

MOUNTAINS

How Oconee bells led botanists on a 200-year wild botanical goose chase



Word from the Smokies

Frances Figart
Columnist

This is the time of year when visitors flock to Great Smoky Mountains National Park to see a plethora of wildflowers such as bloodroot, hepatica, phlox, rue-anemone, spring-beauty, trillium, trout lily, and a variety of violets. Several celebrated Smokies wildflowers — such as Rugel's ragwort (*Rugelia nudicaulis*) — have very limited ranges, some confined entirely to the park, and in fact the Southern Appalachians are a botanical hotspot with many such so-called "narrow endemics."

One prized local wildflower with a very narrow range led botanists on a 200-year botanical goose chase. It may have been about this time of year when Oconee bells was first "discovered" way back in 1787, though it had of course been known in this region by the native Cherokee for thousands of years.

"The plant was found by French botanist André Michaux in what is now the South Carolina upstate, then deep in Cherokee country, but only after it had already flowered," says Jim Costa, director of the Highlands Biological Station, a multicampus center of Western Carolina University where Costa is a professor in the Department of Biology. "Michaux recorded its location vaguely in his journal as being in the high mountains of Carolina."

In the late 1830s, some 50 years after Michaux's discovery, Harvard botanist Asa Gray found Michaux's specimen in an herbarium in Paris. He immediately recognized it as an important discovery and launched botanical expeditions to find it again. Following Michaux's cue, Gray searched extensively in North Carolina's highest mountains — Roan Mountain, the Black Mountains, Grandfather — but never succeeded.

That's because Michaux had been mistaken — Oconee bells doesn't occur in the "high mountains." When Michaux had traveled up the Savannah River and its tributaries and into the Blue Ridge Escarpment area where he first found the plant, those mountains must have seemed awfully high to him. But, as we all know, the mountains in this region get far higher. So, Gray was led astray by Michaux's imprecise journal notes for decades. In the meantime, Gray gave the plant the scientific name "Shortia" to honor Charles Short, a botanist in Kentucky, with hopes of incentivizing Short to search for the plant.

"Ironically, Short could not be bothered," Costa says. "He never even considered searching for Shortia, so many of us plant nerds find it sad that he should be immortalized with the name



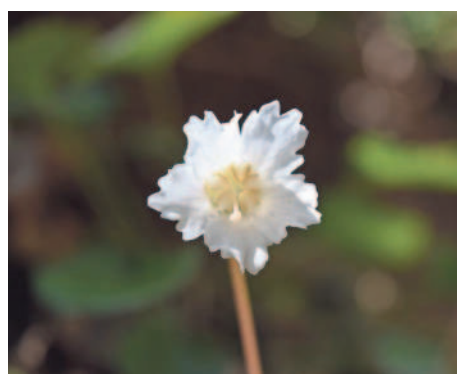
French botanist André Michaux failed to clearly record the location where he first found Oconee bells (*Shortia galacifolia*), creating a two-centuries-long search before the plant could be officially discovered and documented in its native habitat.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JIM AND LESLIE COSTA

of this fabulous species when he not only never saw it, but never even tried to find it. Hence the oft-quoted quip that Shortia was 'found by a man who didn't name it and named for a man who never saw it by a man who couldn't find it.'"

Costa relates that Oconee bells ended up being rediscovered in the wild in the 1870s by a teenage plant collector. However, that turned out to be a disjunct population on the North Carolina Piedmont, near Marion, and Gray realized that could not be the place where the first specimen had been found. Still, he dashed down from Cambridge to see this rare beauty in the wild.

"It wasn't until the late 1880s that Charles Sprague Sargent came to Highlands, North Carolina, and narrowed down the type locality using Michaux's journal," Costa says. "He was helped by four guides from Highlands, two of whom were the teenaged sons of the town's co-founder, Samuel Kelsey. One of those brothers, Harlan Kelsey, went on to expand the family nursery business, the Highlands Nursery, which played a major role in horticultural history by being the first to introduce a whole range of southern Appalachian botanical beauties to the trade — Shortia, Gray's lily, Catawba rhododendron, flame azalea, pinkshell azalea, and Carolina hemlock, to name a few."



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It turns out that Michaux's journal had yet another error, however. Inexplicably, he recorded the time of year of the first Shortia find as December, but his specimen had possessed a developing fruit capsule, the stage soon after flowering in early spring. It wasn't until 1983 that Bob Zahner and Steve Jones solved the mystery location and time of year from studying Michaux's journals, where evidently two different trips up the Keowee River had been conflated.

"So, Shortia galacifolia was intro-

duced to gardens in Highlands as early as the late 1880s," says Costa, "and by the 1960s when the botanical garden at Highlands Biological Station was established, we were fortunate to have loads and loads of Shortia growing on site — and that's why it was adopted as our 'botanical mascot,' and Oconee bells is featured in one of the panels of the Highlands Biological Station logo."

After many years of painstaking research in France and the United States, last year Michaux's botanical journals were finally published by University of Alabama Press.

"André Michaux in North America: Journals and Letters 1785-1797" is edited by Charlie Williams — a retired librarian, Michaux scholar, and impersonator — in collaboration with three colleagues. The book can be found on Amazon. Those interested might also listen to the album "Revival" by Gillian Welch, which includes the song "Acony Bell" by Welch and David Rawlings.

Frances Figart is the editor of *Smokies Life* magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 28,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsassoc.org.

Chai Pani owner talks Asheville in PBS documentary

Mackensy Lunsford Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE — Meherwan and Molly Irani were looking for a fun, liberal spot to call home in the mountains. What they didn't expect was how much the city they chose would change them, and how they would change the city and the South at large.

Those topics are explored in a new



Irani

Pani and a handful of other restaurants in the city and beyond, talks about the new life the recession spurred.

PBS North Carolina documentary series, "My Home NC," an in-depth look at North Carolina people, culture and food.

In the feature, Meherwan Irani, co-owner of Asheville-founded Chai Pani and a handful of other restaurants in the city and beyond, talks about the new life the recession spurred.

The economic downturn in 2009 forced the now-restauranteur to decide whether he wanted to continue in sales or make his own path.

"God bless Molly, when I asked her what I should do, she looked at me and said, 'If there's ever a time do something completely unexpected, to do something completely different, this would be it,'" Irani recalled in the documentary. That's how Chai Pani, an homage to

Indian street food, was born. Asheville was ready: On the restaurant's first day, it sold out of food within hours.

Chai Pani and Irani's other restaurants, including Buxton Hall and Nani's Rotisserie Chicken, remain immensely popular in Asheville.

See more of your neighbors talking about what makes their state special at www.pbsnc.org/watch/unctv-originals/my-home-nc.

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