It is mid-April and throughout the tributaries of West Virginia's Big Coal River, peepers are announcing spring. High in the hills, coves drained by chortling creeks are alight with the whites of trillium, the yellows of spice bush, the reds of wake robins, and the bright greens of ramps. From the valleys the bare woods appear spangled with the russet blooms of hard maples, the green-tinged yellows of soft maples, the white bursts of service and dogwoods, and the deep pinks of Judas trees. Soon, they say, the bass will be leaving the river and swimming up into the creeks to spawn.

I am sitting fairly high in the hills myself, paring knife in hand, in a modest rectangular building officially known as "The Ramp House." Perched as far up the hollow of Drew's Creek as a person can drive in a two-wheel-drive car, the Ramp House faces the Delbert Free Will Baptist Church across a small parking lot. For more than forty years the Ramp House has functioned as a community center, where women of the church hold weekly quilting bees and families assemble for reunions. But its name registers its most public and celebrated purpose: sheltering friends, neighbors, and kin who come together each spring to feast upon ramps.

Ramps, *Allium tricoccum*, are wild leeks. Thriving throughout the Appalachian range in rich, dark woodlands near mountain streams, ramps are among the first edible foods to appear in the early spring, when they pierce the gray and brown leaf mold with a spire of tightly furled, onion-scented leaves. In June the lance-shaped leaves wither, and the plant sends up a stalk with an umbel of white flowers. Underground the stems swell into white bulbs connected by a mass of fibrous rootlets. These diminutive leeks reek of garlic, only stronger.

Throughout the Appalachian South, ramps are hailed with feasting at ramp suppers and festivals. The most famous of these community fund-raisers include the Ramp Festival at Cosby, Tennessee, and the Feast of the Ramson at Richwood, West Virginia. Richwood, in fact, is home to the NRA—the National Ramp Association. But many smaller events proliferate throughout April and well into the month of May. From noon until 8 P.M., the women who organize this particular event at the Ramp House will serve nearly 500 plates piled high with potatoes, fried apples, pinto beans, cornbread, and ramps.

The week before the ramp supper is one of the year's busiest, and members of the Delbert Free Will Baptist Church divide the labor of production. Each evening the women meet in the Ramp House to clean and refrigerate the ramps brought in by the men from the upper-elevation hollows wrinkling the ridgelines. The female camaraderie on these evenings, pungent with the aroma of ramps, coffee, and sassafras tea and punctuated with laughter, makes this an event in its own right. "We sit in a circle and clean ramps and talk," Delores Workman told me at last year's ramp supper. "It's a lot of fun. I love my ramp circle."

"You should hear the tales Jenny tells," laughed Judy Griffy. Hoping to, this year I am in the Ramp House the night before Ramp Day, chopping ramps and tape-recording the talk of a dozen women, worn out from a week of preparation, but excited about the day ahead. Only one man is present, Laffon Pettry's husband, Bob. Bob tolerates the women's razzing with good humor. "You put down that cigarette and get your knife and get busy," Mabel Brown warns him as he tries to take a break. "You'll be the first one we fire, Bob!"

"He's slightly outnumbered, isn't he," murmurs Theresa Elkins.

"He'd better watch it here with this gang of females!" Mabel teases, brandishing her knife.

Dusk gathers outside, and in the wake of the setting sun the stars are brightening into the sign of the ram, for which it is said that ramps were long ago named "ramsons" by the Swedes. Inside, the air is thick with the smell and the talk of ramps. Jenny Bonds tells about a ramp-themed basket her granddaughter gave her for Christmas, containing ramp vinegar, ramp seeds, dried ramps, ramp jelly, pickled ramps, even ramp wine. "I had some of the jelly," said Jenny. "It stunk." Other possibilities are advanced: ramp pizza or Jenny's ramp casserole, with sausage, potatoes, and cheese.

Historically, in these mountains, female sociality has flourished around the gathering and processing of greens and other wild produce. On the heels of ramps a host of other greens start popping up: dandelions, poke, shawnee lettuce, woolen britches, creasies, and lamb's tongue. And around these, women have fashioned women's worlds. "That was the big deal when everybody used to go green picking," said Carrie Lou Jarrell, of Sylvester, West Virginia, on another occasion. "That was the event of the week. Mrs. Karen Thomas would come up
and she always brought Jessie Graybill with her, and then Miss Haddad would come, and most of the time Maggie Wriston came with her. And usually Sylvia Williams was always there to do green picking with them. I knew from the time I came into the world that she was just a good friend. But that was the thrill of my life to get to go with all of these women, because they talked about good stuff.”

Such talk is one means of crafting locality. It catches people up into a dense fabric of kinship and community and fastens that fabric to places and events in the mountains. Through such talk the women enunciate their place in the hills, a place remarkable not only for its biodiversity but for the interweaving of biodiversity and community life. In the Ramp House the women laugh over how Violet Dickens once mistook sassafras tea for bacon grease and poured it over the frying ramps: “We need you to come season the ramps,” Mabel kidded her the other day. They compare the aromas of poke and collard greens and marvel at how window screens get black with flies when you’re cooking them. They wonder where the creasies (dry land cress) are growing this year, and Jenny points out that creasies won’t grow unless you till the soil.

In southern West Virginia a mixed mesophytic forest (known among ecologists as the world’s most biologically diverse temperate-zone hardwood system) is not just a product of nature. It is integral to a cultural landscape that has taken shape over many generations. On Coal River, I have heard people say the best place to look for red mulberry trees, now in serious decline, is on farms; that the cows that grazed throughout the mountains well into the twentieth century kept the snake population down; and that Peach Tree Creek was named for peach trees encountered there by the first white settlers entering the region in the early 1800s. In the Ramp House they say you can start your own ramp patch from the bit of root they’re chopping off at the ends. “Mabel has a few ramps growing in her yard,” said Jenny. “I do, Edna does, and Sadie does. You don’t, do you Theresa? You’re going to have to plant you a patch of ramps and some molly moochers.”

This week the molly moochers are coming in. Molly moochers are morel mushrooms. They say you can hear them popping up through the dried leaves when it rains. Old apple orchards, scattered throughout the woods where people used to live, make good places to go molly mooching. A neighbor found fifty-six today in an old apple orchard behind Laffon’s house. “He found thirty-seven yesterday,” said Laffon.

“Gladys was finding them out there,” says another woman.

“Oh Gladys,” Laffon chuckles. “She’s the queen of the molly moochers!”

The salient feature of ramps is the smell. The Menominee Indians called it “pikwate sikakushia”: the skunk. “Shikako,” their name for a large ramp patch that once flourished in northern Illinois, has been anglicized to Chicago: “the skunk place.” Our chopping of leaves is filling the air with aromatic organosulphur compounds, characteristic of members of the Allium family but carried to extremes in ramps and their consumers. Some have seen in this practice of restoring the body while emitting a sulphurous odor a rite of death and resurrection, serendipitously coinciding with Easter. Actually with ramps the motif appears to be breath and insurrection. Liberating organosulfides seems to comprise, if not a rite of inversion, at least a delicious form of back talk: the country back-talking the city, the improper back-talking propriety. The efforts of official institutions to quell this annual olfactory uprising have been rehearsed at every ramp supper I’ve attended.

“Let me get this down so I can move on,” said John Flynn at the 1995 ramp supper. “We did not eat ramps. There were very strong women in my family who did not like the odor. Also, if you ate ramps and went to school, they sent you home because of the odor. There were a lot of authoritarians in the school, so you didn’t do a lot of ramp eating. Someone might get up the guts to do it once, but they didn’t do it twice. The odor was the issue.” Ways of annulling the odor creep into ramp talk.

“I like them raw,” said Jess Duncan of Sylvester, “like you’d eat a hot pepper or something with a sandwich.”

“Fried potatoes, pinto beans,” added Pat Canterbury.

“You can’t beat them,” said Jess, “and they don’t stink if you don’t eat very many of them.”

“They do too,” said Pat.

“If you eat them with a sandwich, they don’t,” Jess insisted. “My wife’s never complained.”

“Now, if you’re confined close,” cautioned Bob Daniel, of Dry Creek, one morning in Syble’s Bed and Barn, “say in an office with people, I’m sure it would offend people like that, but in my line of work I don’t think I bother anybody with them.”

“If you don’t like the smell,” laughed Mae Bongalis, “go the other way. Stay at your house!”

The most famous official censure of ramps was brought on by the late Jim Comstock, editor of the West Virginia Hillbilly. Comstock, inspired by scratch- and-sniff advertising for perfume and coffee in several local papers, announced the Richwood ramp supper one year by lacing the printer’s ink for his spring issue with ramp juice. “We got a reprimand from the postmaster general,” Comstock recalled. “And we are probably the only paper in the United States that’s under oath to the federal government not to smell bad.”
effects. The beliefs that ramps are good for the heart, that they thin and purify ails you. Ramps have long been recommended for their germicidal and toning effects. The beliefs that ramps are good for the heart, that they thin and purify the blood, and that they relieve the common cold are widespread. Scientific research suggests that such faith in ramps is well placed. The allicin (diallyl-sulfide oxide) in ramps, which has antibiotic properties, has been linked with reduced rates of cancer. Ramps are higher in vitamin C than oranges. They contain cepaenes, which function as antithrombotic agents. Ramps also contain flavonoids and other antioxidants that are free-radical scavengers.

As the first of the wild foods to appear, ramps satisfy the body's craving for living food at the end of a winter filled with produce that's been dried, canned, frozen, or shipped from faraway places. "They used to say," said Jenny Bonds, "that people that lived out like we did didn't live near grocery stores, so they said in the springtime you always need green things, like vegetables. So they said in the springtime the country people got ramps, that was our spring tonic."

"What does a spring tonic do?" I asked.
"Cure for spring fever, I guess," said Jenny.
"Strawberry rhubarb pie is my spring tonic," said Laffon Pettry.

Spring fever is twice cured by ramps, which lure people into the higher reaches of the mountains. "Ramps are fun to hunt," said John Flynn. "You can go out in the yard and get all the poke you want, but you have to go into the forest to look for ramps."

"The higher you go," said Woody Boggs on another occasion, "the more ramps and the bigger."

Ramp patches in the mountains have long functioned as a common resource. Most of the ramps served at the ramp supper, some fifteen bushels, do not come from people's personal patches. They come from the upper-elevation coves rising high above the Ramp House. "I've got a few planted up the holler here," said Dennis Dickens, of Peach Tree Creek, a beloved octogenarian who passed away this year. "They just grow at an elevation of about, I'd say, 2,000 to 2,500 feet. Real rich soil."

For many, eating ramps in the mountains is as much a rite of spring as attending the ramp supper. "I love them," said Bob Daniel, over breakfast at Syble's one spring morning. "I like to dig them and eat them right there. Sit down in the woods with a piece of cornbread and eat them."

"That's the fun part," said Mary Jarrell, speaking in Lloyd's Convenient, which she operates with her husband at the mouth of Rock Creek. "Getting them and cooking them out. We'd go to several places, like Hazy, where they've closed it off. We would always go and take a skillet and make cornbread and take some potatoes and get the ramps and clean them and fix them on top of the mountains."

"We'd take our cornbread and pinto beans," said Mae Bongalis, of Naoma, during the 1995 ramp supper. "And go to the mountain, up Board Tree Hollow, dig ramps all afternoon. Then we'd clean them in a little stream coming through the patch, wash them and cook them and then have dinner. They taste better that way, too."

The higher elevations, known simply as "the mountains," have long functioned as what anthropologist Beverly Brown terms a "de facto commons," an open-access area where people go to hunt, picnic, and party, gather a variety of roots, herbs, nuts, and fruit, or to enjoy some solitude. Ramps inaugurate an annual round of small-scale subsistence harvesting of woodland bounty, and they afford the first opportunity to get back into the mountains. But they are fortifying throughout the growing season. "Ramps are sweet this time of year," said Tony Dickens of Pettry Bottom, one late September evening. "You'll come across a ramp patch when you're out ginsenging. Last week I dug more ramps than ginseng!"

Supporting an unusually diverse seasonal round, central Appalachia's mixed mesophytic forest distinguishes these mountains among America's de facto commons. Telltale signs of this diversity abound in the hollows and coal camps, and in yards and homes on the river: the handful of butternuts curing on a step, the coal bucket of black walnuts ready for shelling, the hellgrammites seine at the ready on the porch, the ginseng drying in the rear window of a car, the squirrel meat marinating in a bowl, the gallon of blackberries ready for canning, the plastic bag full of homemade "deer jerky," the jar full of "lin" (white basswood) honey, the pawpaws in the freezer, the molly moochers soaking in salt water, the pickled ramps in the pantry.

The traditional knowledge that sustains this annual round of harvesting is anchored in a people's landscape inscribed all over the mountains, a literary work writ large.

The hills rising away from the Ramp House are rich in family and community history. Names bestowed on every wrinkle in the ridgeline commemorate people, events, and moments in the seasonal round. What appears to be a jumble of coves, ridges, creeks, knobs, branches, gaps, and forks is as legible to some residents as a metropolitan grid is to an urbanite. "These different little hollows," said Howard Miller, "they had a name for each one, so when a neighbor talked to another neighbor about a certain thing that happened at this holler, they knew
Mary Hufford RAMP SUPPERS

Creek. And they decided to go over in Hazy to hunt one day. They got to the top of history.

Many of the ramps for this year's ramp supper came from Hazy Creek, a long, lush, meandering hollow that hooks around Shumate's Branch like a sheltering arm. Hundreds of people lived at the mouth of Hazy in the 1940s when the coal town of Edwight was the bustling hub of the river between Whitesville and Glen Daniel. Though Hazy Creek and Shumate's Branch were evacuated of dwellings in the 1980s, people continue to comb the hollows of Hazy Creek for ramps, ginseng, molly moochers, yellow root, mayapple, bloodroot, berries, and signs of history.

According to Dennis Dickens, Hazy got its name before the Civil War. "Some hunters came through there," said Dickens, "and they camped over along Drew's Creek. And they decided to go over in Hazy to hunt one day. They got to the top exactly where it was at, they knew even from Beckley down to Racine down to Madison."

The names for the coves anchor local history and knowledge in the land: Mill Holler, Peach Orchard Holler, School House Holler, and Bee Light Holler, where they baited bees in order to "line" them to wild hives, filled with honey from mixed mesophytic flowering trees like basswood ("lin"), tulip tree ("yellow poplar"), and yellow locust ("mountain locust"). Thus indexed, the landscape is a dynamic repository of rural life, knowledge, and history, which elderly raconteurs render into narrative. "Quill Holler's below the ramp house," Howard went on. "They used to get a hollow straw and drink sugar water where they notched a sugar tree. Something like these straws at a restaurant, but it's a plant."

The cultural landscape is rife with landmarks. Over generations of working the seasonal round, a language for navigating the mountains discriminates them into a wide array of landmarks: not only the high walls, mine breaks, auger holes, and other traces of industry, but into "knobs," "drains," "coves," "swags," "ridges," "crossings," "gaps," "flats," "beaver holes," "orchards," "home places," "sink holes," "walk paths," "hill climbs," "camp rocks," "bottoms," "brakes," "graveyards," "bee trees," "den trees," and "benches."

This landscape supports the common world celebrated in the Ramp House. Cultural practices like ramp suppers, ramp talk, and roaming the mountains have co-evolved with an industrial landscape as ways of holding together a world chronically visited with environmental, social, and economic crisis. Only by bracketing out the civic commons is it possible to reduce a mountain to "a worthless piece of dirt," as one industry spokesman put it, "good for nothing, save for snakes and scrub pine." An alternative view—of biodiversity flourishing in the context of community life—is rehearsed in stories and jaunts that map the commons back onto the land.

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According to Dennis Dickens, Hazy got its name before the Civil War. "Some hunters came through there," said Dickens, "and they camped over along Drew's Creek. And they decided to go over in Hazy to hunt one day. They got to the top of the mountain, they looked down in there, it was foggy and hazy. They said, 'No use to go down in here, it's too hazy. We'll not do any good.' And called it 'Hazy Creek.'" Though the coal industry has closed Hazy Creek to the public (Cherry Pond Mountain is slated for mountaintop removal), people still enter with permission to gather plants and hunt, or to visit historic sites and cemeteries.

On a trek up Hazy for ramps in 1996, Dave Bailey and Woody Boggs distilled sights on the overgrown landscape into signs of former communities everywhere: the rusting incline hidden on the hillside; the sludge pond, its banks "reclaimed" in thorny field locust; a stand of Indian corn near Charlie Rock, named for Charles Wiley; the remains of a "splash dam" once used as a skidway for easing timber out of the mountains; red dog from the slate dump that burned for years and was haunted by an old woman's ghost; a big rock that Woody says Hobart Clay could have cleared in his Hazy machine, and campsites marked by the presence of ramps. "People have camped there for years," commented Dave. "They set them out so they'd have some."

As access is increasingly curtailed, people vividly reconstitute Hazy Creek through stories. In a conversation that Woody Boggs videotaped in Andrew, Dave Bailey and Cuba Wiley conjure and reoccupy Hazy as a capacious and generous landscape where they both lived for many years. Cuba, who hasn't been up in Hazy lately, wonders what it's like since the people moved out in the late 1980s. "People tell me I wouldn't know it up that hollow now," he says.

Dave imaginatively takes him up there, and Hazy Creek floods into the room through their words and gestures. "You go up there, Cuba, where the mines is, you go across that creek, go over to the left, go right on up that road to the mines. You can stop the car where the road's washed out, you walk maybe to the top of the hill, and the side of the mountain is covered with ramps."

"Well," picks up Cuba, invoking another space where ramps grew, "what about the Straight Fork of Hazy, where Three Forks used to come in together, and I used to go in the Straight Fork of Hazy, and just go up there a little piece on up that hollow and walk in on the right, and that scoundrel mountain was lined with them."

"That's right," says Dave. "Just as far as you could see."

They go on to the Everett Fork, Hiram Fork, and Bradley Mountain (where Lige Bradley fled from marauding Yankee and Confederate troops during the Civil War, and where people returned to tend and harvest apples in the Wayne Bradley Field long after Bradley was evacuated for strip-mining). On the way out, Dave and Cuba pause for moment at Road Fork and Sugar Camp.

"You know what?" says Cuba, "I'm gonna tell you something. I was in Sugar..."
Camp, way up in there, I could look down over there at the Coffee Pot Restaurant and all that, and that walk path that goes right on up through there takes you to Bradley."

"Yup," says Dave. "I know where it's at."

"I believe I could find it yet," Cuba resumes. "That walk path, I'd turn left and go up just a little ridge, about fifty or seventy-five yards and that scoundrel ridge was lined with ramps, and I'll tell you who else went in there and found them before he died: Calvin Clay. Calvin Clay and them found that patch."

"I didn't know they were in there," Dave marveled.

"Sugar Camp," says Cuba. "Good patch, buddy."

Reconstituting Hazy, Dave and Cuba walk its paths, populate it with fellow gatherers, and savor its views, routes, and destinations. Stories of plying the seasonal round, of gathering ramps, molly moochers, fishing bait, and ginseng, are like beacons lighting up Hazy's coves, benches, walk paths, historic ruins, and camp rocks. In fact, such stories and inscriptions constitute a rural industrial landscape as coherent, as saturated with "traditional cultural properties," as representative of America's rural-industrial history as any landscape recorded on the National Register.

Like other productions of the commons, ramps, ramp patches, and ramp talk are resources for holding together a way of life that is continually being dismantled by plans for progress. The civic commons of the Ramp House and the commons of the cultural landscape are mutually sustaining and cannot be reclaimed by covering a stream with spoil and putting a pond on top of a highland complex, moving a smokehouse from a home place to a pioneer village, or relocating a family cemetery from its ancestral grounds to a commercial cemetery many miles away.

The commons on Coal River models an alternative, integrated, community-based approach to the conservation of natural and cultural resources. The seasonal round, itself a cultural production, outlines a roster of "services" we might expect from central Appalachia's post-mining landscapes. Common pool resources like the ramp patches of the named systems of coves might qualify for protection not as endangered species but as vital resources for mountain life—"traditional cultural properties." Such sites, scattered throughout the mountains, define the social collective, serving both as touchstones to a shared past and as thresholds to a future in which a historic, mixed mesophytic landscape continues to form a hedge against chronic social, environmental, and economic crises.