

# Food and Farming and Community Impact

Prior to the 1940s, most families were fairly self-sufficient; coffee and salt were typically the only food items purchased. Some landowners had sawmills to mill their own lumber, geese were kept for utilizing their feathers for featherbeds and the wool of sheep was used to make clothing and bedding. Today crops are often measured in terms of market value, however, many crops were originally grown for self-sufficiency and barter.

Wildcrafting, or as it was locally known 'gathering of herbs', is a mountain tradition involving collection of many indigenous plants for use as food, medicine or crafts. Ramps, ginseng, sassafras, cherry bark, may apple, boiled root and blackberry root were collected in Big Sandy Mush. Bert Abrams recalls a community member “trading” with Carl Ball when he would come around with his rolling store. However, looking for 'sang and ramps was more than just about the product, it was and continues to be about sharing the experience. People reminisce, “do you remember when we hiked with so and so to his ramp patch on the mountain?” When someone invites you to gather ramps or 'sang with them, a bond is made.

Much of the food and farming culture was community-oriented; events were organized around farming projects that needed many hands such as corn shucking, barn raising, wheat threshing and molasses making. Oral history shares that at a corn shucking, a couple of quarts of moonshine were often put at the bottom of the pile; in later years, it was a case or two of colas that you found when you made it to the bottom of the corn pile.

Corn was a widely-grown crop, both for human grain consumption and livestock fodder. A more discreet use of corn as a cash crop was for moonshine. There were several still sites hidden in the mountains, and oral history notes that it was a lucrative endeavor for those who did not get caught.



North Carolina Collection, Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville, North Carolina  
Leona King with Spinning Wheel 1923

In the early 20th century chestnut and chestnut oak tan bark were sold for supplemental income; in the 1950s pulp wood in five-foot logs sold for \$10-\$12 per cord. In various instances, standing timber and a small amount of sawmill lumber have been sold to buyers.

Ramps, molasses and honey have become favorites of the “foodie” culture. They currently provide supplemental income to some in the community; although previously, they were mostly for personal consumption. A popular expression used in the valley up until the first half of the 20th century was, “up a gum stump,” which meant you were in a tough predicament. This saying was based upon someone climbing up a black gum tree and upsetting the bees.

Today, sources of farm income in Big Sandy Mush are beef and dairy cattle, sheep, Christmas trees, vegetables, cut flowers, herbs, nursery plants, honey and limited agritourism and forestry. Farmers must continually reassess markets and diversify to strengthen their economic viability. What crops and livestock will you see on area farms in the future? What community resources and infrastructure will be needed?

From the 1890s through the 1920s, tobacco grown in Big Sandy Mush was flue-cured. By the 1930s, farmers had switched to burley tobacco, and they needed barns. Older barns were used for livestock, mostly for horses, with hay stored in the loft. Thus, many barns in the community were built in the latter half of the 20th century. Tobacco was principally grown as a cash crop. A “cash crop” is grown to direct sell in a market rather than for livestock feed or personal use. The federal tobacco price support and quota program ended in 2004, deregulating U.S. tobacco production and providing compensation to quota owners and tobacco farmers over a ten-year period. Known as the Federal Buyout Program, it incentivized most farmers in the area to stop growing tobacco.

Milk also provided income for farmers. Until 1950, most local dairies sold Grade C milk. After 1950, most began selling the more lucrative Grade A milk. In the 1980s, there were seven active dairies in Big Sandy Mush; as of 2016, there is only one. Until the 1970s, many families kept a milk cow for personal use, enjoying fresh butter, cream and milk.

Beef cattle have been a mainstay of farm livestock from the early days of this community, and became a substantial income for farmers in the late 1800s. Originally cows were “driven” to the stockmarket via Drover's Rd. Then in the 1940s-60s, cows were weighed on local scales at either the Waldrop Place or Scale Hill, and cow brokers would buy directly from the farmer and then transport the livestock. Through the early 20th century, sheep were also common on farms. People raised sheep, spun the wool and wove it on a loom, making garments for their personal use. They would also sell wool bales at the Asheville market until the wool business collapsed at the end of WWII.



North Carolina Collection, Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville, North Carolina  
Molasses Making with Clyde Duckett & Minerva Clark Sproule - 1923



Photograph Courtesy of Mabel Duckett Collection  
Theron Tweed on Sled with C. Duckett's Tobacco Patch in Background 1951