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## Molasses Makers and Moonshiners

BY [KATE O'CONNOR](#)

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Photo by Tim Robison

David Weintraub doesn't take kindly to the squandering of resources. Yes, he's an environmentalist; he's the former director of Hendersonville's ECO — the Environmental & Conservation Organization — which focuses on good stewardship and sustainable planning in the face of rampant development in Western North Carolina. But there are other resources that are battling against gentrification and assimilation. Human resources. Cultural resources. The type of resources that have deep roots in these mountains; the home-place understandings of the people who have lived here for generations. Elder Wisdom...and he's not about to let that be squandered either.

His latest project, as part of the work of the Center for Cultural Preservation, is an ambitious multi-year endeavor, a documentary film that will record the memories, lore and precious knowledge of the older residents of this region. These are the life lessons of people whose very survival depended on their relationship with the land. These are the teachings passed from their ancestors about how to live in and with their surroundings, despite the challenges. And David believes that they have a great deal of relevance for current and future generations.

Weintraub is not a native North Carolinian. He grew up amid the telephone-pole forests and asphalt meadows of Brooklyn, NY. But in the summer, his schoolteacher parents would take the family to the Adirondacks, where David developed his profound love of nature. After completing law school (he's licensed in several states, including North Carolina) a career as a community organizer and civil-rights attorney led him all along the East coast — as far south as Miami — but his heart eventually brought him to the mountains. "I've lived in a lot of places — major cities and small towns," he says. "This is the first place where I really feel like I'm home."

His involvement with ECO brought him into close contact with the locals. "Instead of just attracting people that had a propensity for environmentalism, we tried to engage people from the entire demographic sphere," he recalls, "so I met a lot of farmers and natives...old-timers who were seeing all their blood, sweat and toil in the land disappearing into mega-development.

"That's where I first developed some close relationships with the native community and learned more about the heritage and history. It just blew me away — living in this place where you don't have to go to a museum to learn the history. There are still people here living the life of their ancestors...still doing things the old-timey way. There was such a rich culture that, I saw, was disappearing. I knew I wanted to do something with this."

Weintraub knows something about preserving cultural heritage. His earlier documentary film, *Where Neon Goes to Die*, explores the vibrant Yiddish culture that flourished in South Florida during the middle of the last century, finally succumbing to the "Miami Vice" sensibility in the '70s. "I saw a correlation. People were losing the connection to their roots...to who they are."

The ECO connections became a springboard for the project. "Every person I meet opens up a gateway to dozens of others," he explains, "but even when someone introduces me, it takes many tries and many cups of coffee before they feel like they can open up.

I'm a believer that it has to be slow and deliberate relationship building. If they don't respect and trust you, you're not getting an authentic response. But once that happens you have friendships that go on forever, and that's as valuable as anything I do on camera."

Assisting Weintraub in the project is a group of volunteers, bringing skills from diverse backgrounds. "They're the "Connecting with the Elders Committee"— archeologists, homemakers, historians and natives — people who see the value in keeping this heritage alive. We're working with an apprenticeship program to train skilled oral historians so that we can continue to expand the work."

Those oral histories come from elders of various backgrounds: Scots-Irish, Native-American, and African-American. "We've interviewed all sorts of folks, from molasses makers to moonshiners, apple farmers to textile workers," David says. "This is not a history project. These skills are just as pertinent today. We all live in a very vulnerable situation. When your food comes from thousands of miles away, when your resources, the daily things you need to survive, come from so far away, then it doesn't take very much — a climate event, a financial storm — to change your situation immediately. The best way to be a resilient, sustainable community is to learn to live in a way that is resilient and sustainable, and we don't have to go very far to find great examples of that.

"That's where "mountain elder" wisdom is important. It's not about looking at the past and reminiscing, but exploring how we apply the lessons of our nearest ancestors to the problems of today. It comes from experience and practice and connecting with something real and authentic. You don't learn that in school. "Elder wisdom" — in contrast to academic wisdom — is so much more powerful, authentic and meaningful. It brings joy into people's lives. There's a big difference between wisdom and education.

"This project captures the heart of true knowledge...where it comes from and what it's meaning is...and how we use that to build a sense of community again. It helps us to reconnect with what's important."

If you have archival photographs, film footage or would like to share your story with or contribute to the project, contact David Weintraub at 828-692-8062 or visit [www.saveculture.org](http://www.saveculture.org). You can also support the project with donations at the website or at their first benefit, the Spring Mountain Art Show on May 31, 7pm at HiArt Studio, 443 N. Main St., Hendersoville.

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