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LIT 374: Food in Literature

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### Film Script

Green beans were an Appalachian staple long before European influence invaded North America. Alongside corn and squash, beans are apart of the group of vegetables known in numerous Native American tribes as the Three Sisters. These veggies are grouped together because of their symbiotic relationships with each other, as the cornstalks support the growth of beans, the beans provide nitrogen for the corn and squash, and the squash provides ground cover to control weeds (Best 14-15).

By growing these vegetables together and sustaining one another, Native American tribes were confident in each season's crop of the sisters. Because of this, green beans are still an almost essential part of the Appalachian diet, as they are not only beneficial to the growth of their sisters, but are also known for their high levels of protein. Because nearly everyone with land in Appalachia was growing their own beans, the number of different varieties of beans would be nearly impossible to count. Half-runners were a one time the dominant bean in mountain areas until small farmers stopped growing their own seeds and began growing seeds from farm stores. Once seed production began more centralized within larger farms, tough genes that made it

nearly impossible to break the beans during their mechanical harvesting became dominant (Best 15).

This loss made room for a new variety of bean to become widely grown: cut-shorts. These beans are known for having seed-filled pods that are so full they square-off at the ends (Best 29). They also have a high ratio of seed to hull, making them packed with even more protein than other varieties, such as greasy beans, which are known for their slick, greasy looking hulls (Best 26). Pink-tip beans are known for and named after their pink blossomed ends, are also commonly grown in Appalachia (Best 31).

But, where did all of these beans come from? According to Bill Best, director of the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center in Kentucky and former professor and administrator at Berea College, most beans can be traced back to the Native Americans who once lived all over the Appalachians. However, Best argues that, when it comes to beans, it's better to focus more on their development than origin. Because of beans' tendency to cross and mutate at fast rates, only where certain varieties predominate, not where they initially began growing, can be known for sure (Best 14-15).

These different varieties enabled greens beans to become significant to Appalachian families for more than just their nutritional value. Varieties of beans that had been grown and eaten for generations became known as Family Beans (Best 16). Best says that family beans are "one of the important ways Appalachian beans have been preserved and developed" since these specific bean varieties have been grown for decades by the different generations of the families (Best 17).

These beans tend to start out as “sports,” or mutant beans, that began to grow in a family’s bean patch. Seeds from these sports were often saved by the older women of the family to be grown the next year. If they were deemed tasty and tender, then the beans became a part of the family’s seed stock (Best 17).

The idea of a family beans helped to create the countless number of seed varieties seen in today’s Appalachia as families would share their beans within their community, allowing for the beans of different families to mix and mutate and create bean varieties that entire communities would share. These community beans were known by nearly everyone in the area and were often the beans of choice for things like family reunions or church suppers (Best 20).

This process of sharing beans ultimately begins to spread into large areas, as community beans became county beans, county beans became regional beans, and so on.

Because of the nutritional value and pride that comes along with having a family bean, greens beans are commonly found in Appalachian writings.

*River of Earth* is a 1940 novel written by James Still that highlights the Baldrige family’s struggle to survive in Kentucky during the Great Depression. The Baldrige family garden is highlighted often throughout the story, and, more specifically, the amount of beans they’re growing is discussed. Because of green beans’ ability to be preserved for such long periods of time, combined with their protein and nutritional value, it makes sense that parents Alpha and Brack would grow as many as they do. In fact, the family has so many beans at the beginning of the novel that other families come by their home, begging Brack to “spare [them] a mess of beans” (Still 17). By having starving neighbors asking the starving Baldriged, Still

shows the desperate need for quality and nutrient-rich foods, as well as how significant they were in keeping families fed during this time. If it wasn't for green beans, the Baldrige family wouldn't have been able to sustain themselves or their neighbors during the Depression.

Bill Best also looks at beans in literature by revisiting the well-known traditional story of *Jack and the Beanstalk* and provides a theoretical present-day Jack, who, years after his initial contact with a magic beanstalk is only interested in trading his beans for sweeter, processed foods. Best describes Jack going down to the market to trade his various kinds of beans (some from his mother, some from his grandmother), imagining that Jack had over 500 varieties in his sack. From there, Jack meets three giants who encourage him to only focus on two or three varieties of beans, especially those that are more resistant to chemicals and had no runners at all. Jack is skeptical from the beginning and ultimately deciding to keep his hundreds of different beans, seeing the value of having more than just a handful of different kinds. This child-like folk tale Best writes serves to point out the flaws with the hands of big business and mega marts getting involved with bean production. Simplifying the beans themselves not only hurts farmers and local markets and economies, but also means that the beans will lose most of their flavor (Best).

Writing green beans into the prose of the region like Still and Best have done is beneficial for showing how they influence the people and culture itself, but looking into cookbooks from the region can show a more realistic view of beans in Appalachian life.

Sidney Saylor Farr's 1983 cookbook *More than Moonshine* successfully captures authentic life in Appalachia through the simple and common recipes of Appalachian families. In her "Vegetables All in a Row" section, Farr has recipes that could easily be ate on a regular

basis. Her recipe for Green Beans and Ham calls for the “quantity you need of fresh green beans, some shelled beans, one small ham hock (fully cured), dried red pepper, and salt” (Farr 93).

From there, Farr instructs her readers to break and shell the beans before boiling them with the ham, saying “we mountain women cook green beans 3 or 4 hours” (Farr 94). This recipe is, although pretty basic, a staple in Appalachia as it provides a good source of protein for whomever is eating it without being too costly. Farr also includes a recipe for shuck beans, or leather britches, which are dried green beans that are boiled and baked until they’re tender and ready to eat. They were prepared this way primarily to preserve them for harsh mountain winters when their high levels of protein will be much-needed out of the growing season (Farr 94).

The ingredients in Farr’s cookbook can be grown or bought locally and substitutions for items that are not as easily accessible are welcomed. The cookbook paints a realistic look into what Appalachian cooks are pairing with their green beans.

But, A more recent publication is Ronni Lundy’s 2017 cookbook, *Victuals*, which also includes a recipe for leather britches. Rather than being more concerned with the necessity of the need for protein in the winter like in Farr’s collection, Lundy is more concerned with keeping the recipe alive and well-known in Appalachia. Lundy provides a large amount of background knowledge about the beans, describing their initial purpose of winter nutrition before talking about ways the process of drying and preparing the beans has changed and how it hasn’t (Lundy 151). By printing this recipe in her beautifully designed, modern looking cookbook, Lundy is able to draw attention from new groups of people to the old ways of Appalachia, thus preserving beans and culture.

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