

Sandy Mashburn

Where: Coffman's Metals

Date: September 16, 2019

Location: Birch River, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 10:13

For the past 6 years, Sandy Mashburn (b. January 20th, 1954, Albertville, AL) and her husband Tommy Mashburn come to West Virginia for 3 months from August-October to hunt “root,” including ginseng, may apple, yellow root, and black cohosh. They sell the foraged root and other plant parts to Tony Coffman at Coffman’s Metals in Birch River, West Virginia. In this short interview, Sandy speaks about how they first started coming to West Virginia, her husband’s digging hobby, how the price of ginseng has changed, and more.

This interview and other materials were collected in collaboration with the Smithsonian Folklife Festivals 2020 festival program on American ginseng. Learn more: <https://festival.si.edu/blog/west-virginia-ginseng-trade>

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EH: Emily Hilliard

SM: Sandy Mashburn

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EH: ...that on tape. Okay, why don't you tell me your name and where you're from and when you were born.

SM: Okay, my name is Sandy Mashburn. I'm from Albertville, Alabama. I was born January 30th 1954. My husband Tommy is the root hunter and I'm the one that takes care of it, I'm the one that washes it and dries it and brings it up to Tony Coffman's to sell.

EH: So how long have you been coming up to West Virginia?

SM: This is our 6th year, but he's been hunting root all his life, ever since he was a little boy. You know, we have the receipt that you saw in 2003 where he sold 21 lbs. dry, so that's a lot. But we've been coming up here 6 years and I just fell in love with West Virginia actually and the people here. Tommy says it's just like Gatlinburg minus the people.

EH: (laughs)

SM: (laughs) He loves it, he loves it!

EH: And so what brought you from Alabama to West Virginia?

SM: Well we actually Tommy had already retired--was watching television, saw the Appalachian Outlaws and saw Tony Coffman and his phone number. He called him. He said take off--I took off a couple of days at work--I'm a banker, I was a banker. And we're gonna ride up there and see Tony. We took one weekend come up here and Tony Coffman rode us around everywhere showing us good places to hunt here and became a really good friend. So these guys are good friends even though now we're staying in Mossy which is like 60 miles away, we still come to Tony's because he's our friend, you know. And Jennifer and Jody and all them.

EH: Where do you stay in Mossy?

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SM: They call it the Baseball Diamond. They call it the Baseball Diamond. It's right past the Chevron in Mossy, you go straight down that road and toward the mine and it's out there on the left. The Baseball Diamond. We stay in a camper out there.

EH: You said you have, you hunt on the hunting camp?

SM: We actually buy a permit, it's a hunting permit on 10,000 acres there in Mossy. We were until this year, buying 2 permits. One at Mossy, one in Morris Creek, but this one 10,000 acres will be all he can dig for a while.

EH: And that's a hunting club that owns it?

SM: Yes.

EH: Okay.

SM: It's a hunting club and of course they sell permits. They're \$200 a year and it covers 10,000 acres, so that's, since he hasn't hunting any there and better, that's what he hunts is the wild roots.

EH: So tell me about the roots that you hunt and what you do with them?

SM: Well, have may apple, yellow root--tops from the yellow root, ginseng, we have hunted black cohosh. We hunt just about anything that sells.

EH: Did you have some of that? Did you know the plants in the woods or was that mostly your husband who had that [knowledge]?

SM: It is mostly him. I've learned, you know, just to kind of spot 'em, but it's mostly him. He can be walking out through a field or the woods somewhere and just look and see. And of course the ginseng, you can spot it by the red berries on it, you know, but he can. And then when the leaves start turning yellow it actually becomes easier to find but once it starts--ginseng season only goes actually until the first frost, or when the leaves die and you can't find it, so they don't buy it forever. Yellow root there's no beginning or ending to that season so we actually come up in August and start hunting yellow root and he sorta gets acclimated because he had, he used to didn't have a buggy or a Honda side-by-side but he had a pedometer and he was walking anywhere from 12-13 miles a day. And the difference is, it's straight up. So he's very acclimated to these mountains and heights. He can, you wouldn't think he's his age cause he can go anywhere.

EH: Probably all that walking!

SM: Yeah! I mean he's very fit. He can go anywhere.

EH: And you were telling me that you, or he takes some ginseng and yellow root. Can you tell me about that?

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SM: Well, the ginseng, the ones that we don't sell, which are just a little smaller ones, he actually takes it and he will just, you know he washes it of course and he keeps it in the refrigerator and he will just take a little piece off of it and chew it up 2 or 3 times a week and it gives you energy, and he don't have to take any medicine. I mean they just, they can't believe it every time he goes to the doctor that he doesn't have to take anything. You don't need anything, it's not sick, don't have any health issues. Yep. And he takes the yellow root sometimes for stomach issues and stuff like that, but he don't do any real medicine. He don't do any chemical medicine or anything like that. Just what's out in the woods and stuff like that.

EH: That's incredible. And it was tornadoes that sort of wrecked...

SM: ...April 27, 2011, there was 252 tornadoes hit across the nation and Alabama was really torn up. And the woods and parks and things where he went mostly all the trees are just laying over now. And you can't get through! You know, you have to dig, I mean, to dig a big root up like you saw a while ago, you have to do some deep diggin' but you can't do it in trees piled up on top of 'em you know? So we saw Tony and actually both of us were--a little extra money--we were both driving escort for some guys we know that

haul mobile homes and when he came up here and saw all these woods and stuff, and seen Tony Coffman's number, he knew that's where he wanted to come and hunt ginseng and so... yeah.

EH: So you're both retired right? But does this cover sort of other expenses?

SM: Heck yeah! We have you know, just like 2003 we bought that tractor. I mean, it costs when you're living off the grid, everybody knows that. To run a generator 24 hours a day, it's a bunch. So we use a lot of gas, a lot of propane and stuff like that. Of course we cover those expenses and we end up having more and stuff. Which he loves it so much. That's his favorite hobby is hunting roots of some kind.

EH: And how has the price changed over the years?

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SM: Well, like you saw in 2003, it was \$280 and that was dry. And we have sold it up here for as much as--now this is dry--we have sold it for as much up here for \$700-800-900 a pound and different things, dry. But then because it's sold to China, the market fluctuates and people will sell a bunch and kind of flood the market and then it drops and now that it's down, kinda, well it is down. And now then it's \$500 dry. But we sell ours wet 'cause it dries about 3:1. In other words, what I've got in there, if it dried, it would be about one third of what it is now. So just sell it wet and I think he has Korean markets that buy it wet and stuff so that really helps, you know, cause we had talked about that--what if it, what if the price goes way down? Should we go back to Alabama? Or what else, you know but we'll have these other we're selling right now. You know last week you know, 16 lbs. of dry, which is \$50 a pound, you know that's \$800 right there. So you can sell a lot of other things but it just happens to be a hobby that he loves a whole bunch and we love West Virginia. I mean West Virginia, next to Alabama, West Virginia's the best. We love it. Are you from here?

EH: I'm not from here, but I've living here for about 4 years.

SM: Oh, okay. Where you from?

EH: I grew up in Indiana.

SM: Oh, heck!

EH: Yeah. (laughs)

SM: Used to work with a girl that was from Indiana.

EH: Really?

SM: At the bank, yeah. A Hoosier!

EH: Yep! Well is there anything else you want to share?

SM: Well no, that we just love this place and this life. And a lot of people, like I said, my husband is the oldest of 11 children and I'm an only child and a lot of people just couldn't believe that I, a banker, after all these years, just up and quit one day, said Friday's my last day. We're gonna do his bucket list and we just quit and came and we've been coming every year since. But see at home we farm big. We have--my grandson takes care of the farm when we're gone--but like we have cattle, we have horses, we did raise deer, but now we have one pet deer--his name is Norman. But we have peacocks, chickens, goats, horses,

cows, you know, so we raise everything at home. And usually raise and kill our own hogs and stuff like that. But yeah.

EH: Do you bring a lot of that meat up too when you come so you can just...

SM: Well we have, up until this year we didn't have any we had just killed, but up until this year, we actually bring our friends. We've met several friends here and we bring them fresh hogs, you know and stuff like that, fresh sausage. But yeah, we like that kind of stuff. We pretty much you know, we're country. We're like what that old gal says "We was country when country wasn't cool!"

EH: (laughs)

SM: (laughs) You know! And we'll always be. But you know, the good Lord has blessed us and we love this life, and you know, sometimes it's like you know, sometimes people just love this life!

EH: Yeah, right!

SM: And sometimes other people can't believe you love this life but you do! Like our family, you know, they're like "Oh my gosh, why are you going to stay 3 months?" And we, well we've done it 6 times now. So as long as he's able we'll keep doing it. And as long as Tony's buying we'll keep coming here.

EH: Great.

SM: 'Cause you know, we're pretty loyal.

EH: Thanks so much!

SM: Thank you ma'am! And I'll be looking for you.

EH: Yeah!

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