

APPALACHIAN SECRETS

Objects, Beliefs & Stories

Silas Mullins

TWO-STORY SAMPLE

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THIS SAMPLE INCLUDES TWO COMPLETE CHAPTERS FROM APPALACHIAN SECRETS:
CHAPTERS 1 AND 3.

Before You Begin

A small bag. A woven blanket. A kettle. A song remembered after the person who taught it is gone.

The stories continue on [Silas Mullins Secrets](#), our YouTube channel exploring Appalachian history and folklore.

These ten chapters begin with ordinary objects, beliefs, and stories and ask what they reveal about the people connected to them: Who made this? Why did a family keep it? What did people believe it could do? How did a story change when it traveled to another home?



CHAPTER 1

The Little Bag with the Powerful Smell

Some objects are remembered by their shape. Others are remembered by the space they made around themselves. An asafetida bag belonged to the second kind. It was small enough to wear under a shirt, yet its reputation arrived before its wearer: an odor people compared to a skunk, sulfur, or something that had gone bad. In Appalachian memories, the bag is less a cure recipe than a portable sign of care.

That distinction matters: a family can remember trusting an object without the memory proving that it prevented illness. This is a history of belief and care, not a medical recommendation.

A bottle before a bag

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History preserves a useful companion to the remembered pouch. Its [asafetida bottle record](#) describes a square, blown-and-molded glass bottle with a narrow neck, rounded shoulders, and a white enamel label reading "ESS ASSA FOETIDAE." The catalog classifies it as a pharmaceutical container, dates it to the seventeenth or eighteenth century, and identifies the contents as an essence associated with asafetida. The record calls asafetida a gum resin from Ferula plants; Kew's [Plants of the World Online](#) identifies Ferula assa-foetida as an accepted species native to southern Iran.

The bottle is not an Appalachian bag, and the catalog does not connect it to a particular American household. It shows that the pungent material had a long apothecary history. In a mountain home, resin might appear as a piece, cake, or powder in a fabric pouch. The form changed as the material entered daily life. The smell did not.

A memory in Alleghany County

The clearest Appalachian account is an attributed household memory rather than a claim about every mountain family. The digital exhibit [“Folk Remedies” in Appalachian folk medicine throughout the 20th century](#) describes a source titled “Remembering Traditional Home Remedies: Faith Healing & Home Remedies in Alleghany County, NC.” In that source, Mayor John Miller talks about his mother and grandmother doctoring at home; Gary Joines recalls carrying a buckeye; and Agnes Joines recalls “asafetida bags” as a way her household sought to prevent colds.

Agnes Joines’s recollection is valuable precisely because it is modest. The exhibit attributes the memory to her, locates it in Alleghany County, and names the object. It does not provide a universal pattern or complete recipe: we do not learn the bag’s size, fabric, wearer, or lifespan. Those absences are part of the record. Oral history preserves what a person found memorable, not necessarily every practical detail.

An earlier North Carolina document gives the material a different paper trail. In an [1865 letter](#), William Holland Thomas wrote from Stekoa to Dr. John Mingus asking for an ounce of asafetida and two gallons of purified whiskey. The catalog and transcription say Thomas considered smallpox close and called the substances preventatives. The letter shows regional demand during a health crisis; it does not establish efficacy or describe a bag.

When the odor became a boundary

Other oral records help explain why the bag remains vivid without turning one story into an Appalachian rule. In a 1984 [University of Georgia interview](#), Dean Rusk remembered wearing bags around his neck during the 1918 influenza epidemic. He separated the precaution from medical proof and suggested that the odor encouraged distance. His interpretation gives the object a social dimension: a bag could mark sickness, caution, and personal space.

A 1975 [Lola Gamble Clyde interview](#) from Idaho supplies physical detail from a different region: a red flannel bag, a “cake” of asafetida, and an outrageous smell. Her account cannot fill in Agnes Joines’s missing details, but it shows how the vocabulary of fabric, string, resin, and odor could travel and be adapted.

The bag’s power in these memories is cultural and sensory. It condensed an invisible danger into something felt against the chest and smelled from a distance. Someone had obtained resin, made or found a pouch, tied it, and decided when it should be worn. The object made care visible. Its unpleasantness was the feature that made it unforgettable.

What we can know

The sources give us three firm anchors: a Smithsonian asafetida container, Thomas's 1865 request in North Carolina, and Agnes Joines's Alleghany County memory of bags associated with preventing colds. Other oral histories add red flannel, strings, and strong odor, but no single Appalachian design.

The evidence does not establish that a bag prevented illness, or tell us what Joines's bag contained beyond the name she remembered. The little bag is best approached as documented memory: pungent, portable, and bound to the ways households made uncertainty manageable.

Sources

- [Smithsonian National Museum of American History, asafetida bottle \(nmah 993829\)](#)
- [Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Ferula assa-foetida](#)
- [Appalachian Folk Medicine, "Folk Remedies"](#)
- [Digital Library of Georgia, William Holland Thomas letter, 1865](#)
- [University of Georgia, Dean Rusk oral history](#)
- [University of Idaho, Lola Gamble Clyde Interview #6](#)



CHAPTER 3

Before the Refrigerator, There Was a Spring

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At the Brinegar Cabin site in Doughton Park, the most revealing building is not the largest one. The springhouse sits downslope along the tree line, separate from the cabin and close to the water that made it useful. Its plain walls make a quiet argument: food storage was once an architectural problem, solved with a hillside, a spring, stone, and careful placement.

The building is also a reminder that historic places are layered. The springhouse belongs to the Brinegar family's late-nineteenth-century farmstead, but the structure visitors see has also passed through restoration and park interpretation. Reading those layers keeps the story concrete instead of turning the outbuilding into a generic symbol of "old mountain life."

A building in the Brinegar landscape

The [National Park Service's Brinegar Cabin Cultural Landscape account](#) says Martin and Caroline Brinegar purchased North Carolina land in 1876 and established a farming homestead. They built a cabin, barn, shed, and springhouse, cleared sloping ground, and raised crops and livestock. The property is now at Milepost 238.5 on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Doughton Park. The surviving interpretive site includes the cabin, granary, springhouse, garden, former orchard area, and a later outhouse.

The [NPS place description](#) calls the original farm 125 acres and describes Martin as a cobbler and Caroline as a weaver. Their work mattered because the homestead was not only a residence. It was a small productive landscape in which buildings, gardens, animals, water, and skills belonged to one household economy. The springhouse was one part of that arrangement, but an important one: a place where the farm's water source could be protected and put to work.

The dates require care. Current NPS pages refer to the main cabin as built in 1886 or around 1889, while the earlier National Register nomination places it around 1880 and says Martin spent five years completing the house and nearby outbuildings. "Late nineteenth century" is the safest description here.

The springhouse's place

The Park Service's accounts place the springhouse downslope from the cabin and within the working farmstead. They tell us where it stood and how it related to the other buildings, but not exactly what the family stored there or how cool the food became from day to day.

The [Walker Sisters' springhouse](#) is a comparison, not evidence about Brinegar: NPS describes milk and butter kept cool beside a flowing creek, while a [Great Smoky Mountains teaching guide](#) explains protected water, cold running water, and evaporation in general. Those examples explain why springhouses mattered without supplying Brinegar facts.

The people behind the outbuilding

The Brinegar family's documented work gives the springhouse a human setting. The NPS [Brinegar Family profile](#) lists crops including buckwheat, rye, oats, corn, and sorghum. It records Caroline's four-poster hand loom, her use of wool and flax, and the "linsey-woolsey" cloth she wove. It records Martin's cobbling and the family's collection of herbs sold to drug merchants in Jefferson and Boone, North Carolina.

Together, these records place the springhouse within a household balancing food, clothing, cash work, gardens, animals, and craft.

A preserved layer, not frozen time

The springhouse did not simply survive untouched. NPS says Works Progress Administration laborers restored it in 1941–42 for interpretive purposes. The same account identifies a dry-laid stone retaining wall and stone steps added in 1942. A Mission 66 outhouse appeared in 1957, and roads, parking, fencing, garden plantings, and other visitor features followed as the Blue Ridge Parkway developed. The cultural landscape therefore records two histories at once: the Brinegar farm and the twentieth-century decision to present that farm to motorists and park visitors.

Seen this way, preservation holds several moments together. The retaining wall and steps document restoration; the surrounding paths and garden show interpretation in action. Looking at all of them makes the springhouse more, not less, specific.

What remains visible

The Brinegar record places the springhouse downslope from the family's cabin and documents its 1941–42 restoration, including the stone steps added in 1942.

Wider NPS context explains springhouses as protected water and cool storage, but the sources do not preserve a room inventory, equipment list, food record, temperature, or daily schedule. What remains is documented working architecture within a preserved cultural landscape.

Sources

- [National Park Service, "Brinegar Cabin Cultural Landscape"](#)
- [National Park Service, "Brinegar Cabin"](#)
- [National Park Service, "Brinegar Family"](#)
- [National Park Service, "The Walker Sisters"](#)
- [National Park Service, Mountain Life Field Trip Guide](#)
- [National Register nomination, Brinegar Cabin \(1972\)](#)

Continue Exploring

There is more to discover beyond these pages.

Watch on YouTube:

youtube.com/@SilasMullinsSecrets.

Visit the website: theoldhollerways.com.

Linked references throughout the chapters point to museums, archives, historic sites, universities, oral histories, and public records. Historical accounts can be incomplete or conflicting; the text keeps those limits visible. Illustrations are contemporary interpretations, not archival photographs or exact reconstructions of the objects and places discussed.

Historical health beliefs are history, not medical advice, and historical food practices are not safe-preservation instructions. Legends remain legends; no dialogue, personal recollection, or eyewitness testimony has been invented.