

## **Ginseng Trade** <sup>[1]</sup>

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by Ansley Wegner, Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History, 2013

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Ginseng is a hardy perennial that proliferates along the biodiverse forest floors in the Appalachian Mountains. The root of the ginseng plant was so highly prized in China for its medicinal uses that it was collected in Asia almost to extinction. When it was discovered that the American variety of ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*) had similar properties, the ginseng trade between Appalachia and China began. The Empress of China, sailed from New York to China, laden with 3,300 pounds of ginseng, left the states in 1784. During the nineteenth century, over 95% of the wild ginseng harvested in the United States was exported to China and the Far East. Today the percentage of exported product remains very high.

Virginia surveyor and diarist William Byrd was a lifelong proponent of the benefits of ginseng. He promoted its medicinal use to the Royal Society of Great Britain in the early 1700s, calling it the “king of plants.” His account of running the dividing line between Virginia and North Carolina contains a passage about ginseng and the plant’s relative rarity. Naturalist William Bartram recorded the Cherokee Indians’ veneration of ginseng in the 1790s. Ironically Bartram noted that the Cherokee emphasized that gatherers of ginseng should not be greedy—they should take no more than one root in four and should leave behind a seed.

All walks of mountain dwellers searched the forests for ginseng, which earned the nickname “green gold.” Taking a gun and a bag into the wilderness, one could hunt game and gather ginseng on the same excursion—looking up for a while, and then down. Both woman and men could collect the plant to supplement the family’s income. In the nineteenth century collectors would take ginseng to a “factory” to sell it. There the roots were cleaned and dried and stored until they were ready to be exported to China.

Western North Carolina was a part of this global ginseng trade. Watauga County had many citizens who were ginseng hunters in the nineteenth century. Most well-known was Bacchus Smith, who collected ginseng from the local mountains and dried out the root in a barn near modern Vilas. Betsy Calloway from Foscoe, “dug many a pound of ‘sang with a child strapped to her back” during the mid to late nineteenth century. She would harvest the ginseng and sell it to regional dealers in Abingdon, Virginia, and Blountville, Tennessee, for ten cents a pound.

There is even evidence of wild simulated ginseng agriculture in early Watauga County. Wild simulated ginseng is produced when a farmer plants ginseng in an area that matches the microenvironment of wild ginseng and takes a relatively laissez-faire approach to the root once it is planted. It often takes years before the grower can expect to see a return on the ginseng. The largest historic example of wild simulated ginseng agriculture in Watauga County was near Sugar Grove, where a quarter of an acre of ginseng was cultivated. Many residents would nurture a small patch of ginseng in a shady corner of their property.

In 1900 Grant Wilcox opened Wilcox Drug Company in Boone. His family had been involved in the ginseng trade for years and he had hunted the root as a child. Later, working for his father-in-law, Wilcox bought herbs and roots and prepared them for shipment. He continued to act as a middleman in the ginseng trade until he opened his shop in Boone. Then he began to buy from families and country stores in Watauga and surrounding counties, often trading merchandise for the herbs and roots. In 1976, Butch Wilcox, the third generation proprietor, told a reporter that the business was “the largest American buyer of botanicals . . . (buying) about four to six million pounds of botanicals a year, a couple of hundred items from thirty-eight states.”

Wilcox Drug merged with a similar company and became Wilcox Natural Products. In 1982 it was purchased by the Swiss firm Zuellig Group. Wilcox Natural Products closed in 2000.

Ginseng, still immensely popular, has diminished in the wild due to over-collection. The North Carolina mountains remain a significant source for the root, but its collection is strictly regulated.

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Report on North Carolina non-timber forest products <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/fletcher/programs/herbs/pdf/ntfpfinal17.pdf> <sup>[4]</sup>

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