GINSENG: A PIONEER RESOURCE

A. W. Schorger

Father Jartoux (1810), while in China, was ordered by the Emperor to prepare a map of Tartary. He was at a village in the latter country, when the natives brought him four ginseng plants which they had collected in the mountains. A letter from him, dated Peking, April 12, 1711, and published in Paris in 1713, described the plant and its medicinal properties. He thought that the plant would be found in other countries, particularly Canada. The Jesuit missionary Laflatau (1718), stationed at the mission of Sault St. Louis, chanced to read the letter and began, with the aid of the Indians, a search for the plant which resulted in its discovery near Montreal in 1716. Two years later he published a monograph on ginseng in Canada. The new edition of the book contains considerable information on the commercial history of ginseng in Canada.

The Chinese have long considered ginseng to be a sovereign remedy, and placed special emphasis on its virtue as an aphrodisiac. Kalm (1772), stated that the French used it for asthma, stomach disorders, and promoting fertility in women. Medical science has been unable to confirm any of the claimed physiological results.

The discovery of ginseng (Panax quinquefolium) in Canada was likened to that of gold in California and Australia. The root was very profitable to the small traders since a pound costing 2 francs in Quebec, sold as high as 25 francs in Canton. In one year there was sent to China ginseng valued at 500,000 francs. In 1751, owing to the great profit to be realized, the Compagnie des Indies monopolized the ginseng trade. The price paid in Canada ultimately rose to 80 francs (Garneau, 1882). This was a sufficient incentive to send everybody into the woods, and ginseng was collected out of season and regardless of age. In addition it was dried in ovens, further lowering the quality. The product was unacceptable to the Chinese, so that the Canadian trade decreased sharply by 1754, in which year the exports dropped to 33,000 francs.

Kalm (1772), was in Quebec in August, 1749. He states that at Quebec, in the summer of 1748, ginseng sold at six francs a pound,
though the usual price was five francs. The demand for ginseng was so great that all the Indians near Montreal were searching for the root so that the farmers could not hire, as usual, a single Indian to assist in harvesting their crops.

The furcated root (Fig. 1) is in the greatest demand owing to the fancied resemblance to the thighs of a man. The value of the root, in the eyes of the Chinese, is enhanced by being rendered semitransparent by steaming, sometimes in the presence of sugar. The root should be five to seven years of age, and should not be dug until the latter part of August and preferably in September and October. Indiscriminate collecting has eradicated the plant from much of its range which is largely east of the Mississippi. Several states have passed protective laws. Wisconsin (1905) passed a law prohibiting the digging of wild ginseng between January 1 and August 1, or dealing in green ginseng between these
dates. In 1923 the owner of the land was excepted from the restrictions. The roots when dug should be washed thoroughly, and dried carefully at a moderate temperature to prevent molding. About two-thirds of the weight is lost in drying.

The fame of ginseng spread from Canada to New England, New York, and westward. The first settlers of Vermont found the plant in abundance. For a long time ginseng was purchased by most of the retail dealers in the state, the roots in the “crude state” bringing 34 cents a pound (Thompson, 1853). It was supposedly discovered in western New England in 1750 (Williams, 1809). Rev. Jonathan Edwards, in 1752, wrote to a friend in Scotland that ginseng had been discovered at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the year previous (Speer, 1870). The Albany traders were eager buyers of the article for export to England. The discovery had a demoralizing effect on the Indians. Young and old ranged far and wide to collect it. This kept them from public worship, and when in Albany to sell the product, they were subjected to various vices. In 1773, the Hingham, sailed from Boston to China with 55 tons of ginseng (Williams, 1957).

The trade in ginseng, colloquially called “sang,” from the beginning was largely in the hands of the fur traders. The American Fur Company handled the root. Astor is reputed to have made, in 1782, the first shipment of ginseng to China following the revolution.* Astor (1910), in 1815, wrote to Ramsay Crooks that the ginseng should reach New York by the first of May. Even today most of the wild ginseng is purchased by fur buyers.

One of the early dealers in ginseng in New York was Sir William Johnson (1721–65). His papers contain numerous references to the trade. On November 29, 1750, he delivered 41 pounds of ginseng. A letter of September 12, 1751, to Samuel and William Baker, London, inquired for the price of ginseng to be expected in England. He had most of the members of the Five Nations gathering ginseng, and, owing to its scarcity he had obtained only four hogsheads over a period of three months. If ginseng sold under 12s. a pound he would be a loser. In 1752 he heard of ginseng selling from 32s. to 40s. a pound. The plant could not have been scarce for in 1766 the chief of the Tuscaroras asked for a trader as it was plentiful in their country. A shipment of ginseng which Johnson sent to London in 1759 was valued at £ 144.4.7. Ginseng was highly profitable to the buyers in 1752, but the following year they were nearly ruined. The Indians in Broome County, who had

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* L. T. Williams, loc. p. 344. The date at least is incorrect since Astor did not arrive in America until 1783 and did not engage in the fur trade until the following year.
collected it in large quantities, however, benefitted considerably (Hawley, 1850).

The Moravian missionaries (Beauchamp, 1916) among the New York Indians in 1752, depended heavily on the ginseng which they dug to furnish their necessities, such as blankets and shoes. When they arrived at some of the Indian villages, they were nearly depopulated as the inhabitants were away gathering ginseng. The demand for ginseng seems to have been low in 1755 for the missionaries received for their roots only a traveler’s kettle from a reluctant trader.

The noble, Daniel de Joncaire, Sieur de Chabert et de Clausonne, was sent to the Bastile in Paris in 1761 to await trial for undoubted corruption in handling supplies for Fort Niagara. He used ginseng in his defense: “I enjoyed a prosperity acquired by the most legitimate means... This is the chief source of my fortune. The craze for ginseng spread from Europe to Canada. My connection with the Indians made it possible for me to profit by this. They gathered this plant as much as I wished, at 15 livres the pound; it sold at Montreal for 24 livres. If this trade had lasted a longer time, I could have made great loans to the State and the King” (Severance, 1917).

Attempts were made frequently to propagate ginseng in Europe though the seed will not germinate or the root grow if allowed to dry. Barbé-Marbois (1929) was in the Oneida Reservation in September, 1784, where he had engaged an Indian to collect five or six barrels of ginseng to be shipped to France for transplanting. His statement that, prior to the discovery of ginseng in America, the supply from Tartary was so limited that in China it was worth its weight in gold, shows the incentive.

The early settlers of New York also collected ginseng. The inhabitants of the town of Kirkland, Oneida County, were greatly in need of food in 1789 on account of a crop failure the previous year. A local merchant accepted ginseng in payment for supplies in place of gold and silver (Durant, 1878). It is surprising that the plant persisted in quantity for so long a period. Dwight (1822) wrote in September, 1799, that the Brothertown and Oneida Indians, near Clinton, New York, at that season, collect annually a thousand bushels of ginseng for which they receive two dollars a bushel. Most of it was sent to Philadelphia, thence to China.

Philadelphia remained for many years the principal port for export. In 1752 it was hoped by the merchants of this city that a market for ginseng could be created in England. This hope did not materialize and by 1772 ginseng was no longer exported to England (Jansen, 1963). While Schoepf (1911) was at Laurel Hill,
Pennsylvania, he met a man with two horses carrying 500 pounds of ginseng bound for Philadelphia. Much was brought to Fort Pitt. An energetic man could collect 60 pounds in a day. The price paid was about a shilling sterling per pound. In going over the Alleghany Mountains in September, 1794, Washington (Fitzpatrick, 1925) met “numbers of persons and Pack horses going in with Ginseng.”

The members of the Moravian Mission (New Salem) on the Huron River, northern Ohio, relied largely on ginseng for support. Zeisberger (1885) recorded on August 29, 1787, that nearly all the brethren were gathering ginseng. There was a great demand for it, while skins were worthless. The price was $3.00 a bushel. The plant was abundant in some places and scarce in others. Where plentiful a man could collect a full half-bushel in a day. There was a big demand for ginseng in Ohio in the period 1798–1808 (Hildreth, 1852).

Large amounts of ginseng were purchased by Daniel Boone in Kentucky (Eakeless, 1939). Owing to the absence of an Indian population, the collection of the roots must have been made largely by the white settlers. He personally collected some ginseng. The winter of 1787–88, he started up the Ohio in a boat containing nearly 15 tons of ginseng. The boat overturned, and before the cargo could be salvaged and transported to Philadelphia the price had declined. Undismayed he had on hand 15 “caggs” of ginseng in the fall of 1788.

According to the botanist Michaux (1805), ginseng in 1802 was the only product from Kentucky that would bear the cost of transportation overland to Philadelphia. It was collected by people having some leisure, and by hunters who carried a digging tool in addition to a rifle. A collector seldom dug more than 8 or 9 pounds of the roots in a day. These roots were less than an inch in diameter even after an age of fifteen years. He received a shilling for the dry roots which brought twice that amount in Philadelphia. The process whereby the Chinese rendered the roots transparent, i.e. by steaming, was considered a secret, although knowledge of it was long known, and worth 400 piasters (dollars). Some of the Philadelphia merchants paid six or seven piasters per pound for the beneficiated roots.

Large quantities of ginseng were being sent to China from Wisconsin and Minnesota in the 1860’s (Speer, 1870). About 1845, Green County, Wisconsin, was known as the “sang” country. The supply was soon exhausted as men, women, and children devoted their leisure time to collecting the roots. A. Ludlow of Monroe purchased all that was available for shipment to New York. A
boy in 1846 within three months, collected 500 pounds for which he received $0.22 a pound (Bingham, 1877). Much was collected in the Bark River woods, Jefferson County, where it was abundant (Warner, 1930). As late as 1900 ginseng could still be found in the county in considerable amount. John Hooper obtained about 5000 plants annually during the three years 1904–1906, by personal collection and purchase of a small number (Moore, 1940). There does not appear to have been any early interest in the plant in Dane County. In 1893, it was said of ginseng in the vicinity of Madison: “Occasional in rich woods. Becoming rather rare” (Cheney, 1893).

The collection of ginseng received much attention in Sauk County. Charles Hirschinger, when ten years of age came with his family to a farm near Baraboo in 1847. As an aid to the family, he dug ginseng for which he received a few cents a pound (Cole, 1918). Mrs. L. H. Palmer, a widow, with the aid of her children collected and sold at a dollar a pound, sufficient ginseng to pay the mortgage on her place. Thousands of pounds were dug in the town of Ironton. Though initially bringing a dollar a pound, the price fell to fifty cents; nevertheless, ginseng brought comfort to many families. This was particularly true about 1859, when times were difficult (Western Hist. Co., 1880). During June of this year the merchants at Tomah were doing a thriving business in ginseng which was to be found in quantity to the southward (Tomah, 1859). However, a New York firm, Schiffelin Brothers and Company, contributed a letter stating that ginseng was not in the best of condition until fall, and should not be collected before that time (Ripon, 1859).

Within a few weeks, in the spring of 1859, over $1200 had been paid for ginseng collected in the valley of the Baraboo River. The price of 12½ cents probably represented that of the green root (Baraboo, 1859). At this time the number of diggers of ginseng in the Trimbelle woods, Pierce County, was estimated at 300. One load of about 1200 pounds was noticed. The price of the green root was 9 to 10 cents a pound. Fraudulent practices consisted in soaking the roots in water and inserting sand into the large ones (Prescott, 1859).

Men and boys about 1860 were occupied in digging ginseng in Dunn County. Haugen (1927) relates that in the summer of 1861 he went with a party to Maple Springs, town of Eau Galle, and spent a month digging the roots. The men received six cents a pound, and individuals sometimes dug as high as thirty pounds a day. The boys received six dollars a month and board. In the spring of 1864 speculators were paying fifteen cents a pound for the
green root at Menomonie. Ginseng to the amount of $8,000 had been purchased (Menomonie, 1864). At the same time ginseng was in great demand at Mauston (Mauston, 1864). The occupation of George W. Shaffer, of Downsville, was farming and digging ginseng (Forrester, 1891–92).

Ginseng was plentiful in 1866 in the town of Rock Elm, Pierce County, and was worth ten cents a pound in the green state. The ginseng trade revived at Ellsworth in the fall of 1875, and twenty cents a pound was paid for it (Ellsworth, 1875). This price prevailed in 1878 (Ellsworth, 1878). Trade was active in 1879. E. L. Davis advertised for 100,000 pounds of ginseng. Sanderson and Campbell were shipping several hundred pounds weekly. The initial price of thirty cents a pound soon fell to twenty cents (Ellsworth, 1879). E. R. Condit of the village of Rock Elm, in the fall of 1880, had on hand two tons of ginseng which he had purchased. It was “the only legal tender in exchange for goods at our store, bringing 15 cents a pound” (Weld, 1906). J. P. Fetherspill came to the town of Springfield in 1896, and acquired a wide reputation as a collector and grower of ginseng (Easton, 1909).

Ginseng was a boon to the settlers of Vernon County in the years 1854–1856 (Rogers, 1907), as in the dry condition it brought from $0.50 to $1.00 a pound (Union Publ. Co., 1884). Owing to the scarcity of money, ginseng circulated as currency. In the town of Liberty, a young couple about to be married, brought with them an artistically arranged basket of ginseng with which to pay the minister (Stout, 1899).

Most of the ginseng marketed in the northern counties was collected by the Indians. In the 1870’s, Fred E. Bailey had a trading post at Rice Lake, Barron County. He hired Indians to dig ginseng and trap fur-bearers (Gordon, 1922). Indians, in the 1880’s and 1890’s, came to Perkinstown, Taylor County, to collect ginseng, which was also purchased from them in the town of Hammel (Latton, 1947). John Brinkman, in Wood County, began trading with the Indians about 1880. One season he bought nearly $3000 worth of ginseng, paying $2.00 a pound for it (Jones, 1923). Only a few years prior to 1922, Indians came to Antigo, Langlade County, to sell ginseng and other products which they had gathered in the woods (Dessureau, 1922). In Lincoln County the Indians obtained from $2.00 to $5.00 a pound (Drew, 1898).

The most extensive recorded experience in collecting ginseng is that of Jabez Brown (1855) in Sauk County. His first entry is for September, 1855. On the 25th of this month he dug a bucketful. On July 16, 1858 he dug 15 pounds of green roots. He and his father on September 10 dug about 20 pounds each, and each made
about $1.50. His entry for September 18 reads in part: "I hunted
sang all day but got but about half a bushel. I came home late
very tired. It is curious to see what excitement the Sang business
has got up in this country. All classes of men are digging. Some
make as high as three dollars per day. I have dug from ten to
about twenty pounds per day of green roots. In the extreme money
pressure it is all the article that will fetch cash or goods. Some
individuals have dug hundreds of lbs. and in Bad Ax, Sauk and
Richland Cos. thousands and thousands of lbs. have been dug. Men
go out with wagons and teams and provisions and bedding and
and camp in the woods to dig Gin Sang."

The fall of 1858 Brown began buying ginseng to take to market
at Richland Center where he arranged with a merchant to deliver
from two to four hundred pounds at 37½ cents per pound. The
ginseng was purchased in small lots for which he paid from 30 to
32 cents a pound. On October 11, he and an associate sold 382½
pounds in Richland Center at 38 cents a pound. Within a few years
the price increased greatly. In July, 1870, a merchant at Richland
Center paid $3.00 per pound for the dry product, and the following
year $3.75 (Pease, 1870).

Statistics on the early trade in ginseng in Wisconsin are almost
entirely wanting; however, the state is reported to have shipped
ginseng to the value of $40,000 in 1858 and $80,000 in 1859 (Nash,
1895). As soon as the wild plant became scarce, attempts were
made to cultivate it. In 1877 it was stated that all attempts to grow
it in Wisconsin ended in failure. One man after spending several
hundred dollars was unsuccessful in growing it from seed (Ann.
Rept. 1877). Eventually the difficulties were overcome so that most
of the ginseng exported today is from cultivation. It is one of the
wild plants which does not conform readily to man's ministrations.
The tribulations of the Fromm Brothers in growing it in Marathon
County have been well described (Pinkerton, 1953).

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