



M C H S

# MITCHELL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Third Quarter 2018

## MCHS 2018 APPLE BUTTER FESTIVAL

The Mitchell County Historical Society will hold its 6th annual Apple Butter Festival on Saturday, October 13, 2018, from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM at the Bakersville Creek Walk. MCHS members and volunteers will cook apple butter over an open flame. Watch them stirring the large kettle and enjoy a sample of hot apple butter with fresh biscuit. Apple butter in pints and half pints will be for sale. They make wonderful Christmas gifts - as well as a delicious breakfast for yourself!

Twenty-five or more local vendors will offer various arts and crafts at the 2018 Festival. Visit booths of some talented mountain artisans as you stroll along the picturesque Cane Creek. And you won't go hungry; there will be food vendors selling snacks and lunch!

We'll have great live music all day long; you can bring a chair and be entertained or enjoy the musicians as you visit vendors or watch the apple butter being made.

Get in on the drawing for a set of MCHS Christmas ornaments; the 2018 ornament, the 7th in the series, depicts the Cloudland Hotel which once crowned Roan Mountain. MCHS will also raffle *Voices of the Valley*, the excellent account of Mitchell County's first 150 years, by Elizabeth Hunter. Those and other books, including Arcadia's Images of America series, will be for sale, as well as Christmas ornaments.

There will be activities for all in the family to enjoy, so come out and spend the day at the 2018 Apple Butter Festival.



# LEATHER BRITCHES

By Will Ritter

Excerpted with permission from Will's website,  
<https://sarahandwilliam.weebly.com>.



There's a huge bean diversity in the Appalachian range, and that is especially true in Western North Carolina. A veritable army of various types of "bunch" beans, cornfield beans, cut-shorts, pink tips, turkey crows, preacher beans, stick beans, case knife beans, butter beans, (to name only a few) can be found in gardens across the western part of the state. Many have been in the same families for generations. October beans, like many of the beans I just listed, can come in a range of shapes, colors, and textures. It is more like a bean "genre" than a variety. The main unifying characteristic amongst October beans, or as some people call them, Fall Beans, is the fact that they set their beans late in the season. The first time I planted October beans, I was just about to give up on the flowerless giant sprawling vines, but then late in the season it started setting beans like crazy--I was inundated with them. Turns out, many types of October beans only set pods in the fall of the year, after days have begun to shorten. It's not that they take a long time to put out pods, as much as they need to be "triggered" by the days getting shorter. I planted October beans at different dates, but they all came in about the same time.

I break down the October bean genre into two sub-genres: "tenderhull" and "toughhull." Many varieties of October beans are stringless and have a tough outer hull. Some tough-hulled types of October beans are commercially available as "French Horticulture Beans," or "Cranberry Beans." They are almost exclusively eaten as a dry bean, or in the desirable "shelly" phase when the bean seed is swollen and fully mature, but not yet dried out for dormancy.

Tenderhull beans on the other hand, tend to have more rounded seeds, and can be eaten at any stage: (1) Early and thin--some folks don't give beans a chance to grow, (2) fat and bulging with seeds, flavor, and protein, (3) as shellies for soup beans and the like, (4) as dry beans, and (5) "unzipped," strung together still in the hull, and dehydrated as "Leatherbritches," a.k.a. "Shuckie Beans" or "Shuck Beans.\*"

It's not hard to see where the name leather britches comes from, because the beans dry and fade to a shriveled tan color that very much resembles leather pants. The dried beans are later soaked and then slow cooked with some fatback for a unique taste.

In an article for the *Sylva Herald*, my friend and noted storyteller Gary Carden wrote a few lines in praise of the old-time treat: "[It's] a bean dish that my grandmother used to fix from beans that had spent the fall drying out on newspapers in the attic. When she boiled them, they fattened up and acquired that wonderful flavor that drove me into a feeding frenzy.

Southerners loved their shuck beans so much that the title of the old Scottish tune "Lord MacDonald's Reel" was renamed "Leather Breeches."

Shuck beans and October beans, like so many other fixtures of mountain people's gardens and supper tables, were adopted or inherited from the Cherokee and other Native groups. Before the widespread use of canning, and especially until grocery stores offered beans all-year-round, leather britches were an excellent way to store your beans through the winter. Over time, whether they were threaded with a wire and hung on an old rusty nail or spread out on an old window screen on a hot tin roof to dry, the shrunken tan hulls went from being a food staple to being a rare treat at holiday suppers (they do take, after all, a while to cook).

I remember seeing Leather britches hanging off porches, or occasionally inside an old car when I was growing up. At a roadside stand in Crossnore I actually saw some for sale a few years ago (which nearly caused me to wreck). On the whole though, I almost never see shuck beans or leather britches anymore. Now, that could be because people are drying them in electric dehydrators and keeping them sealed up in a freezer or somewhere out of sight and away from the amazing tight-rope gymnastic abilities of mice, but I think it has more to do with the fading memory of a way of life that didn't just find leather britches delicious--they *needed* a good way to keep food over the winter. My hope is that taste and novelty will, as it has with heirloom seeds, save the cultural practice of leather britches. There's a restaurant in Asheville called Buxton Hall BBQ, that has started offering leather britches on rare occasions. They even string them and dry them in house, in the smoke from the roasting hog meat. That sounds pretty 'daggum good to me.

Will Ritter presented a terrific program in August 2018 for the Mitchell County Historical Society entitled "Saving Seeds and Song." As he told his rapt audience, his "parents always kept a big garden, and (whether he liked it or not) he had the opportunity to learn the finer points of gardening from his father Richard. Over the past few years, William has collected a freezer-full of old timey family seeds that have been passed down in Appalachia and elsewhere for generations." Will told stories about how he began saving seeds, sang songs about "greasy beans" and other delicious vegetables common in Appalachia, and even shared seed with folks who wanted to start their own seed stash. To check out the musical and storytelling talents of Will Ritter and his wife Sarah Ogletree, go to their website <https://sarahandwilliam.weebly.com>.

Mitchell County Historical Society in collaboration with the NC Dept of Natural and Cultural Resources is participating in the national program “Bells of Peace.” This is a call to citizens and organizations across the nation to toll bells in their communities 21 times at 11 a.m. local time on Nov. 11 as a solemn reminder of the sacrifice and service of veterans of WW I as well as all veterans. The war ended by an armistice agreement at 11 a.m. on Nov. 11, 1918.



A World War I Remembrance

MCHS Chair Rhonda Gunter says, “We will be sure that the Historic Courthouse bell will ring and we hope that every church in the county will set aside time to participate. Not just to ring their bells, but also consider a special prayer service for the 116,516 who died in WWI, all veterans, and those currently serving in our armed forces.”

The event began with The World War One Centennial Commission, joined by the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, the Society of the Honor Guard of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the National Cathedral, The American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

In Washington, D.C., bells will toll in the National Cathedral at an interfaith service, marking the centennial of the armistice that brought an end to hostilities in what Americans fervently hoped had been “the war to end all wars.” World War I took place from July 1914 to November 1918 and is among the deadliest conflicts in world history. The US officially entered the war on April 6, 1917. Some 4.7 Americans stepped forward to serve in uniform, of whom 2 million were deployed overseas to fight.

Congress established the U.S. World War One Centennial Commission in 2013 to provide education programs, public outreach, and commemorative events regarding US involvement in the war. The commission is authorized to create a new national memorial in Washington, DC, to honor the men and women who served. For additional info and resources go to: <https://www.worldwar1centennial.org/> or contact MCHS at 828-688-4371, mitchellnchistory@gmail.com, or <http://mitchellnchistory.org>.

