

MOUNTAINS

Pandemic creates hardship for longtime sorghum demonstrators



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

In a normal year, Mark and Sherry Guenther would be having the time of their lives and bringing in much needed income to support their business—Muddy Pond Sorghum. But 2020 has been anything but normal.

Carrying on a family tradition for three generations, the Guenther family in Monterey, Tennessee, specializes in the old-fashioned mountain art of harvesting sorghum and processing it into a sweet syrup that offers a coveted fall treat, especially when combined with butter on hot biscuits and pancakes or mixed in porridge and grits.

“Everybody calls it molasses, but it is sorghum cane and the correct name for it is sorghum syrup,” said Mark Guenther, son of late Muddy Pond Sorghum founders John and Emma Guenther, describing the product he still makes each year during September, October, and November. This year, due to the need for safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, Great Smoky Mountains National Park canceled its popular sorghum demonstrations, which represent a large part of the Guenther’s annual revenue.

“Fall is when the sorghum is ripe and ready to start cooking, and that smell is what makes the whole season,” said Sherry Guenther, Mark’s wife. “We’re usually at Cades Cove every weekend when the fall colors come in, and together with the smell of it cooking, it transports you back to a simpler time. It’s so relaxing.”

Determined to keep the practice alive, the Guenther’s use a labor-intensive process to make 100 percent pure Muddy Pond Sorghum that involves squeezing juice from the cane, bringing the juice to a boil, and then reducing it down over a wood-fired furnace. Today, the smell of simmering syrup still summons memories of cool days, autumn leaves, and communities coming together to harvest and mill their crops.

“Sugar cane only grows farther south, but sorghum cane can grow here, so it became a regional staple,” Sherry said. “It’s sweeter and has a more complex taste, real earthy. A lot of older people remember it from back when they were kids, and we get to remind them of that part of their heritage.”

For years, the couple has traveled with mules, tools, equipment and sup-



Mark Guenther demonstrates putting cane through the mill as part of the making of sorghum syrup in Cades Cove.

COURTESY PHOTO FROM VALERIE POLK, GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION.



Juiced sorghum strains out through a mule-powered juicing machine as friends and family of Ronnie and Mary Fowler make sorghum syrup at the Fowler's Mills River home. KATIE BAILEY/CITIZEN-TIMES

plies in tow, demonstrating their chosen craft at the old cane mill near Cades Cove Visitor Center. Never failing to attract a crowd of onlookers, the Guenther’s sell their Muddy Pond products through Great Smoky Mountains Asso-

ciation stores as well as at various fairs, theme parks, and festivals across the region.

“It’s a dying art—not a lot of people are making it anymore, especially on the level that we are,” Sherry said. “But it’s a

good feeling to be making a product that’s so rare, showing people part of their heritage and keeping this tradition alive. It’s great to love what you do for a living.”

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Muddy Pond Sorghum has fallen on hard times as festivals, fairs, and other crowd-attracting events are canceled or closed due to social distancing measures.

“This year’s been really rough for us,” Sherry said. “One after another, all the events got canceled, and without the shows, we don’t sell much. In spring and summer, it was sad and hard to comprehend. But then fall festival dates started going by, and there we still were at home.”

Although the Guenther’s will not be hosting live demonstrations in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park this fall, you can still stock up on this year’s fall harvest at Great Smoky Mountains Association bookstores in the park’s visitor centers and online at smokiesinformation.org.

Frances Figart is the editor of *Smokies Life* magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.

STATE BRIEFS

Navy unit to detonate ordnance found on beach

BUXTON – A U.S. Navy unit confirmed that an object discovered on a beach is live military ordnance, and it plans to detonate it. The National Park Service said in a news release that the U.S. Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit from Norfolk, Virginia, placed the 100-pound aerial bomb from the World War II era deep inside the beach near the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse Beach Access parking area.

The unit was to detonate the ordnance in place on Saturday. No damage to nearby structures is expected. However, Buxton residents and visitors may hear the detonation. To protect visitors, the park service has set up a safety perimeter around the buried bomb, and the adjacent areas will remain closed

until the unit determines the perimeter is safe.

Company that maintains rest stops settles EEOC lawsuit

RALEIGH – A company under contract to maintain state-owned rest areas will pay more than \$39,000 to settle an age discrimination lawsuit, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission said.

A news release from the commission on Friday said Liberty Support Services, Inc. of Raleigh was charged with violating federal law when it fired or refused to rehire four rest area attendants employed at the Cherokee County Rest Area in 2016 after it was closed for renovations. The commission said the attendants, all of whom were over age 40, expected to return to their jobs. Instead, they learned they had been discharged and replaced with younger workers.

The EEOC said Liberty Support discharged or failed to rehire the employees because of their respective ages, violating the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. The law is designed to protect individuals age 40 and over from employment discrimination and makes it illegal for an employer to fail or refuse to hire or discharge anyone because of his or her age.

In addition to the monetary relief, the three-year consent decree settling the lawsuit requires Liberty Support to adopt an anti-discrimination policy and provide training for its owners and employees on the ADEA.

Officials: 4 killed, 2 injured in North Carolina house fire

BUXTON – Four people were killed and at least two others injured in a fire that damaged the homes of Coast Guard members on North Carolina’s Outer

Banks, authorities said.

The Virginian-Pilot reported the four people who died in Friday morning’s fire in Buxton were a Coast Guard member’s family.

“This tragic incident impacts not only this family, crew and station, but various members, families and units throughout the Coast Guard,” said Coast Guard Capt. Matt Baer.

The fire damaged multiple homes, displacing three other Coast Guard members and their families, officials said.

Two people were taken to Outer Banks Hospital. Dare County officials didn’t immediately release the names of the victims.

“Thoughts and prayers are with all who have been impacted by this tragic fire, especially those that lost loved ones,” said Drew Pearson, Dare County’s emergency management director.

Associated Press

Citizen Times

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Customer service

To view important information online related to your subscription, visit aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com. You can also manage your subscription at account.citizen-times.com. Contact the Citizen Times for questions or to report issues via email at citizentimes@gannett.com or 1-800-672-2472.

Operating hours are:

■ Monday-Friday: 8:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m.
■ Saturday: 7:00 a.m. -11:00 a.m. for technical support only
■ Sunday & holidays: 7:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

Full access subscriptions

Subscribe and save today by visiting citizen-times.com/subscribe. Subscriptions below are billed per month and include access to citizen-times.com, tablet and smartphone apps, and the e-Edition, a digital replica of the print edition.
■ Delivery of the Monday through Sunday print editions: \$68.00*
■ Delivery of the Friday through Sunday print editions: \$39.00*
■ Delivery of the Sunday and Wednesday print editions: \$32.00*
■ Delivery of the Sunday print editions: \$25.00*
*Plus applicable taxes

Corrections and clarifications

Our goal is to promptly correct errors. Email us at accuracy@asheville.gannett.com to report a mistake or call 828-232-5829. Describe the error, where you saw it, the date, page number, or the URL.

Contact us

Customer Service 1-800-672-2472
News Director Jewell Walston | 828-232-5829
Advertising 828-252-5611
Obituaries 828-232-5966

Postal information

Citizen Times, USPS #236-000, ISSN #0336-0000, is published Monday through Sunday at 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC 28802.
Postmaster: Send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 62670, San Angelo, TX 76906.