered invasive. It blanketed out forests. And of course it's very hard to find now. So, just little isolated plants here and there. (laughs) And it was because people discovered that it was effective and valuable.

EH: Wow. Yeah, I've heard theories that say these plants come in because they're needed in an area.

LH: Mmhm. And I do see that, I've watched that in building this house. The year that we built the house there was so much yarrow. It was just incredible--the whole hillside was yarrow. Yarrow and chickweed, just incredible--I could take a laundry basket out and gather chickweed, you know? Which is a delicious edible, and it was everywhere. Now I have to search and search and search for yarrow. It's still out there in little bits and pieces but I've watched that whole field really transition and it's because the work that the yarrow did in vito-remediation, you know, rebuilding and meeting a soil need for that micro environment has been met, and in the next step, now there's other plants coming in--very different kinds of plants. And I don't see nearly as much Queen Anne's lace and it's interesting watching that transition. So I absolutely believe that. I think that there's a forest progression that happens and if you allow it to run its course...I know with garlic mustard, how they'll battle that, but when they do these garlic mustard pulls, they always do them, usually like late May and June. They've already gone to flower. The reason they do is because they can recognize the plants at that time. They are recognizable when they're flowering, but it's a biennial. And so you're pulling out the second year plants which I guess is good if you don't want them to re-seed, but the first year plants are all still there. They're really low to the ground and they don't have flowers and they're not recognizable, so you're sort of just--it's almost like closing the barn door after the cows got out (laughs) You know? It's kind of, oh well! They've already finished their life cycle.

EH: I see.

LH: But I do think if we held all these wonderful garlic mustard cook-offs and have recipes and things and people really began to eat it a lot, we probably would not have the invasive problem that we do. So I know I have to search for it, but I'm happy when I find it! (laughs)

20:39

EH: Would you say you have a personal herbalist practice?

LH: Well I try, I constantly say that I'm not a clinical herbalist. I do consult some reluctantly. (laughs) Kind of like a neighbor-to-neighbor and friend-to-friend. In small ways, I really love teaching. That's my...I love to empower people to recognize the common plants around them and use them in their daily lives, whether it's to make body care products or food or simple home remedies, folk remedies for everyday things like kitchen burns or headaches or stomach aches, or a little bit of touch of insomnia, having trouble relaxing at night--just the everyday things that we've always dealt with that plants are excellent...Plants are also excellent at helping us to maintain good health. They are effective in an acute situation when you're very sick, but it's such a hard time to learn about plants when you're really sick. Who wants to say, "Oh, I have to make this broth and I have to..." (laughs) It's not the greatest time to launch your (laughs) learning journey with plants. But they're wonderful at supporting positive good health through our woods that we eat and our teas that we drink in a daily way. And that's what I want to really, really encourage because I believe that our daily habits are gonna have the biggest impact on our experience of living vitally and in enjoying life, so that's what I want to address most.

EH: And when you do neighbor-to-neighbor friend consultations, is it people you already know or do they hear about you?

LH: Well it used to only be people that I knew.

EH: Yeah.

LH: But more and more as I teach and now with technology I have a website and I'm getting more questions and requests from people that I don't know. Now sometimes they've been referred by someone that I know, but sometimes they're completely out of the blue and so that's a little different, and a little difficult to do because you really need to have a whole picture of a person--their lifestyle and their daily habits and things like that. Sometimes mainstream medicine will approach things on just a symptom picture, like they're just gonna treat your symptom. You have a stomach ache, here you can take this and it'll stop your stomach from aching or heart burn or something like that. But in general, herbalists, I believe, as well as some other practitioners are looking at the whole person. They're not treating an isolated symptom. They're treating and responding to a person in their wholeness. And so sometimes let's say that heartburn that you have might not have anything to do with the spicy foods you eat. It might have to do with a stressful lifestyle that you travel a lot, you eat a lot on the road or on the run or something like that. Or you're just--so maybe when you see that, when you get that whole picture, then instead you're not really worried as much about the symptom of heartburn, your primary concern is helping that person to deal better with stress and maybe make some different choices. Maybe some herbs, adaptogen herbs are very very good at helping us regulate adrenaline release so that we don't get that stress reaction, that fight-or-flight response quite so readily. And so those are the kinds of things that would make it very different. And I find that harder to do with a total stranger. It's possible, but you have to ask tons of questions and usually they'll say, "I just have a quick question--what do you take for heartburn?"

EH: Uh-huh, yeah.

LH: And there's really not a this for that, to me. It's more of looking at the person and their life holistically.

EH: Right. Do you feel that you're part of a community of herbalists?

LH: I do, and that's really a fairly recent development for me. And I actually work hard to network with other herbalists because I feel like having that community of herbalists, it's like people say "finding your tribe." (laughs) And that's why I will try to go to something, a big gathering of some sort like International Herb Symposium or something every couple of years to reconnect and just be in my village with my tribe for a little bit and know that I'm not this isolated person. But even locally, semi-locally, Andrea Koutras Lay up in Frostburg, Maryland with her shop The Nettle Patch, I like to stay connected with her, I encourage people who come to my classes to check her out and go take her classes because we're all like within an hour of each other. Also Tonic Herb Shop up in Shepherdstown. There's Shenandoah Herb Gathering that will be happening in Shepherdstown the first weekend of June and that is I'm trying to remember--Hillary is the organizer, I'm trying to think of her last name. I'll get it to you! But they have a land trust there that is a pretty big gathering--I think several hundred herbalists come and it's a 2-day event and it's another one of those just really connecting with--they have a lot of classes and a lot of other things. Meals--very healthy meals served there. But I think the biggest thing we get is just not feeling isolated and so doing something like that at least once a year feels very important to me because we went at least a couple decades where I didn't have that at all. I was just reading other herbalist's books who lived way far away. (laughs) And probably had very different practices, especially the ones who lived in cities--doing great work but it was very different from the work that I did and so I do think that that's vitally important. Probably whatever field you're in.

EH: Right! I'm sure. I mean I feel that with folklore.

LH: Absolutely.

EH: And one of the things with talk about with folklore is place-based traditions and obviously herbalism is so based in place but I was wondering if there's something part--or what is particular about being an herbalist in this region? You know, obviously the plants that grow here but are there other things?

28:17

LH: I really think that there are. It's interesting, I would highly, highly recommend, even if you are not interested in herbs at all--Phyllis Light has just published a book called Southern Folk Herbalism. I have it--I'll show it to you. It is the most wonderful, inspiring book. It isn't an herbal in the sense of "here are these herbs, they're good for this or they're good for that." It's stories. And personally I feel like that is a huge part of the Appalachian tradition is storytelling. It is an oral tradition and so she shares about her practice, she shares about her relationship with specific plants. I love her story about American ginseng, about how she first found it as a young girl. And those stories are so central, I think, to this region. And I was really fortunate in that when I was studying with Jeanne Rose, even though she was all the way out in San Francisco, which is an incredible place, I mean, for a botanist or a person who loves nature--year round all the plants! But obviously a very, very different environment. But I was fortunate in that she always reinforced the idea of not using what somebody else uses on the other side of the world, but using what's native to your area and learning about what's right around you and it's season and it's...And so I realized I could have been studying with someone who taught something completely different, "Oh you need to order these herbs from China, or you need to (laughs) use this Ayurvedic herbs" and I'm not against using any of those, but I do feel like an Appalachian herbalist. I love stories, I teach through stories. Another one of my very early teachers, Jeannine Parvati Baker always said herbs are ladies with



roots and tales T-A-L-E-S and every plant that we learned we would learn her tale. It didn't matter if it was raspberry leaf or chickweed or whatever. And I think that that's a wonderful learning device because we don't forget stories! We don't forget the fairy tales we learned as little children. You know they stay with us all our lives and I don't know why that is. But it's absolutely a part of my teaching and it's been a part of my learning and I do not forget the details about plants, if I look at them as a story. So I feel like that's a big thing as an Appalachian herbal tradition. When I meet other herbalists from that mountain range, they all seem to share that. "Oh, yeah definitely!" You know? And "Have you heard this story?" You know (laughs) they have different stories from different regions, but you can tell they're, it's kinda like the different variations of the Cinderella story. It's like, "Oh well the way I heard it was..." (laughs)

EH: Uh-huh, yeah! That's totally folklore.

LH: Yes, yes. I love it.

EH: Cool. Let's see, let me just check. I should head out soon, but so you were talking--you love teaching and you may be working on some publication so could you talk just a little bit about carrying the tradition forward?

31:57

LH: Oh yes. That's really the foundational reason why I teach is I want these traditions to be carried on. And it's the reason that I moved so much away from products and towards self-production, being a producer yourself and teaching others to carry that on. I'm working more and more and more--30 years ago or 25 years ago when I was first doing wild herb walks, I would mostly have people, of course I was younger, but I would have people 20 or 30 years older than me coming to these. And I still have older folks who come to my classes, but I see more and more young people and that is very inspiring to me and they're the ones I want to reach out to. I'm trying to work more with teenagers. A lot of people in their 20s are coming to classes and I think these are the ones that it's very important to inspire and to share the traditions with because they are the ones who are gonna be around to carry it on. And they inspire me. I'm just very inspired by the younger generation that are going back to very basic things. They want to do real things. And they want everything to be transparent, even when I make products. I notice they care about what ingredients went into it, where those ingredients came from. And it means something to them if I have a tea blend that came from my garden or came from a local farm and I know that farmer and I know what their practices are, and that hasn't always been the case, you know? I was talking with my sister herbalist Andrea when we were up at the Nettle Patch just last weekend and I said, Yeah, you know, 20 years ago you could not get anyone to drink a loose tea. I mean no way--if it was not in a tea bag, you could forget it! (laughs) nobody. Everybody's "Oh, I don't have time. I don't have time. I don't have time to pour water over that." You know? (laughs)

EH: Right, right!

LH: And now it's really interesting because everyone wants loose teas and they can see what it is. Like "Oh yeah, that mint leaf!" Like even when it's in their teacup or in their teapot, they like that realness and the transparency that's there. So I so respect that in this younger generation that they want to know where things come from and they want to know what it is and how they can do it themselves and how they can make it or grow it themselves and so that inspires and reenergizes me and makes me feel young again to be part of that and be helping in that.

EH: Cool. Well, is there anything you'd like to add?

LH: Oh let me think. I guess what I would really like to add is I'm very thankful to my teachers and to especially those teachers, I think about them starting in the 1960s and 1970s. These days we have such a plethora of herbal resources and books and online and websites and so many things. But when they started there was like nothing. You know? And I know there was the one book, the Jethro Kloss book, which was considered the herb Bible--the Back to Eden and some of my teachers I know they would go to these really ancient texts. You know, Greek texts and things like that, that were not easy to read and not easy to glean information from. But they were part of this renaissance that now we really benefit from. So even if I didn't get to know each one of these teachers like I have gotten to know Jeanne Rose for example, they created resources that made it possible for me to continue to learn, and many, many others. And they've inspired so many in that little dry spell in there where almost completely had these traditions die out, where we would have lost that information completely. And it was like a little glimmer, a little spark and they kinda kept it alive and rekindled it and so I am most, most thankful to those teachers.

EH: Yeah, I haven't really thought about that. I guess there was a revival. There was a revival of a lot of things at that moment.

LH: Right, right absolutely.

EH: This was one of the more endangered traditions.

LH: Yes, I agree completely. Yeah.

EH: Well this has been so great.

LH: Oh good!

EH: Thank you so much.

LH: Thank you so much, Emily!

EH: This was fun! I'm getting excited about plants!

LH: Let me get--before I forget I want to show you that book.

EH: Yeah, I want to see it.

LH: 'Cause I will forget about it!

37:12

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