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# GINSENG Rush in Minnesota

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IN 1859, while thousands of hopeful argonauts sought their fortunes in the Pike's Peak gold rush in Colorado, Minnesotans thronged into the woods in search of ginseng—a local elixir for the economic ills of the time. Ginseng boomed but briefly, yet many Minnesotans reaped unexpected cash which helped them bridge the perilous economic chasm opened by the panic of 1857. In time, the ginseng rush became legendary as pioneers reminisced about the weed that "saved" Minnesota.

Ginseng, the manroot, was highly prized by the Chinese, who believed it had restorative properties. They made a cure-all tonic from it and sometimes brewed ginseng

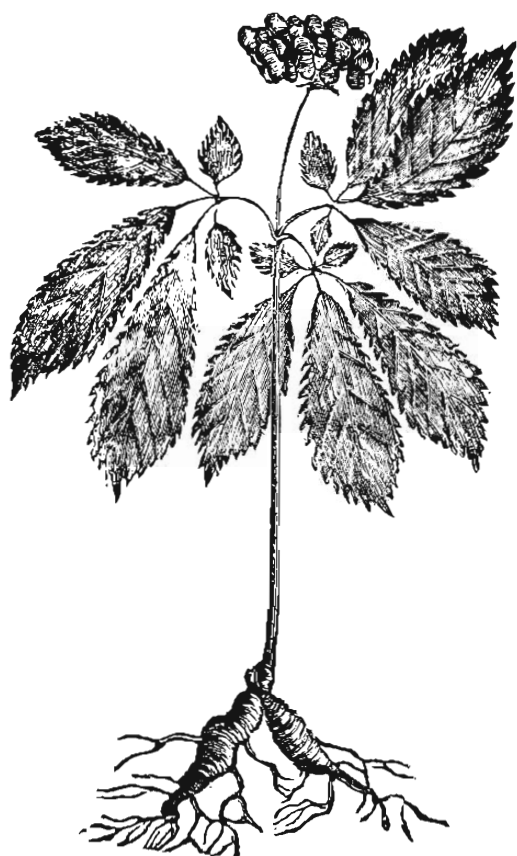
tea. The Chinese also ate the root in its crude form and on occasion pulverized and smoked it. The plant was reported to be variously used as an opiate, an intoxicant, a stimulant, and an aphrodisiac. Small amounts of ginseng were raised commercially in China, but wild roots were considered superior. Thus, there was a ready market in the Orient for the American plant.<sup>1</sup>

"Sang," as it was called on the frontier, was first gathered by colonial pioneers, and it continued to provide a valuable supplement to the meager incomes of later frontiersmen. American ginseng, which closely resembles the Chinese variety, was commonly found throughout the deciduous forest areas from eastern Canada and Maine west to Minnesota and Missouri and south into the mountain regions of Kentucky, Georgia, and the Carolinas.<sup>2</sup>

Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolium*), a relatively inconspicuous plant still in existence, ranges from eight to twenty inches in height, with several leaf stalks, each topped

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), May 24, p. 2, May 28, p. 2, 1859.

<sup>2</sup> George V. Nash, *American Ginseng: Its Commercial History, Protection and Cultivation*, 9 (United States Department of Agriculture, *Bulletins*, no. 16—Washington, 1898); Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 1:439, 441; 2:869, 884 (New York, 1941).



*A ginseng plant*

with five ovate leaflets arranged palmately. The size, shape, and arrangement of the leaves closely resembles that of the common woodbine. Ginseng is most striking in the fall when the leaves turn bright yellow and mature plants bear a cluster of crimson berries, each of which contains one to three wrinkled pealike seeds.<sup>3</sup>

Ginseng's range is dictated by the plant's peculiar environmental requirements. It grows best in a rich, cool, moist, well-drained loam with a high humus content. In earlier years its densest growth occurred in forests consisting primarily of large deciduous trees which provided the ideal heavy shade conditions and thick leaf mulch.<sup>4</sup>

In Minnesota, ginseng and other eastern woodland plants grew most luxuriantly in the Big Woods, a dense hardwood forest dominated by large deciduous trees, par-

ticularly sugar maple, basswood, elm, and red oak. At about the latitude of St. Cloud, where the deciduous belt separating the coniferous forest and the prairie widened markedly, the Big Woods culture became apparent. From this starting point the somewhat irregular western boundary of the Big Woods, separating the forest and the prairie, ran to the Minnesota River Valley slightly upstream from Mankato. The southern boundary lay through the lower portions of the Le Sueur River Valley and then ran northeastward, staying slightly south of Waterville and Faribault. The eastern edge of the Big Woods, which touched prairie in places and shaded off into a deciduous forest of lesser growth in other sections, lay through Faribault and Northfield. It then turned northwestward, passing about fifteen miles west of downtown Minneapolis before following along the Mississippi River back to Stearns County. This vast continuous forest was something over a hundred miles long from north to south and as much as forty miles wide.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the thousands of newcomers to Minnesota Territory during the prosperous times before the panic of 1857 must have recognized ginseng but evidently attached no importance to it. There was no local market for it, and besides, the rife speculation which followed the ratification of the Sioux treaties in 1853 nearly monopolized business activity. The grand territorial boom was based on a skyrocketing population, particularly in the southeast and the Minnesota River Valley, where farm and town claims were the most promising. During the short-lived land craze, hundreds of new towns were planned or started, and debtor

<sup>3</sup> Nash, *American Ginseng*, 7; Conway MacMillan, *Minnesota Plant Life*, 337 (University of Minnesota, *Report of the Survey, Botanical Series*, no. 3 — St. Paul, 1899); H. Lea Lawrence, "Man Plant's Return," in *Natural History*, 73:35 (May, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Harlan P. Kelsey, *Some Information about the Root "Sang" or Ginseng*, 4 (Boston, privately published, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> Carl Otto Rosendahl, *Trees and Shrubs of the Upper Midwest*, 10 (Minneapolis, 1955).

immigrants accrued heavy obligations. In this inflationary situation, money was commonly loaned on real estate security for six to twelve months at 3 to 4 per cent interest a month. The Minnesota boom was part of an inflationary spiral affecting much of the nation, but it was just such frontier areas with no exportable wealth which were hit particularly hard by the resulting panic.<sup>6</sup>

The panic of 1857 developed after the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company failed in August. New York City banks soon suspended specie payments and several major railroads made assignments. The panic spread west, and within weeks dozens of Minnesota banks and mercantile firms had also made assignments or suspended operations. As the depression darkened the last territorial days, sobered Minnesotans groped for a solution. Remedial measures — such as the sale of state bonds to stimulate railroad construction and the extensive circulation of depreciated bank notes — were neither extensive nor systematic enough to achieve more than limited relief.

THE DEPRESSION brought out the wanderlust in many who were attracted by the Fraser River gold discoveries in Canada and the agricultural possibilities of Kansas and Nebraska. There was enough of an exodus to stimulate an occasional "impending depopulation" editorial, but most Minnesotans waited out the crisis. The state's population actually increased somewhat during the depression. Since there was no outstate market for Minnesota farm products, farmers quickly bartered away the little produce demanded by home markets and literally

had time on their hands. In the fall of 1858, at a time when notices of sheriffs' sales crowded the newspapers, some farmers were introduced to a novel new business — digging ginseng for money.

Root buyers appeared in at least two sections of the Big Woods and quietly hired local men to reconnoiter and dig ginseng. The Chilton brothers, Edward and Joseph B., moved to Wayzata from Iowa and opened a ginseng buying and drying station. They also had a branch buyer, J. H. Clark, at Excelsior who took boatloads of roots across the lake. Meanwhile, Colonel B. F. Pratt, a Virginian, had hired some idlers in St. Peter to dig the root, and it was rumored locally that he had a contract "with some heavy root doctor in the east."<sup>7</sup>

This initial digging was done without fanfare. Contemporary newspapers made no mention of it until after the 1859 rush had begun. It is possible that they did not deem noteworthy a new venture that involved comparatively few people. The buyers in 1858 did not advertise in the newspapers, either. The Chiltons and Pratt appear to have been deliberately cautious and secretive — apparently with good reason. It seems that a Philadelphia exporter, concerned with the scarcity of ginseng in the East, contracted with a Virginian for all he could supply. Shortly thereafter, the exporter was pleased and surprised when he received quantities of the root but was soon chagrined when his competitors likewise obtained heavy shipments from an unknown source. The exporter attempted to ruin the competition by buying at ridiculously high prices, but he could not exhaust the market. Upon investigating, he found that his own contractor, operating in Minnesota, was the source of the competition. It was reported that the conniving Virginian, in an effort to keep the Minnesota discoveries to himself, deliberately blotted and changed markings so the point of shipping would be illegible. Although the identity of the mysterious Virginian was never made known in the press, he quite likely was Pratt or one of the

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<sup>6</sup> Alice H. Felt, "Minnesota and the Financial Situation 1857-1873," 10, unpublished master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1918 (copy in Minnesota Historical Society); Mildred Lucile Hartough, *The Twin Cities as a Metropolitan Market*, 158 (Minneapolis, 1925).

<sup>7</sup> Dana W. Frear, "Minnetonka Town: A History of the First Hundred Years of Minnetonka, Minnesota," 226, unpublished manuscript in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, 1964; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, June 4, 1859, p. 2 (quote).

Chiltons. They were the only major identifiable buyers in Minnesota in 1858, and they were all from Virginia. By 1859 they were working as partners at St. Peter, representing a company of Virginians, and were recognized as substantial capitalists who freely advertised that they were importing gold from Virginia. In any event, the harvest of 1858, said to amount to \$10,000 worth of exported root, was soon publicly known, and the Virginian's ginseng plot was ruined, as dozens of buyers entered the field in 1859.<sup>8</sup>

Because of their prior experience and careful preparation, Pratt and the Chiltons were the pioneers of the great rush. On May 6 the *Minnesota Statesman* of St. Peter reported that a company from Virginia, apparently Pratt's, had established a ginseng drying station at Lake Washington, and then predicted that "This will be of much benefit to the citizens of Le Sueur county, and the unemployed generally, as these diggings will bring the *gold* more certainly than those at Pike's Peak." The reference to Pike's Peak was but a harbinger of editorializing in which the newly discovered gold frontier served as whipping boy for Minnesota journalists, who were first openly alarmed lest the Colorado rush attract numerous Minnesotans, and then elated when the anticipated Pike's Peak boom busted, proving positively that a person was better off staying in Minnesota and digging ginseng.

Within a fortnight of the initial notice "Some fifty or one hundred men" were said to be digging ginseng in Le Sueur County across the Minnesota River from St. Peter, and Pratt and his associates were ready to purchase any quantity. By late May the business in the St. Peter vicinity was described as "immense." The rush was no doubt inspired by contemporaneous announcements that diggers were making up to \$5 daily and that Pratt and the Chiltons were "now ready to purchase from \$50,000 to \$100,000 worth of Ginseng, for which they will pay the highest market price,"

because J. B. Chilton had "JUST ARRIVED FROM Virginia, with a large sum of money."<sup>9</sup>

Buyers also appeared in the northern sections of the Big Woods. A Wright County pioneer from Rockford recalled that on the evening of May 18 two Virginians, Colonel Robert Blaine and a Major Goshorn, came to the village and asked if ginseng grew in the area. The next morning, several settlers found a ginseng plant and carried the root to Blaine, who announced that it was a good specimen and then offered to pay gold for all that was procured. Blaine, remembered by one contemporary as a "well-dressed old gentleman," was soon a familiar figure in Wright County. He made the rounds of various communities, showing root specimens and inducing "sangers" to take to the woods by assuring them a cash market for roots. Blaine headquartered at Rockford where he washed and dried roots, but he had substations at Buffalo and Monticello in Wright County and at Kingston in neighboring Meeker County. He soon had local competition. Within a few weeks Thomas Chambers of Monticello was buying quantities of ginseng and processing it for the eastern markets, but Blaine retained his position as the major buyer. While the latter was a Virginian, it is not likely that he was associated with Pratt and the Chiltons. They were never connected in the literature of the time, and Blaine's associate, Goshorn, later worked in competition to Pratt and the Chiltons in the Mankato-St. Peter area.<sup>10</sup>

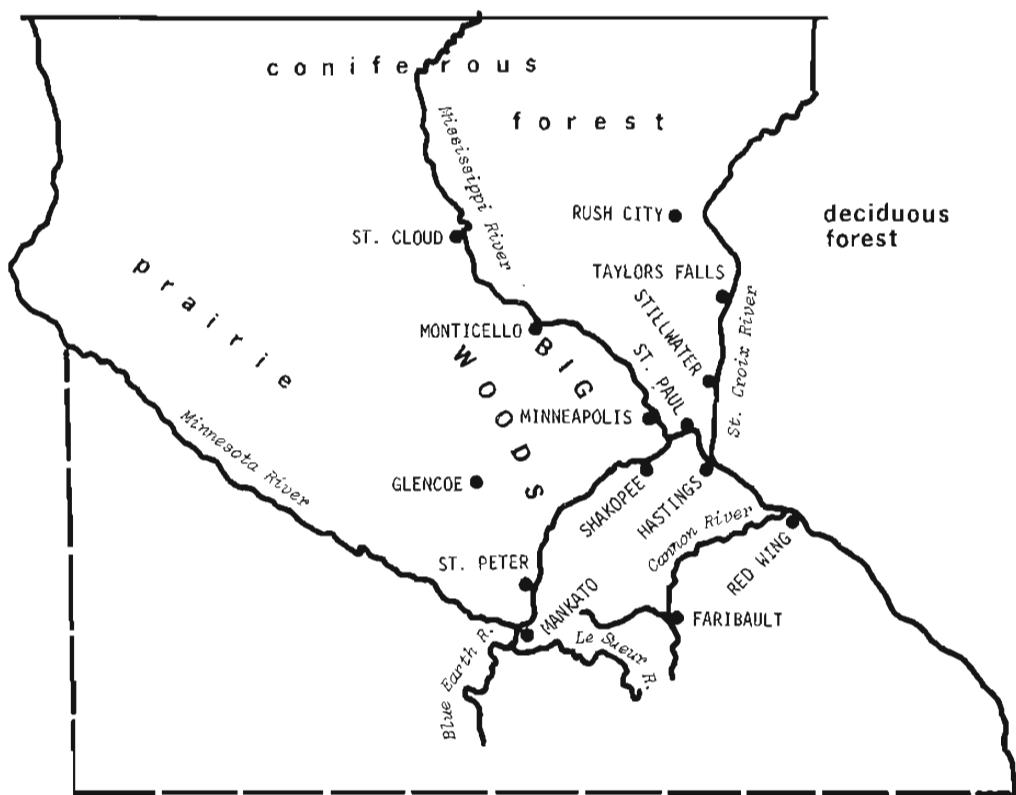
AFTER THE BEGINNINGS in Le Sueur and Wright counties the ginseng fever

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<sup>8</sup>Minnesota Commissioner of Statistics, *First Annual Report*, 110 (Hartford, 1860); *Hastings Weekly Ledger*, May 14, 1859, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>*Minnesota Statesman* (St. Peter), May 13, p. 5 (quote), May 27, p. 3 (quotes), 1859.

<sup>10</sup>Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, comp., *History of Wright County Minnesota*, 1:211; 2:855 (quote), 856 (Chicago, 1915); *Wright County Republican* (Monticello), June 30, 1859, p. 3; *Mankato Weekly Record*, July 12, 1859, p. 3.



spread quickly through the Big Woods, with the rush peaking from late May to mid-June. Every community of note within the woods soon had many buyers. Some of these were from outstate, but practically every general merchandise store dealt in ginseng. The great demand and the seemingly inexhaustible supply caused heavy advertising in Faribault, Mankato, St. Peter, Belle Plaine, Glencoe, and Shakopee. The weeklies usually carried several notices from buyers who all paid the "highest price." Handbills were another common medium. In Glencoe, just west of the Big Woods, it was reported that notices "are posted on our street corners, along our highways, and, we warrant, on the trees through our forests."<sup>11</sup>

The cash market and heavy advertising not only induced hundreds of Big Woods farmers and townspeople to become sangers, but also encouraged an immigration of sorts

into the prime ginseng area. The *Hastings Weekly Ledger* of June 4 reported that "Everybody is going into the Ginseng trade. About seventy-five men and boys have left here, and are digging in the neighborhood of Northfield, and a few have gone into Wisconsin." Likewise some Winona residents left for the "Ginseng Diggings" in the interior — some to dig, and others to speculate in the root." "A great many individuals" from St. Anthony and Minneapolis, outfitted with wagons and tools, were said to have gone into the Big Woods on ginseng foraging expeditions. Some diggers even came from out of state. A group of thirty Wisconsinites equipped with "camping and mining utensils" arrived in Carver and worked through the area between there and Glencoe. The *Pioneer and Democrat* of June 19 noted that "the last three packets, the Milwaukee, Grey Eagle, and Itasca, have brought up a number of emigrants, bound for the ginseng diggings." One of the

<sup>11</sup> *Glencoe Register*, June 18, 1859, p. 2.

"Milwaukee's" passengers was reported to be an eastern capitalist who came with \$40,000 to invest in ginseng.<sup>12</sup>

For several hectic weeks ginseng digging was the preoccupation in the Big Woods. As thousands marketed their first cash commodity in two years, ginseng was on practically every tongue. The exaltation over its salutary effects was variously expressed. Levi Countryman, a Dakota County farmer, saw it as a "godsend to Minnesota." Mankatoans sponsored a "gingenseng Ball" which was to make diggers "oblivious to musquito [*sic*] bite or toil of delving for the bulbous root, whilst 'tripping the light fantastic toe' to the music of of [*sic*] the Ginseng Polka." A St. Peter bard, Henry R. Hayden, parodied Longfellow's *Excelsior* with *Dig Ginseng*:

The shades of night were falling fast,  
As o'er the muddy highway passed  
A youth, who bore, across a stick,  
A tin-pail, knapsack, hoe and pick!

Dig Ginseng!

His brow was sad, by care oppressed,  
"Hard times" had robbed his nights of rest,  
And now his guardian angel sung,  
In accents of his mother tongue,

Dig Ginseng!

In gay saloons he saw the light  
Of fine "Havanas" burning bright,  
Of "sherry cobbler," icy cool;  
Then muttered, as he passed, "O, Fool!"

Dig Ginseng!"

"Start not to-night," the neighbors said,  
"The prairie grass will be your bed,  
And blow-snakes nestle by your side!"  
But still that youthful voice replied,

Dig Ginseng!

A beauteous maid, with coal-black eye  
And rosy lip, suppressed a sigh,  
Brushed from her eye the gathering tear,  
And, blushing, whispered in his ear,

Dig Ginseng!

A peasant said, in tones of spite,  
"Beware of the mosquito's bite!  
The root is scarce, the soil is tough!"  
A voice replied, far up the bluff,

Dig Ginseng!

At break of day, you might have seen,  
Beneath the forest's leafy screen,

A youth, supplied with hoe and pick,  
(While from his brow the sweat dropped thick.)  
Dig Ginseng!

A traveler, passing by the place,  
Reports, that all the vacant space  
Is packed with the gigantic weed!  
The youth, with unabated speed,  
Digs Ginseng!

There through the livelong summer day,  
'Tis dug, and washed, and piled away;  
But, whether clarified or dry,  
Celestials will forever cry,  
Dig Ginseng!<sup>13</sup>

Ginseng digging paled other activities. The inauguration of the "new era" at Traverse des Sioux and St. Peter brought great changes: "bar-rooms are abandoned; eucher and draw-poker have lost their fa[s]cination; even fishing, ducking, politics and religion are not now displayed as peculiar fortes; but old and young, the patrician and the plebian, the prudent and the desolate, are all agog with — 'Ginseng.'" Another report had it that St. Peter was "deserted" because anyone who could not make at least \$3 a day in town was out in the woods singing.<sup>14</sup>

There were reasons other than economic for the mass participation in ginseng digging. It was a trade that required little training, minimal skill, and inexpensive equipment. Anyone with a durable back, hoe, and gunny sack, and a tolerance of humidity, dirt, and mosquitoes could easily be successful in the diggings.

The daily routine for those who lived in or near the woods was to go out early in the morning, virtually wading through the dew-covered forest with a tool and sack, and work until either their load forced

<sup>12</sup> *Winona Republican*, June 22, 1859, p. 3; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, June 10, 1859, p. 3; *Glen-coe Register*, June 25, 1859, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Levi N. Countryman Diary, May 25, 1859, Countryman Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society; *Mankato Weekly Independent*, June 4, 1859, p. 3; *Minnesota Statesman*, May 27, 1859, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, June 4, p. 2, June 8, p. 2, 1859.

them to come in or dusk fell. The ordinary digger harvested ten to twenty pounds a day, but daily individual yields of fifty pounds or more were known. There was some risk involved. Getting lost was not uncommon, and there were those who could not distinguish ginseng from the hundreds of other plants and young trees. One St. Peter resident brought a load of roots to market only to find out that "there was 'nary' Ginseng root in the whole lot."<sup>15</sup>

Some sangers used picks and spades, but the usual implement was the "ginseng hoe," a narrow triangular tool made specially for the trade and designed to work effectively between tree roots. The spindle-shaped, cream-colored root, usually three to ten inches long and a half inch to an inch or more thick, was found from one to four inches below the surface of the ground, often entangled with the roots of other plants and trees. Competition with other roots caused some grotesquely shaped ginseng roots. Young roots tended to be quite simple, but two- to three-year-old roots were commonly forked, and five- to six-year-old roots oftentimes were fantastically gnarled.<sup>16</sup>

THE CLASSICAL ROOT of Chinese lore was man-shaped, thereby giving the plant its name. Only rarely, however, did diggers discover a root with identifiable trunk, legs, and arms. Most roots resembled small parsnips, with regard to shape, color, and wrinkled surface. One veteran sanger held that "in a thousand pounds of ginseng roots it would be almost impossible to find two or three shaped exactly alike." The age of a root was easily determined, because at



*A root shaped like a man*

the end of the season the plant died back to the root neck, leaving a notched leaf scar. The next spring the plant sprouted from the opposite side, so for each growing season a semicircular wrinkle developed on alternate sides of the neck.<sup>17</sup>

Weight depended on the condition of the root, which had three processing stages — green, clarified, and dry. Most green roots weighed only a few ounces, but there were exceptions. On June 10, 1859, the *Minnesota*

<sup>15</sup> *Minnesota Statesman*, May 27, 1859, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Curtiss-Wedge, *Wright County*, 1:211; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, May 24, 1859, p. 2; Charles H. Coe, "Ginseng: Its Character, History, Commerce and Medicinal Value," in *Scientific American Supplement*, 57:23704 (May 7, 1904).

<sup>17</sup> Curtiss-Wedge, *Wright County*, 2:856 (quote); Lawrence, in *Natural History*, 73:35; A. C. Parsons, "What Good is Ginseng?" in *Nature Magazine*, 38:256 (May, 1945).

*Statesman* of St. Peter reported that A. Rhein of Traverse had dug a mammoth eleven-and-a-half-ounce root.

Diggers sold the root green by the pound. The usual price was eight or nine cents, but this varied somewhat from area to area and was influenced by the quantity available on any given day. Individuals who traded in their roots on commodities would normally get more per pound than those who demanded currency, and the sellers for cash would get somewhat more if they accepted bank notes in lieu of gold. Most sangers, possessed of a certain native cunning, handled the roots carefully and sold them soon after digging in order to market the sticky loam that clung to the roots. Eight or nine cents a pound for dirt was a grand sale. Buyers were not as disturbed by this as most sellers assumed. In fact, dealers seem to have preferred dirt-covered roots, since the soil kept them moist and fresh and also was conclusive proof that the roots, had not been soaked overnight to make them heavier. Sellers who resorted to soaking were docked for water content.<sup>18</sup>

The major buyers maintained ginseng stations where the roots were cleaned and dried. The first task was to wash and sort the roots carefully—or, in the language of the trade, “clarify” them. Washing was oftentimes done by hand, but large-scale processing demanded technology. At Rockford on the Crow River, Blaine used washing machines, which were wooden cylinders about four feet in diameter. Paddles were fastened to the cylinders, giving them the appearance of small undershot water wheels. The cylinders were loaded with five hundred to eight hundred pounds of roots, placed in the river, and firmly secured. The current turned them until the ginseng was clean. After washing the roots, processors turned to the tedious task of stripping the fibrous hair roots and the prongs from each root. The clarified roots then had to be dried. Many individuals and buyers simply laid the roots on sunlit platforms made of boughs—a common sight

on the streets of major ginseng towns. Others often used cabin roofs, which served the purpose in fair weather but which retained more moisture than the platforms. The really professional and experienced processors, aware of the area's naturally high humidity, realized the need for quick and efficient drying and used drying houses. These ginseng kilns were constructed at major buying points. Godfrey Scheitlin, a Minncapolis merchant, built a drying house with a large brick furnace beneath the lower floor. Pratt and the Chiltons had similar drying houses at Mankato, St. Peter, and Lake Washington. Their first Mankato structure and about a ton of roots were destroyed in a fire caused by a faulty furnace.<sup>19</sup>

The cleaning and drying of ginseng diminished its bulk considerably. About four pounds of green root were needed to produce one of processed. Minnesota diggers sometimes complained that they were being “taken” by buyers who finally sold dried roots in Philadelphia and Baltimore for 75 cents to \$1 a pound, but they were merely comparing the local price for the crude product to the eastern price for dried and delivered roots.<sup>20</sup>

THE GINSENG CRAZE was centered in the Big Woods, but it was not restricted to that region. Ginseng was also found in two other deciduous forest zones, one along the Mississippi River downstream from St. Paul and the other between the Mississippi and the St. Croix rivers. The ginseng rush in the Big Woods spurred searches for it throughout both of these areas.

The Driftless Section of the deciduous forest below St. Paul roughly resembled the

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<sup>18</sup> *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, June 24, 1859, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Curtiss-Wedge, *Wright County*, 2:856; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, June 24, 1859, p. 3; *Mankato Weekly Independent*, June 4, 1859, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Washington to his parents, June 3, 1859, Washington Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society; Parsons, in *Nature Magazine*, 38:256.



Big Woods, but its vegetation was more diversified, including a number of soft trees and bushes not commonly occurring in the Big Woods. Those who assumed that ginseng would be found in profusion in any deciduous forest soon found that this was not so as they searched the Driftless Area woods. There was some digging around Hastings, on both sides of the Mississippi, but the town was more important as a deportation point for processed roots from the interior than for its local buying and processing.

Red Wing, on the other hand, had a short-lived boom. On June 18 the *Red Wing Sentinel* announced under the headline of "GINSENG FEVER" that "premonitory symptoms of this epidemic, which is raging so extensively in some parts of this State, have made their appearance in our usually healthy community." Several batches of the root had been brought in by that time, and a number of merchants prepared to enter the trade. Prospecting parties scoured the nearby forests and ravines as well as the Wisconsin woods which were said to be "full of it." Within a week the ginseng fever was raging to the point where it threatened to "depopulate" the city. Anyone who could "bear the inconvenience of a hot sun, mosquitoes and woodticks" was advised to go out and dig. Red Wing was the only community in the Driftless Section that was greatly affected by the ginseng rush. Small amounts of ginseng were found in the Chatfield area where some half dozen persons who dug the root realized a return of about \$100 in the space of a week.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Rosendahl, *Trees and Shrubs*, 11-13; *Hastings Independent*, June 9, p. 3, June 16, p. 3, June 23, p. 2, 1859; *Red Wing Sentinel*, June 25, 1859, p. 3 (quote); *Chatfield Democrat*, June 18, 1859, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Rosendahl, *Trees and Shrubs*, 11-13.

<sup>23</sup> *Stillwater Messenger*, June 21, 1859, p. 2; Heinrich Bosshard, "Sixty-sixth Letter. NOTES FROM THE PINE FORESTS OF ST. CROIX, MINNESOTA," October 3, 1859, in *Zweite Reise Schilderung Aus Amerika*, p. 33-67 translated by Mrs. George W. Wakefield, Bosshard Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

As in the Driftless Section, ginseng was found irregularly in the delta region between the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers. The forests there were more open than the Big Woods, had a higher frequency of oaks and conifers, and generally had smaller trees, although there were local approximations of the Big Woods. The lower reaches of the St. Croix were dominated by oak and aspen stands, whereas sugar maple, basswood, elm, and oak prevailed in the area west of Taylors Falls to the Mississippi. Most of the ginseng in the St. Croix area was found in the diversified forests north of the oak-aspen section. Consequently, Taylors Falls and neighboring St. Croix Falls in Wisconsin were greatly affected by ginseng digging and processing, but Stillwater to the south was not.<sup>22</sup>

By mid-June ginseng diggers were active on both sides of the St. Croix. There was some activity at Swede Lake in Chisago County, and a drying house had been constructed at Vasa. Heinrich Bosshard, a Swiss traveler, recalled that in the woods along the St. Croix he "came upon printed posters . . . asking for 200,000 pounds," of ginseng. He reported seeing quantities of the root at drying stations and observed that "In certain spots in the wilderness there are plants which yield a more certain and profitable return than hunting does."<sup>23</sup>

GINSENG DIGGERS and buyers undoubtedly realized from the start that the boom would not last. Nonetheless, they were stunned by its abrupt end. "Contrary to the expectations of purchasers and blighting to the hopes of diggers," reported the *Minnesota Statesman* of St. Peter on June 24, 1859, "the Ginseng trade has almost come to a 'stand still.'" The *Central Republican* of Faribault reported on June 29 that "The Ginseng trade has fallen off rapidly during the past week. Very little is brought into the market at present, and all reports agree that the supply in the 'big woods' is nearly exhausted." And so it went throughout the Big Woods in late June. Depletion

of the root was the reason usually given for the decline, but this was, at best, a superficial explanation. Obviously, after several weeks of frenzied activity by thousands of diggers, the root in the most accessible areas would have been taken. However, there were still quantities of ginseng throughout the woods in points farther from town.

The truth of the matter was simply that the Minnesota rush had glutted the eastern market, and exporters had all the root they could sell in the immediate future. The *Glencoe Register* sensed something of the real situation when it observed on July 16 that "ginseng has fallen," but then concluded: "Well, we guess it will come up again. We expect speculators are at the bottom of it."

Although the rush had run its course after five or six profitable weeks, it had had a number of beneficial effects. Many pioneers, who had been merely subsisting during the panic, had a cash commodity. It is impossible to determine the number of people who turned to ginseng digging, but newspaper stories provide some basis for calculations. On June 4 the *Rochester Free Press* estimated somewhat flippantly that "10,000(?) diggers were working between Faribault and St. Peter. "Hundreds of men, boys and women" were digging in the area south of St. Cloud. The daily individual returns were at least \$1 to \$2, with the average reported to be from \$2 to \$5, but running as high as \$10 in exceptional cases. The capital invested in ginseng is also hard to determine, but for a depression economy it was substantial. It was reported that \$100,000 was available in St. Peter for ginseng purchasing, and another \$100,000 was said to have been paid out in the Faribault-Waterville area in several weeks. A Hastings businessman commented that "Pike's Peak is left in the shade by the discovery in the big woods of an inexhaustible quantity of Ginseng. Some estimate the probable value of the trade this season in Minnesota as high as \$2,000,000."<sup>21</sup>

The number of roots processed was stag-

gering. Considering the small size of individual roots, millions must have been harvested. W. E. Manro and George W. Piper of St. Peter bought thirty to forty tons in a few weeks. During the rush about fifty tons were purchased in Mankato, while one Faribault buyer purchased five to six tons weekly and another advertised, although probably facetiously, that he wanted two hundred tons.<sup>25</sup>

Marketing ginseng was the main relief from the depression in 1859. Levi Countryman judged the situation nicely by noting that "the times are so hard that money cannot be realized in any other way[.]" In many cases ginseng enabled families to buy groceries and other necessities. One Rice County farmer who had a \$700 mortgage was able to pay it off and prevent foreclosure by digging ginseng with the aid of his wife and two sons. Alarmists who saw ginseng as contributing to the neglect of agriculture need not have been concerned. To the contrary, proceeds from the ginseng trade were almost immediately pumped back into farm improvements, seed, and stock and, more importantly, carried many farmers through a difficult transition by providing the assurance that better times were at hand.<sup>26</sup>

FOR SEVERAL YEARS after the 1859 rush, ginseng continued to be quite significant to the state. Great quantities were gathered, but even in the Big Woods its relative importance in the total economy

<sup>21</sup> *St. Cloud Democrat*, June 16, 1859, p. 2 (quote). Sangers' incomes were recorded in Francis M. Crosby to Philander Parmalee, June 19, 1859, Parmalee Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society; *Minnesota Statesman*, May 27, 1859, p. 3; and *Glencoe Register*, June 18, 1859, p. 2. *Rochester Free Press*, June 4, 1859; Crosby to Parmalee, June 19, 1859, Parmalee Papers.

<sup>22</sup> *Minnesota Statesman*, June 17, 1859, p. 3; *Mankato Weekly Independent*, July 2, 1859, p. 3; *Hastings Weekly Ledger*, June 4, 1859, p. 3; *Central Republican* (Faribault), June 1, 1859, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Countryman Diary, May 25, 1859, Countryman Papers; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, June 19, 1859, p. 2; *Henderson Democrat*, June 1, 1859, p. 2.

Edward Fromm  
harvested  
ginseng crop  
in 1910  
on Fromm  
fur farm.



declined. Despite impressive harvesting, the ginseng gathering of the early 1860s was not as widespread as that of 1859. Activity was concentrated in several key areas where people tended to dig near their homes. The liveliest trade was in the Minnesota River Valley from Belle Plaine to Mankato, but there was also much digging on the upper St. Croix near Taylors Falls and in Wright and Anoka counties. The historian of Anoka County concluded that "Up to 1863 ginseng digging held its place as a valuable industry."<sup>27</sup>

In late May, 1860, the newspapers of Glencoe, Belle Plaine, Henderson, St. Peter, and Mankato all reported that the ginseng trade was reviving. One predicted that the trade "bids fair to be as great as last year," and soon hundreds of diggers were successfully finding root. Before the season ended, however, the *St. Peter Tribune* noted that the trade was "quite lively, although without the excitement which attended the business

last year." The frontier press still devoted considerable space to ginseng digging, but the notices lacked the tone of urgency that had permeated the dark days of '59. As a moderate grain trade began in the Big Woods and farmers returned to the soil, the journalists no longer saw ginseng as the only answer to financial recovery. Coverage of the digging was reduced to reporting of a commonplace activity.<sup>28</sup>

There were apparently far fewer sangers in 1860 than during the previous year, but they seemed to have worked longer and more consistently. Thus by midsummer the diggers once again managed to glut the market. In the fall the trade revived, and after the harvest was completed many farmers returned to digging. The proceeds of 1860 were impressive. Within a one-week period twenty-five tons were sent from St. Paul, and one of the Mankato dealers dried over six thousand pounds during the year. While diggers were successful in terms of poundage, prices for green root were low most of the season — only five or six cents per pound. They gradually rose to ten cents for the fall root.<sup>29</sup>

Ginseng showed no signs of exhaustion through 1862. In 1861 and 1862 there was especially heavy digging in the Mankato-St. Peter area and on the upper St. Croix.

<sup>27</sup> Albert M. Goodrich, *History of Anoka County Minnesota*, 87 (Minneapolis, 1905).

<sup>28</sup> *Henderson Democrat*, May 26, 1860, p. 3; *St. Peter Tribune*, August 29, 1860, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, October 9, 1860, p. 1; *Mankato Semi-Weekly Record*, May 22, p. 2, August 17, p. 3, September 18, p. 3, September 25, p. 3, October 12, p. 3, 1860.

It is possible that these areas, located on the fringes of the frontier, had not been severely exploited during the initial rush. Another factor influencing the trade near the elbow of the Minnesota River was the presence of Sioux and Winnebago Indians who, by 1861, were the principal ginseng diggers. The *Mankato Semi-Weekly Record* of October 1 reported that "at least one half the Winnebago tribe have been almost constantly engaged in digging." Many frontiersmen were too busy with other enterprises, especially since at one point the 1861 price dropped to as low as four cents a pound.<sup>30</sup>

During 1861 the main Mankato purchaser, Major Cyrus Hill of New Hampshire, was reported to have purchased "at least 65,000 pounds" and to have spent "upwards of \$8,000 in gold and silver" for purchasing and clarifying the roots. The *St. Peter Tribune* regularly reported the selling of "Considerable ginseng" in that community, with the estimated 1862 total at 16,000 bushels. On the upper St. Croix ginseng was said to be "coming in by the bagful" at Taylors Falls which was "turning out to be a young California."<sup>31</sup>

For four consecutive years, 1859 through 1862, Minnesota exported more than 200,000 pounds of dried ginseng roots annually. The following table shows available Minnesota export figures and also shows amounts exported from the United States. The significance of Minnesota's contribution to the total export is evident. Without doubt, Minnesota was for a brief period the ranking ginseng-producing state. The amount exported from Minnesota in any given year was not necessarily dug during that year. Late season root that had not been dried before the close of navigation could easily appear in export statistics for the following year. It should also be noted that the figures below are for dried root. The amount of green root was approximately four times the amount of exported dry root. In 1859, when green root sold for eight or nine cents a pound, Minnesota diggers realized an in-

come in the neighborhood of \$64,000 to \$72,000 for the sale of approximately 800,000 pounds.

#### GINSENG EXPORTS — 1859<sup>32</sup>

Year	Pounds Exported from Minnesota	Pounds Exported from U.S.
1859	203,000	110,426
1860	245,434	395,909
1861	208,650	347,577
1862	241,245	630,714
1863	154,830	372,945
1864	(not available)	360,950
1865	80,259	464,507
1866	89,523	444,398

AFTER FOUR very productive years, ginseng declined sharply. In 1863 buyers had considerable difficulty inducing individuals to dig despite a price rise to as high as twenty to twenty-two cents for a pound of green root. The deportation of the Winnebago Indians from Blue Earth County and from Minnesota greatly decreased digging in the Mankato-St. Peter-Lake Elysian area. Then, too, there was a wartime manpower shortage in some areas, and the root was not nearly as common as it had been in the undisturbed forests. Nonetheless, it remained locally significant in two widely separated areas — the Minnesota River Val-

<sup>30</sup> *Mankato Semi-Weekly Record*, June 14, 1861, p. 4.

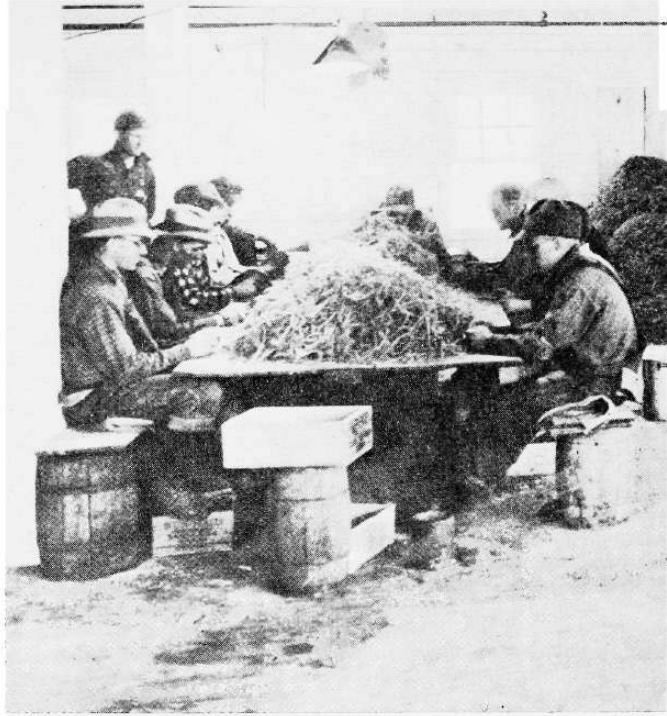
<sup>31</sup> *Mankato Semi-Weekly Record*, October 1, p. 3, October 15, p. 3, 1861; *St. Peter Tribune*, June 18, p. 3, August 6, p. 3, 1862; *St. Croix Monitor* (Taylors Falls), September 13, 1862, as quoted in James Taylor Dunn notes, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>32</sup> The total for 1859 represents St. Paul and Hastings exports, while the figures for 1861, 1865, and 1866 represent St. Paul exports only. The 1863 amount is the total ginseng sent south from St. Paul by river. See Minnesota Commissioner of Statistics, *Second Annual Report*, 91, 92 (St. Paul, 1862); J. M. Armstrong, M.D., "History of Medicine in Ramsey County," in *Minnesota Medicine*, 22:182 (March, 1939); *St. Paul Pioneer*, January 1, 1864, p. 1; *St. Paul Weekly Pioneer*, December 29, 1865, p. 5; *St. Paul Weekly Press*, January 3, 1867, p. 2; Nash, *American Ginseng*, 16.

ley around Mankato and the upper St. Croix Valley near Taylors Falls.<sup>33</sup>

The ever increasing scarcity of the root, sharp competition, and wartime inflation drove prices up, so that in 1864 Mankato buyers were paying twenty-five cents for green root, and eight to ten thousand pounds were supposed to have sold for as much as forty-five cents per pound. The purchasers then reportedly formed a pool, agreeing on a uniform price of twenty cents. The experience of dealers at Taylors Falls was comparable to that of Mankato buyers. Lively competition forced the price of green root to forty cents in the fall of 1864, and Taylors Falls' principal buyers agreed to pay no more than twenty-five cents. During the fall, five tons of root were marketed in Taylors Falls, "thus bringing quite a number of greenbacks into circulation, and a little mine of wealth to the buyers." Buyers managed to secure sizable amounts of root during 1864. The *St. Paul Pioneer* of October 16 reported that some fifty thousand pounds of dried root had been forwarded from that city within a one-week period.<sup>34</sup>

The diminishing ginseng supply and the resultant high prices caused great concern among the principal dealers, who claimed to have "sustained heavy losses." The buyers, in hopes of cutting their losses, were vitally interested in regulating ginseng gathering so they could obtain the desired late season roots which were fuller, heavier, less fibrous, and less subject to shrinkage than spring-dug roots. The *Mankato Weekly Record* of July 12, 1859, printed a letter from an eastern dealer, the Schieffelin Brothers and Company of New York: "The first specimen of the Minnesota root was shown us yesterday [June 24, 1859], and is



*In Fromm brothers' sorting shed,  
workmen cull ginseng roots.*

spongy, shriveled, lean and fibrous, utterly worthless for shipment to China, and will hardly show for home use, for which the demand is quite limited." That firm and many others were also undoubtedly interested in preserving wild ginseng so that it might be harvested systematically over a longer period. In order to assure the dealers a better quality root and to perpetuate the plant, the Minnesota legislature passed a "Ginseng Law" in 1865.<sup>35</sup>

ON FEBRUARY 13 the legislature approved "An Act to preserve and protect the growth of Ginseng," which provided: "That if any person or persons shall dig, or have in his, her or their possession, or expose for sale, or purchase, within the State of Minnesota, any green ginseng root, between the first day of May, and the first day of August, in each year, such person or persons shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof, shall be fined in a sum not less than five dollars, nor more than one hundred dollars, in the discretion of the court."<sup>36</sup>

In 1865 Minnesota sangers began operat-

<sup>33</sup> *Mankato Weekly Record*, June 13, 1863, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Mankato Weekly Record*, June 18, 1864, p. 3; *Taylors Falls Reporter*, September 10, p. 2, September 24, p. 2 (quote), 1864; *St. Paul Pioneer*, September 13, 1864, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Mankato Weekly Record*, July 12, 1859, p. 3, July 28, 1866, p. 3; Nash, *American Ginseng*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1865, p. 70.

ing under the new law which, in effect, established a ginseng season opening August 1. This date suggests that the basic purpose of the law was to guarantee dealers better quality roots rather than to preserve the plant. Since ginseng was propagated only from seeds, its reproduction could be assured only if the berries were permitted to ripen. For conservation purposes an opening date at least a month later than the one established would have been more realistic. The legislature perhaps reasoned that a true conservation law would be detrimental to sangers since, for all practical purposes, any ginseng season ended after the frosts killed the identifying foliage. In Minnesota, diggers would have had an extremely short season if it had been limited to the time between the ripening of the berries and the first severe frost.

Minnesota's initial regulated ginseng season was not particularly successful. It evidently did not solve any problems for dealers. Buyers kept the price quite low as compared to 1864, with green root usually bringing fifteen or sixteen cents. Some diggers were working along the St. Croix on the Wisconsin side before the Minnesota season opened, and S. Howes, the outstate dealer who had headquartered at Taylors Falls for three years, opened his business in June. During the season, F. S. Eddy, Howes' manager, bought over six tons, and the total purchased in Taylors Falls by late September was over eight tons.<sup>37</sup>

Mankato's key outstate buyers, Major Cyrus Hill and the Smalls of Baltimore, who had frequented the city throughout the 1860s, returned during the summer to open the season. They pooled their interests, with Hill acting as the Smalls' agent, and they assumed the operation of the ginseng drying house erected by E. W. Dike, a Fari-bault merchant, who at one time had aspired to become the Mankato ginseng lord. The year 1865 was a disappointing one to ginseng interests. Howes evidently quit the business in Taylors Falls, as he rented his buildings to William Vincent and P. B.

Krey of St. Croix Falls. Neither the Smalls nor Hill returned to Mankato in 1866, although the former authorized a local merchandising firm to act as their agent.<sup>38</sup>

With the departure of the outstate dealers the importance of ginseng was further diminished. The plant was ideally suited to the timelessness of the virgin forest, and its existence was violently disrupted by man. Ginseng digging, like the fur trade or lumbering, was essentially extractive. Traditionally, it had moved with the frontier, the only place where wholesale digging could occur. Diggers inevitably ruined many young plants while procuring roots. Thinking only of immediate gain, they disturbed germinating seeds and destroyed seed stock through their concentrated spring digging. Plants did not normally bear seeds until their third year, and the seeds usually germinated the second spring following their ripening, or after a period of about twenty months. It took five to six years for a root to reach desirable size. Ginseng was hurt not only by poor digging practices but by agricultural use of the land as well. As farmers systematically cleared the land they destroyed ginseng habitat. Their cattle trampled the plants and their hogs dug out the roots. However, in heavily wooded and comparatively inaccessible areas unsuited for cultivation, such as bluffs near rivers and creeks, enough of the plant survived so that ginseng remained a fairly constant commodity on farm markets for years after the ginseng rush.<sup>39</sup>

THE SUPPLY of American wild root augmented the demands of the Chinese market for roughly a quarter century following the

<sup>37</sup> *Taylors Falls Reporter*, July 17, p. 3, August 19, p. 3, September 23, p. 3, 1865.

<sup>38</sup> *Mankato Weekly Record*, July 8, 1865, p. 3, July 28, 1866, p. 3; *Taylors Falls Reporter*, September 23, 1865, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Nash, *American Ginseng*, 21; "Letters of William Byrd, 2d, of Westover, Va.," in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 9:129 (October, 1901).

Civil War. In Minnesota there was some digging each year in the plant's indigenous range. These later sangers were usually farm boys or housewives working for "pin money," but some digging was done by trappers. Roots were normally marketed through merchants who dealt in furs, hides, wool, tallow, ginseng, and other herbal roots such as Seneca snakeroot and golden seal, and nearly every town had at least one such dealer. Miner Ball of Delano compiled a list of over thirty towns in the northern Big Woods region that had ginseng dealers in 1875 and 1876. For 1880 he listed twenty-seven towns. Mankato had several dealers, including Isaac Marks, an old Winnebago Indian trader who was the operator of a general store. During the late 1870s and the 1880s the price for green root ranged from twenty-five to forty cents, and newspaper advertisements for it were quite frequent. At times ginseng gathering seems to have been locally important. In 1874 a Mr. Churchill of St. Croix Falls bought and processed over 16,000 pounds, and "large quantities" were dug at Rush City in 1878.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, the demands of the Chinese and the persistence of American diggers nearly exhausted the wild ginseng stock. By 1894 Minnesota was said to be "pretty nearly 'dug out.'" The experience of other ginseng producing states was comparable to Minnesota's, and American horticulturists concluded that if the United States was going

to continue to share the Chinese trade with Korea, Manchuria, and Nepal, it would be necessary to cultivate the root, as the Chinese and Koreans had long done.<sup>41</sup>

AFTER long experimentation, George Stanton of Summit Station, New York, finally mastered the art of raising cultivated ginseng during the 1880s. He is generally regarded as the pioneer ginseng cultivator in the United States, since his methods were the basis for all subsequent cultivation. Essentially, Stanton duplicated the plant's natural conditions by providing the forest loam, leaf mulch, and shade in arbors covered by latticed roofs. The plants were started from seed or by transplanting either the wild plants or roots.<sup>42</sup>

Cultivated ginseng roots developed distinctive features. They matured much faster than the wild roots and were firmer and less subject to shrinkage. Furthermore, because they were raised without competition with tree roots, the roots were usually regularly shaped and lacked the odd forms of the wild. Since much of the Chinese faith in the ability of ginseng to rejuvenate the body was based on the classical "man" form, a persistent demand for the wild root continued even after cultivation became widespread. There is some question as to whether the cultivated or the wild root was the more valuable; the various authorities do not agree on this point. Quite possibly the average price of the cultivated root was higher than the wild because it was a more uniformly developed and firmer root. However, wild man-shaped roots apparently were considered premium by Chinese buyers who sometimes bargained for single roots.<sup>43</sup>

Stanton's success naturally spurred an interest in the commercial prospects of ginseng, which were widely advertised in government reports and numerous periodicals. In 1895 the United States Department of Agriculture published George V. Nash's *American Ginseng*, which was reissued in revised form three years later. This became

<sup>40</sup> Miner Ball Diary, May 22, 1876, Ball Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society; *Review* (Mankato), July 8, p. 7, August 5, p. 7, 1879; June 3, 1884, p. 7; June 2, p. 9, June 16, p. 6, June 23, p. 7, 1885; *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 11, 1874, p. 2; *Rush City Post*, July 26, 1878, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> "Ginseng Root," in *Northwest Magazine*, 12:5 (December, 1894).

<sup>42</sup> George C. Butz, *The Cultivation of American Ginseng*, 6, 20 (Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, *Bulletins*, no. 27 — n.p., 1897); Maurice G. Kains, *Ginseng: Its Cultivation, Harvesting, Marketing and Market Value*, 20 (New York, 1899).

<sup>43</sup> Butz, *Cultivation of American Ginseng*, 20; Nash, *American Ginseng*, 8; "'Ginseng' — an Equal of Gold," in *Harper's Weekly*, 50:999 (July 14, 1906).



the basic technical manual, and later writers such as Maurice G. Kains and George C. Butz relied heavily upon it. Nash, Kains, and Butz all wrote glowingly about the assured ginseng market in an effort to induce Americans to enter the business. Many briefer articles on cultivated ginseng were published in farm, garden, and scientific journals. Encouraging information on the Chinese ginseng market was furnished by the United States consuls in Hong Kong. In 1902 W. A. Rublee, the consul-general, reported that "ginseng root is as indispensable to the well-to-do Chinese as is their rice," and that the prices of wild American root on the Hong Kong market ranged from \$4.05 to \$6.18. He noted that little American cultivated root had been imported to that time, but that the "demand is so great that much could be disposed of advantageously. . . . Its cultivation ought to be encouraged in the United States."<sup>44</sup>

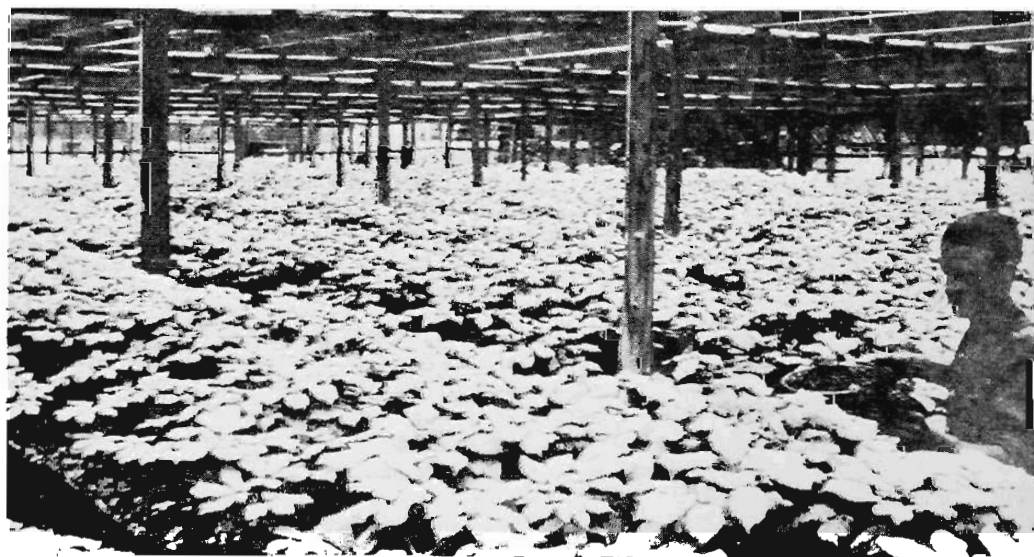
The wide dissemination of technical advice and the assured Chinese market caused a rash of ginseng cultivation in most of the northern states, but particularly in New York and Wisconsin. In Minnesota numerous ginseng arbors were started in the early twentieth century. One of the first was

the "Minnesota ginseng plantation" at Howard Lake owned by H. Simmons. In 1902, the plantation consisted of a quarter-acre arbor from which Simmons harvested two and one-half bushels of seed and shipped about fifteen thousand roots which were to be transplanted by others. In Le Center about 1900, L. L. Whipps and his son Harry L. started a ginseng garden which was said to have been valued at some \$10,000. L. A. Comstock of Morristown had a garden with three thousand roots, and there were several growers in the Kenyon area, including P. A. Henning of Aspelund, and M. O. Floan, G. H. Fossan, and the Severeid brothers. Henning had a twenty-four-by-forty-foot arbor, and like many of the small producers, he specialized

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<sup>44</sup> Later technical manuals included: Warner W. Stockberger, *Ginseng Culture* (United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmers' Bulletins*, no. 1184—Washington, 1921, 1928, 1941) and Arthur R. Harding, *Ginseng and Other Medicinal Plants* (Columbus, Ohio, privately published, 1936); W. A. Rublee, "American Ginseng in China," in *Scientific American Supplement*, 53:21995 (April 19, 1902). See also United States Department of State, *Consular Reports*, no. 206, *Commerce, Manufactures, Etc.* (November, 1897); no. 211, *Commerce, Manufactures, Etc.* (April, 1898).

*A ginseng arbor at Fromm fur farm in Wisconsin*





in raising seed rather than root. He produced twenty-nine pounds of seed from his bed in 1903, when seeds were selling for eight cents apiece, about \$6 an ounce, and \$90 a pound.<sup>45</sup>

There were many other gardens, including those of O. J. Ekegren of Copas, Charles T. Gates of Stillwater, Gus H. Schendel of Rapidan Station, Dr. Charles F. Burrows of Lake Crystal, Charles H. Peterson of Garden City, and G. D. Moore, H. A. Whittier, and B. F. Richel of Northfield. Whittier and Richel were reported to have "one of the largest ginseng farms in the country" and were selling two thousand to three thousand pounds of dry root at a time when it was going for \$7 to \$8 a pound.<sup>46</sup>

THE GINSENG ACREAGE increased moderately during the first two decades of the century and then rose dramatically during the 1920s. In 1920 Minnesota ranked fourth in cultivated ginseng production, following Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio. However, the trade was nearly ruined by developments in both the United States and China in the 1930s and 1940s. During the depression decade in the United States, China was racked by political chaos, a series of natural disasters, and finally the Japanese invasion. The situation was further aggravated by World War II, when Japan used her military advantage to create an official government-controlled ginseng monopoly in Korea. American economic interests in China were further impaired after the war when



*In 1949 Korea put out this postage stamp, the first of eleven such issues through 1966 to depict ginseng.*

Chinese political conditions worsened with the resumption of the civil war and the emergence of Communist China.<sup>47</sup>

In recent times the ginseng trade has revived somewhat. The loss of the Chinese mainland as a market has forced American exporters to find new outlets for ginseng. Most American root is marketed in Thailand, Korea, and Hong Kong, with some being sold to Chinese Americans. Throughout the era of ginseng cultivation there has been some gathering of the wild root. In fact, the wild root, once thought to be nearly extinct, has made a comeback. Annual exports during the 1960s probably do not total even a hundred thousand pounds, but with prices at an all-time high, the value of the exported ginseng is about \$2,000,000.<sup>48</sup>

Currently Minnesota produces small amounts of both wild and cultivated root, with good quality, dry, wild ginseng selling for as much as \$36 a pound. The nation's leading producer, the fur farm of Fromm Bros., Inc. of Hamburg, Wisconsin, now raises about fifteen thousand pounds of gin-

<sup>45</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, October 11, 1902, p. 16; *Le Center Leader*, October 31, 1940, sec. 3, p. 1; *Faribault Republican*, November 18, 1903, p. 4; *Kenyon Leader*, November 26, 1903, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Stillwater Messenger*, July 15, 1905, p. 4, September 11, 1909, p. 4; *Mankato Review*, October 1, p. 1, October 5, p. 1, 1912; *Northfield Independent*, June 13, 1912, p. 1 (quote).

<sup>47</sup> *United States Census*, 1920, *Agriculture*, 5:851. "Japs Get Monopoly of Ginseng Growing," in *Science News Letter*, 43:137 (February 27, 1943).

<sup>48</sup> "America's Oddest Export: Mysterious Ginseng Root," in *Popular Mechanics*, 120:32 (August, 1963); Lawrence, in *Natural History*, 73:35.

CULTIVATED GINSENG PRODUCTION  
UNITED STATES AND MINNESOTA 1909-1954 <sup>49</sup>

UNITED STATES					MINNESOTA				
Date	Farms Reporting	Acres	Pounds	Value	Farms Reporting	Acres	Pounds	Value	
1909	—	23	—	\$151,888	—	—	—	\$	7,640
1919	—	54	18,561	129,927	—	7	2,048		14,336
1929	303	434	59,299	584,274	17*	73*	12,674*		111,831*
1939	112	138	25,508	77,270	4	5	701		3,014
1949	19	12	10,600	34,734	2	2	480		1,350
1954	5	21	88,600	142,785	—	—	—		—

\* Totals quoted are for "ginseng, golden seal, warm seed, etc."

seng annually which is sold for \$26 a pound.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, although vestiges of sanging remain to the present day, ginseng gathering and raising has been an occupational oddity for decades. In looking at the fertile open cropland of southern Minnesota now, one might echo the words of the *Le Center Leader* of October 31, 1940: "It does not seem possible today, but the fact remains that this root which grew so profusely in the forests and had a ready market, played an important part in the early history, as it gave the pioneers an income which was sorely, and sometimes, desperately needed."

By the time ginseng had been domesticated, the pioneers of 1859 were passing into history. Some reminisced about the great ginseng rush. Although they often had difficulty recalling the exact year and the market price, they agreed on the importance of ginseng. It was even remembered by some as having "saved" Minnesota.<sup>51</sup>

It is not likely that the discovery of ginseng prevented Minnesota's ruination, but to many in 1859 it was difficult not to over-emphasize the importance of the plant. Certainly, the impact of ginseng can only be appreciated if considered in light of Minnesota's desperate financial condition after the panic of 1857. Seth K. Humphrey

captured the essence of the ginseng rush as well as anyone: "Outside of China, ginseng has never been credited with having any particular medicinal value; the Chinese regard for it is said to be well mixed with magic. But for those desperate settlers in Minnesota, ginseng — no doubt about it — was 'good medicine.'" <sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See *United States Census*, 1920, *Agriculture*, 5:851; 1930, *Agriculture*, 4:824; 1940, *Agriculture*, 3:699, 795; 1950, *Agriculture*, 2:655; 1954, *Agriculture*, 2:578, 762.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews by the author with Howard Bennett and Herman Ohsman of Ohsman & Sons Hide Co., Mankato, March 17, 31, 1969; letters from B. Ribnick of I. Ribnick & Sons Furs, Minneapolis, March 16, 1969, Roger Wilkowske, Waseca County Agent, March 18, 1969, and Fromm Bros., Inc., March 18, 1969, in possession of author.

<sup>51</sup> *Faribault Republican*, February 14, 1894, p. 3; *Wright County Journal-Press* (Buffalo), August 13, 1931, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Seth K. Humphrey, *Following the Prairie Frontier*, 33 (Minneapolis, 1931).

THE DRAWING on page 250 is from Horton Howard, *An Improved System of Botanic Medicine*, 424 (Columbus, Ohio, 1833); that on page 255 is from *Northwest Magazine*, 12:5 (December, 1894). The photographs on pages 259, 261, and 264 are from Kathrene Pinkerton, *Bright With Silver* (New York, 1947); the Korean stamp on page 265 is from the collection of Francis R. Meisch, Minneapolis architect. The map on page 253 was adapted from Warren Upham, *Catalogue of the Flora of Minnesota* (Minneapolis, 1884) and drawn by Alan Ominsky of the society's staff.



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