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Heirloom Seed & Story Keepers: Growing Community & Sustainability through Arts-Based Research

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Introduction

In a small community known locally as Yahooola (which the locals instruct is properly pronounced “yay-hooluh,” not “yuhhooluh”) Robert “Pop” and Elizabeth Grindle practice much of the lifestyle exemplified by their ancestors, one that was defined by relative self-sufficiency. Any food they eat is produce from their own garden, grown using heirloom seeds passed down through the Grindle family tree since the 1800s. Any leftover vegetables are canned in their own cannery on their property. To the Grindles, it is important to sustain “knowledge and appreciation of Appalachian culture and the value it brings” (R. Grindle and E. Grindle, personal communication, October 23, 2012). The Grindles represent a union between present and past necessary for a sustainable future. They have chosen to embrace a lifestyle that some may consider outdated, but bolsters independence and sustainability.

In August 2012, students in the Introduction to Appalachian Studies course at the University of North Georgia began to examine these lifestyles and their impact on the local food system. Their journey would spill the bounds of curriculum and guide these students into the hills, gardens, and living rooms of a small north Georgia county. With the support of the Appalachian Regional Commission’s Appalachian Teaching Project, they engaged in a pilot research project in a unique sub-methodology of qualitative research known as *arts-based research*. Merging several academic disciplines including biology, sociology, and art, the students created an art piece called a communograph (Figure 1). It tells a story of the development of community and sustainability through the visualization of local values and foodways.



Figure 1. Communograph

Background

We performed our research exclusively within the confines of Lumpkin County, Georgia. The site of the first major gold rush in the United States, Lumpkin County is a place of picturesque natural beauty and quaint mountain culture. At the heart lies Dahlonega, a town in which the lines of past and present blur. The historic square consists of modern businesses housed by buildings that at one time were general stores, car dealerships, pharmacies, or any number of historic institutions. Every year, visitors from Atlanta and other parts of Georgia journey to Dahlonega to partake in festivals that celebrate arts, local history, and mountain culture. These festivals are outward expressions of a unique heritage and culture, treasured by many.

This heritage is endangered by modern American trends toward commercialism and urbanization. The past 30 years have seen a massive expansion of the Lumpkin County economy and population. Connected by freeway to metropolitan Atlanta just 60 miles to the south, Lumpkin County has opened to urban influence. Between 1980 and 2010, the population nearly tripled (Forstall, 1995). In the last ten years alone, 85 % of the population shift is attributed to people moving into Lumpkin from elsewhere (Lumpkin County Government, 2009).

This migration brings with it commercialization in the form of grocery stores and fast food and a decreased need for farming and gardening. According to the Lumpkin County Government's website (2009), "farming is becoming less of an occupation and more of a hobby for those living in our rural areas today" (Profile of the County section, para. 3).

Due to the declining nature of this lifestyle, the students decided to examine the current state of heirloom seed gardening in Lumpkin County today, with the understanding that the findings could carry implications for the state of Appalachian traditions throughout the region. This project afforded several students the opportunity to break those social barriers and work together with each other and locals to attempt to understand life in Lumpkin County. This is not to say that Lumpkin County is necessarily representative, but only that it may follow trends that are present throughout Appalachia.

Heirloom gardening

The subjective nature of heirloom gardening makes it difficult to define. For the project, we used Virginia Nazarea's definition: seeds that have been passed down by families and neighbors for more than 50 years and have never been bought or sold (Nazarea, 2005). Heirloom seeds are open-pollinating and true-breeding. This means that, unlike commercial or hybrid seeds, they are "propagated by natural pollination" (Bodenstab, "The Seed Goes On," para. 6), and every year their seeds can be saved and replanted. Commercial or hybrid seeds, if not sterile, often do not produce offspring reflective of the parent. If the original traits are desired, seeds must be purchased every season. This is not necessary for heirloom seeds, making them the more economic alternative.

Food autonomy is another benefit of heirloom gardening. Seed saving puts control of the seed supply in the hands of individuals instead of large agricultural companies. This allows the

gardener to manage the seed quality and select for regional adaptations (Bailey, 2012, p. 38-39). Additionally, heirloom seeds have cultural value as family emblems carefully cultivated, saved, and passed down through generations. Bauer and Goland (2004) observed these benefits on a community level:

Local markets thus give growers the freedom to select the varieties they produce, based on their own valuation of these varieties, rather than those dictated by the commercial market. In essence, we can look at local markets as refuges for the old varieties; in the absence of local markets, many of the older varieties would no longer be grown. (p. 234)

However, the most crucial benefit of heirloom gardening is its contribution to the preservation of genetic diversity. In this manner, heirloom gardening is invariably linked with sustainability. In 1987, The World Commission on Environment and Development brought the concept of sustainable development to the world stage, positing that humanity should meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations 1987, para. 27). The shift from subsistence to commercial agriculture, centered on the expediency of monoculture, is a prevailing threat to genetic variety in the world’s traditional food sources (Visser, Engels, Rao, Dempewolf, & Wouw 2010). Genetic variation is crucial to agricultural sustainability, because genetic erosion leaves agricultural operations especially vulnerable to disease. This truth was observed in 1970 when a rampant fungus wiped out half of the corn supply in the American South (Rhoades, 1991). The importance of stable, sustainable food sources is stressed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): “...with an expectation of a world population of nine billion by 2050, countries must make greater efforts to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the plant genetic resources for food and agriculture” (Visser et. al. 2010, p. iii). This monoculture-based trend in agriculture threatens the viability of our food sources.

The reversal of this genetic erosion is impeded by a prevailing myopic preference for efficiency and high yield that overshadows the benefits of more gradual, sustainable efforts. Michael Carolan speaks of the epistemically distant (less obvious) benefits of sustainable food production (e.g. improved soil health) versus the epistemically near (more obvious) benefits of commercial food production (e.g. high yield). These clear benefits of commercial food production obscure the furtive costs, such as environmental degradation due to synthetic pesticide use. Amplifying these hindrances are two polar views that Carolan presents: technological rationality and cultural rationality (Krimsky and Plough 1987). Technological rationality works on the conventional model of agriculture that deemphasizes epistemically distant risks. The immediate benefit and distant cost characteristic of conventional farming is problematic. It propagates a nearsightedness that is contributing to loss of genetic diversity, family farms, and community ties. Cultural rationality, however, relies on community cooperation and understanding in agricultural practices (Carolan 2006).

Biodiversity is just one of many natural resources abundant in Appalachia. However, like fossil fuels and forests, human progression is threatening its repositories. While heirloom gardening is a cornerstone of Appalachian culture, the tradition wanes as the number of participants dwindles (Veteto 2008).

By applying these concepts to Lumpkin County, Georgia, the Georgia Appalachian Studies Center began to address this issue. In 2012 Rosann Kent, the director of the Georgia Appalachian Studies Center at the University of North Georgia, received a grant from the Appalachian Teaching Project to facilitate community-based research about issues of sustainability in Appalachia. This support allowed the Center to address the global problem of genetic erosion on a local level by beginning to apprehend and affect the status of sustainable food production within the community. The specific research question was, “How can we provide students and community members with reciprocal opportunities to engage in the local food system through cultural literacy?”

Methods

Instead of working against the perceptual disparities between the university and the local culture, Kent developed a methodology that maximized utilization of their respective strengths. This project was designed to connect students with local citizens in an effort to preserve Appalachian heirloom seeds and traditions in Lumpkin County. Students established personal relationships with local gardeners through interviews. The intention of these interviews was to connect students with gardeners in each of the 14 militia districts in Lumpkin County, so as to gain a fuller understanding of the tradition within the county. The interviews sought to address three sub-questions:

- 1) How has heirloom seed gardening contributed to the development of community in Lumpkin County?
- 2) What is the current state of the tradition?
- 3) What implications does it have for the sustainable future of the county, state, and region?

Students then reviewed and analyzed their interviews, identifying trends and connections within the community.

To help students analyze the data collected, Kent worked with the Appalachian Teaching Fellow, Associate Professor of Art Education Dr. Chris Dockery, MFA, Ph.D., in developing a research method. The method was to analyze data with the use of an art piece that could communicate trends and foodways. Foodways are the means by which a community acquires its food. The art, aptly christened a communograph because of its literal purpose as a graphic representation of community, not only reflected, but also directed, the gathering of data and the drawing of conclusions. The basic layer of the communograph was a map of Lumpkin County militia districts. These divisions date back to the Antebellum Period and today still serve the locals as geographic identifiers for different areas of the county (Figure 2).

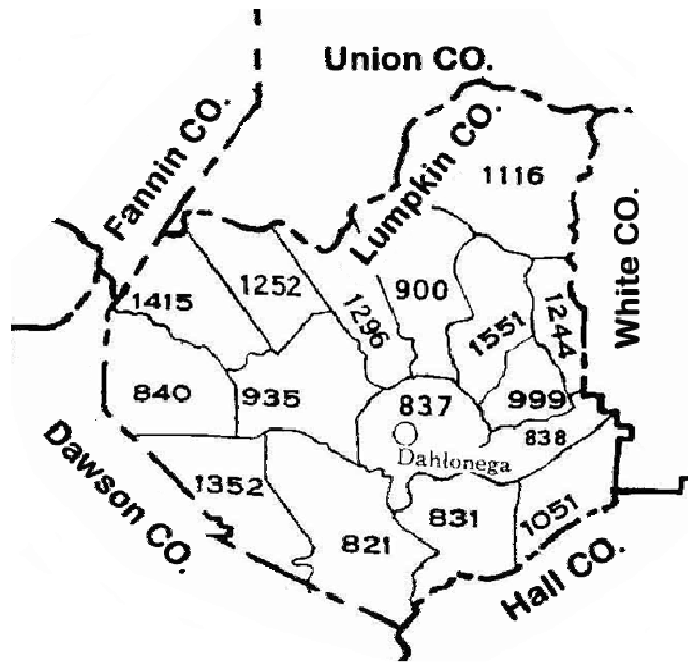


Figure 2. Militia Districts of Lumpkin County, GA

As students engaged in the interview process, they would incorporate interview content into the communograph, which would then guide them in apprehending trends and community connections displayed in the collected data. Thus, the process of creating the communograph was ongoing. It mapped where gardening was practiced and which militia districts were still in need of research attention. This unique method of data analysis classifies this project in a unique sub-methodology of qualitative research known as *arts-based research*, research in which scholarly understanding is rooted in the creation of an art piece.

An important preliminary step was establishing legitimacy within the community. The University of North Georgia's Biology department houses a seed bank containing a diverse reservoir of heirloom seeds overseen by Professor Karrie Ann Fadroski. These seeds have been collected over the past five years from various seed swaps and community members. The purpose of the bank is not only to protect and preserve the precious heirloom varieties, but also to disseminate them. The latter function is important to sustainability, because "while preserving this genetic material is vital, its isolation from the functioning ecosystems in which it adapts and evolves is none the less problematic" (Goland and Bauer, 2004, p. 228). The students of the Intro to Appalachian Studies course partnered with the Dahlonega Farmer's Market to set up a booth to swap seeds from the bank and share information about the research project with farmer's market attendees. This was the students' first exchange with local gardeners, and it helped locals acknowledge the project's objective to engage the students directly in the community.

The next step of the project was to expand on these student-community relationships through personal interviews. Pairing up with local tradition bearers, the students were immersed in the culture of heirloom gardening. Utilizing the snowball sampling method, the professors recruited locals who were tied to the Appalachian Studies Center who knew others in the community who practiced heirloom gardening. The professors then connected these individuals, termed Gatekeepers, directly to the students (Figure 3). The Gatekeepers then introduced

students to Seedkeepers, locals who met three requirements: 1) their families have lived in Lumpkin County for multiple generations; 2) they practice heirloom gardening; and 3) are willing to share their seeds and stories. Students then interviewed the Seedkeepers to learn about their gardens, traditions, and seeds.

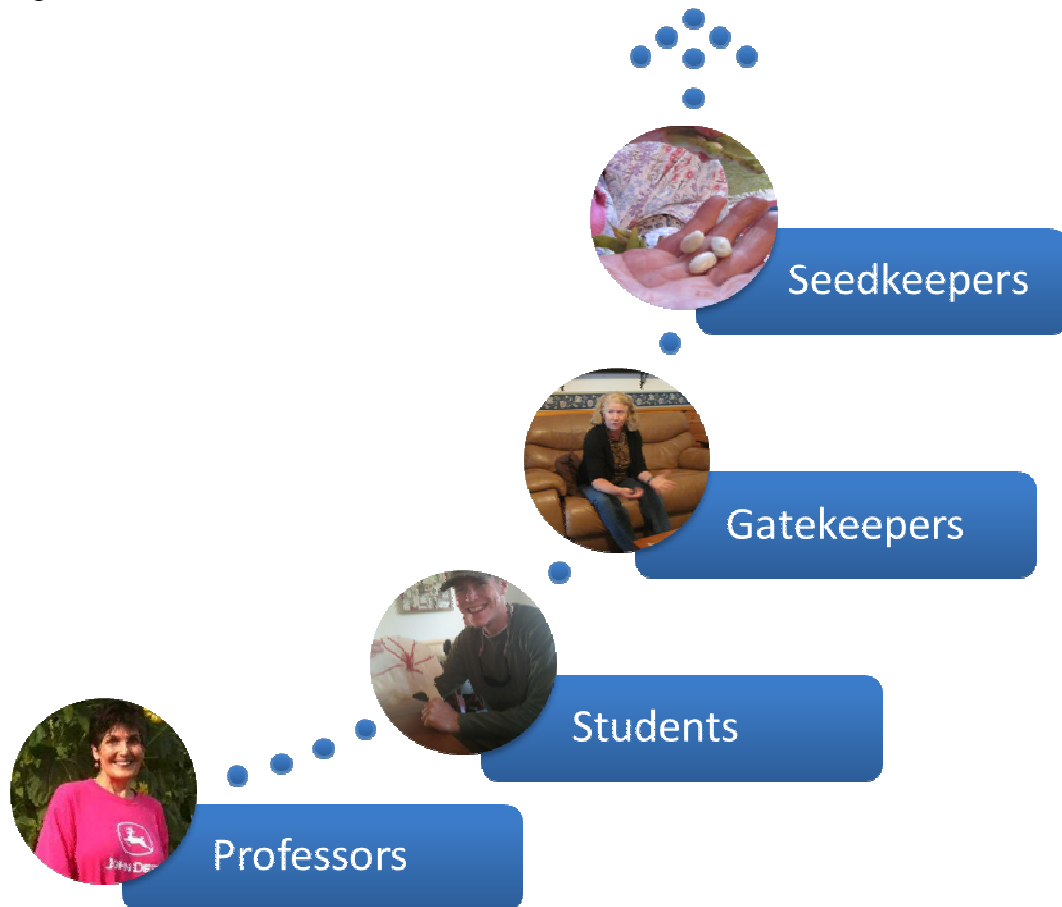


Figure 3. Process

The welcoming attitudes of the Seedkeepers made the interviews friendly visits. While documenting the interviews with audio recording devices and photographs, students often received personal tours of the homes and gardens, allowing access to knowledge of traditions beyond heirloom gardening. As students collected the stories and traditions over the course of the semester, they visually diagrammed their findings. Quotes and photographs from the interviews were then collectively analyzed to highlight common motifs.

Throughout the interview process, the communograph, formerly a blank sheet of canvas with a map of Lumpkin County drawn onto it, slowly transformed into art. Acrylic photo transfer was used to imprint images of the Seedkeepers and the students, as well as seeds and vegetables collected in the interviews. Students added quotations that exemplified the trends and traditions they observed and added a finishing layer of yellow-tinted matte medium to generate an aged look. Lines that had been initially traced to visualize personal connections were then stitched with red thread using a back-stitch method, highlighting the symbolic community relationships. The same thread was used to blanket-stitch the borders. The resulting communograph was

displayed along with a presentation of the research at the 2012 Appalachian Teaching Project Conference in Washington, D.C. It has since traveled to the 2013 Appalachian Studies Conference in Boone, North Carolina, as well as embarked upon a tour of Lumpkin County.

Results

In Lumpkin County, as in much of Appalachia, society was initially shaped by the difficulty of survival, largely due to the relative isolation of the region. Here, fates are inextricably woven with the land and fellow people, which begat a culture grounded in effective use of resources and reliance upon human interdependence. Several of our interviewees mentioned having seeds that had been in their family or in the county for several generations. Harold Southern, who has lived and gardened in Nimblewill for 50 years, plants Corn Field Beans that are over 100 years old, which he had received from the Woody family near Suches, Georgia. Skippy Edwards, upon inquiry about where his family had first received their seeds, remembered: “We went to the Co-Op a lot of the time, and there were some that would give us some seeds” (personal communication, September 20, 2012). Carol Meeks, whose family has lived in Lumpkin County for seven generations, indicated reliance upon a reciprocal food sharing.

What you always did was [with] your neighbors or your family...you just went and got food, whatever they had. It’s still a lot that way today...what’s done commonly around here is if you see somebody’s garden that has an over-abundance and you’re wanting some green beans that day or you’re going to can some...then you knock on the door and say “Can I get some green beans?” (personal communication, October 16, 2012)

Our Seedkeepers also indicated that this subculture is one grounded in self-autonomy. Many of our Seedkeepers were people who would not starve if they decided to forego gardening for a year. They did not depend on it for survival, but rather because it is traditional. During an interview with Billy Brooksher, he remarked: “It makes a difference to know who’s been handling your food...my wife’s family pretty much lived on it up until just a few years back” (personal communication, September 20, 2012). He then mentioned that their chosen lifestyle was never a financial necessity, but that they gardened simply because “it was just the way they were brought up” (B. Brooksher). Archie Gilreath, when asked why he practices heirloom seed gardening, responded: “They seem to be a better taste, and they out-produce the seeds you get on the market today...some of the market seeds only yield one good harvest before you have to buy more seed” (personal communication, October 18, 2012).

Possibly the most significant trend in heirloom gardening is that it seems to be a dying tradition. Skippy Edwards remarked during his interview that “older seeds seem like they’re getting scarcer than they used to be” (personal communication, September 20, 2012). It was intended that during the course of the research, students would identify and interview at least one person who practices heirloom gardening from each one of the 14 militia districts. At the conclusion of the project, however, researchers were only able to reach gardeners in seven of the militia districts. This was not a result of a lack of effort on the part of the interviewers, but rather

a scarcity of gardeners. Several times students gained contacts that promised to lead to a gardener, only to find that the person had stopped gardening many years before.

Carol Meeks observed that this reduction in the number of gardens could be a byproduct of the convenience of corporate grocery stores. “Fresh local produce is not a big part of my diet. It was in the past, until Wal-Mart came. It’s the same for many people in Lumpkin County” (personal communication, October 16, 2012). Archie Gilreath said that “north Georgia in the last twenty-five to thirty years has come out of the past and into the newer days” (personal communication, October 18, 2012). When asked about the state of old-timey traditions in Appalachia, he observed: “Some of us still live the old-timey way, but we live in modern houses and use modern tractors” (A. Gilreath). The influx of “modernity” and commercialization seems to pose a serious threat to this Appalachian tradition.

The Grindles recognize the superior quality of heirloom seeds. Pop Grindle said in regards to some commercial seeds that he had bought that they “blossomed pretty but did not produce no food” (R. Grindle and E. Grindle, personal communication, October 23 2012). They preserve all of their own food; crops grown in the spring and summer sustain them through the winter. But the Grindles preserve more than just vegetables. They realize that they must instill in their grandchildren the value of fresh, homegrown produce and self-reliance. So far, it seems they are successful. Elizabeth proudly claims “our grandchildren love the green beans so much they would eat them for breakfast” (R. Grindle and E. Grindle).

In conclusion, heirloom seed gardening has played a major role in building connections and community in Lumpkin County, Georgia. Trading of heirloom seeds, for many generations, represented a significant form of community interaction and subsistence. As the years passed, urban sprawl crept ever closer to Lumpkin County, and the emphasis on convenience and commercialism began to infringe upon time-honored Appalachian traditions and the autonomy they represented. Unless something is done, the future of this vital Appalachian tradition seems grim. The migration of “mover-inners” will not cease in the near future, nor are we saying that it should. The fact remains, however, that the beginnings of the rise of modernism and commercialization correlates with the ease of access to Atlanta and the early migration that began in the early 1980s. If we are to save this tradition and others like it, it will require a sense of solidarity between the “been-here’s” (individuals that claim a prolonged multi-generational membership and the local community) and the “come-here’s” (people who have moved to Lumpkin County during their own lifetime) and between student groups and heirloom gardeners. A collaborative effort to raise awareness about this beneficial tradition can maintain a unique cultural heritage. Through a revitalization of autonomous foodways, we can build toward a more sustainable future. We can work with families like the Grindles to ensure that future generations are able to continue to enjoy the heritage of southern Appalachia, as well as maintain the genetic diversity provided by heirloom seeds.



Figure 4. Communograph. Shapes of the militia district were stitched together. Images and quotes from interviews were layered over the map. Finally, connections between Gatekeepers and Seedkeepers were stitched.

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