

## **S.B. Penick & Co. and the Reed Creek Greenway: Asheville's Medicinal Plant Boon in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

By Tina Kessinger

If you've walked the Reed Creek Greenway on the west side of Broadway, you might have noticed the sign noting that the warehouses of S.B. Penick & Company once stood nearby. Penick was one of the world's major purveyors of botanicals sold for pharmaceutical use, having moved his headquarters to Asheville from Marion in 1917.

According to the National Register of Historic Places: "*Penick and Company constructed a root and herb warehouse on Broadway at Catawba Avenue between 1917 and 1925; it was still open in 1943.*"

Penick's move to Asheville was a boon to many area residents, particularly those who had been using native medicinal plants for generations. As noted in a 1941 *Life* magazine story on Penick's company: "*The most productive source [of medicinal plants] at present in the U.S. is the Great Smokies region in the South, whose self-sufficient mountaineer inhabitants know their herbs through their own pharmacopoeia of household herb cures.*"

Prior to WWI, Europe supplied most of the plants used in herbal medicines in the U.S. When the war broke out, the U.S. pharmaceutical industry was cut off from suppliers. Penick took advantage of the shortage and expanded his business, recruiting area residents to scour woodlands and pastures for wild botanicals. Western North Carolina was resplendent with plants like bull nettle, digitalis, pine bark and stramonium, used in everything from heart medicine to cough syrup to sedatives. Hundreds of local pickers harvested, dried and sold the plants to Penick, who packaged and resold the products in bulk to herbal pharmaceutical manufacturers in the eastern U.S.

By the end of the 1920s, Penick had opened offices in New York, New Jersey and Chicago and become one of the world's major suppliers of bulk botanicals, which were also known as 'crude drugs'. He claimed that 85% of the world's pharmaceutical plants were harvested in the Asheville area.

The medicinal plant shortage reoccurred during World War II and demand for Asheville's botanical bounty surged again. The aforementioned *Life* magazine article states, "*With prices, as in the last war, riding the herb shortage boom to promise a more*

*than 50-cent daily wage, back-country families are scouring woods, swamps and weed patches to collect and export a list of 224 herbs to the outside world.”*

Unfortunately, over-harvesting resulted in the decline of many wild medicinal plants, some of which are now endangered or protected. Wild ginseng in the area was harvested almost to extinction and is now a protected species.

The botanical plant industry waned in the area after WWII, and although many residents still collected wild plants for cash, S. B. Penick & Company, facing financial hardship, closed its Asheville operation and was sold off to a conglomerate.

Check out the Life magazine article with photos on Penick and Asheville’s herb pickers (article begins on page 79) at:

<https://books.google.com/books?id=jU4EAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA84&lpg=PA84&dq=s.b.+penick+%26+company+asheville&source=bl&ots=9vEWrgbk1U&sig=JXI7GJa1pHPVEB8lWtw9YX2DVYM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=ehAvVYS4KYKZsAWXxoHwCA&ved=0CDYQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=s.b.%20penick%20%26%20company%20asheville&f=false>