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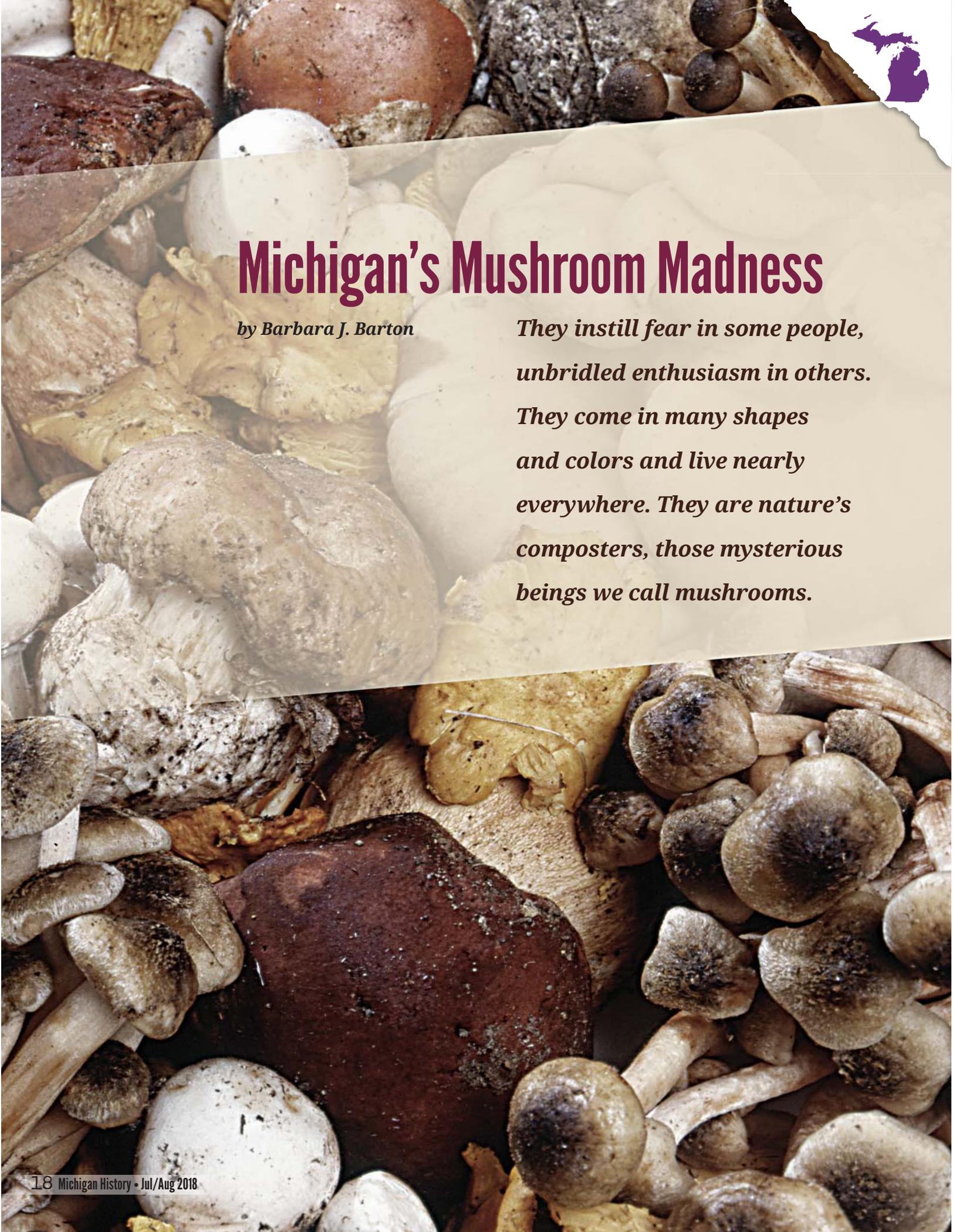
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Michigan's Mushroom Madness





Michigan's Mushroom Madness

by Barbara J. Barton

They instill fear in some people, unbridled enthusiasm in others. They come in many shapes and colors and live nearly everywhere. They are nature's composters, those mysterious beings we call mushrooms.

Mushrooms belong to the kingdom Fungi, along with their cousins the molds, yeasts, rusts, and mildews. While the names in that clan might make one cringe, their contribution to the natural world is vital.

Mushrooms break down dead organic material and release nutrients back into the soil, a significant part of ecological cycles. They have a symbiotic relationship with most vascular plants, living within their roots. They are nutrient emancipators. But what else do mushrooms offer?



Fifty-four species of mushrooms collected in Central Michigan University's Neithercut Woodland in Farwell. (Photo courtesy of Sister Marie Kopin.)



Maze fungus (*Daedalea quercina*), which were made into curry combs. (Photo courtesy of Saxifraga/Jan Willem Jongepier.)

Michigan's First Mushroom Hunters

Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples in the Great Lakes region have gathered mushrooms for food, medicine, and other purposes. Smoke from lit *Fomes igniarius*, *Fomes fomentarius*, *Polyporus betulinus*, and *Daedalea quercina* could be used to calm wild honeybees while people gathered their delicious honey. Mushrooms were even used in grooming. The fungus *Daedalea quercina*, which grows on oak trees, made a wonderful curry comb that reportedly gave horses a shiny coat. Native women would also make combs for themselves, adorning them with their own personal touch. Maze fungus combs, as they are called today, were used not

only by the Anishinaabek but also by people in other parts of the world where the fungus grows.

Sisters Wanda Perron and Paula Carrick come from a large family with more than a dozen siblings and make their home at the Bay Mills Indian Community in the Eastern Upper Peninsula. Mushroom hunting has been a part of their family's tradition for generations. Their grandmother, Lucy (Waboos) Smith LeBlanc, shared her vast knowledge of mushrooms, blueberries, and many other traditional foods until her death in 1986. The sisters fondly remember traveling down old dirt roads and riding on top of the family car with their eyes trained on the forest floor. It was a serious contest seeing who could spot the first mushroom. When one was glimpsed, the siblings would race out into the woods to pick it. Carrick's most cherished memory is being out in the woods mushrooming with her mother, father, and Grandma Lucy.

Perron, Carrick, and Perron's daughter, Kayla, head out to the woods during every warm season to look for edible fungi. In the springtime, they look for several species, including oysters and morels. In the summertime, they focus on finding chanterelles, puffballs, chicken-of-the-woods, and shaggy manes. In autumn, they turn their sights to hen-of-the-woods, pasture mushrooms, and pine mushrooms. They also harvest chaga, a fungus they say is new to their family tradition, which is made into tea and tincture. Their family gathers for sustenance rather than profit. The oyster mushrooms are dried or frozen; the morels, dried; and the rest, eaten soon after they are picked.

When asked if they have noticed a decline in morels, the sisters agree that there is a problem. They do not see them where they once did—in fact, Perron says it has been years since they have been successful in finding any in places where the popular mushrooms were once abundant. They attribute the decline to outsiders, who come in and take large amounts to sell on the open market, and to ATVs, which allow people to travel deeper into the woods.



Wanda Perron and her mother, Agnes Carrick, foraging for traditional foods, c. 2002. (Photo courtesy of Paula Carrick.)

Carrick has passed down her family's mushroom-hunting traditions to her daughter, who has passed them on to her children. Both sisters are enthusiastic about the renewed interest by the younger generations in the cultural traditions of their people. There is a resurgence happening—the Ojibwe youth are coming back to their elders' traditions.

An Immigrant's Story

The mushrooms of Michigan soon met another group of people interested in gathering them for food. Newly arrived European Americans did not know most of the



Chester Kopin Kopcinski became a mushroom expert, learning from his Poland-born grandmother. (Photo courtesy of Sister Marie Kopin.)

mushrooms that grew in the Great Lakes region—a mistake that often resulted in fatal consequences. But, over time, they learned, and their knowledge was passed down from generation to generation as it had been among the Anishinaabek.

Indeed, many immigrants became skilled mushroom hunters.

One such family came from Kęty, Poland. Kęty is a beautiful little town nestled in the Silesian foothills in the southern part of the country and is bisected by the clear, cool waters of the Sola River. It is an area rich

with history. Pope John Paul II was born in the nearby town of Wadowice in 1920, and north of Kęty, just meters from the Sola River, stands Auschwitz, the largest concentration and extermination camp built by Nazi Germany during World War II.

There were lush state forests in the mountains around Kęty, and in the rich soil grew a large variety of wild mushrooms. In the late 1800s, when Kęty was part of Austria, a young Polish woman named Mary Kukla could often be found wandering in the mountainous woods, searching for mushrooms in the leaves, on the bases of stumps, and in every other place her trained eye could spot them. Among her favorite were the fall honey mushrooms and spring morels, though the latter were harder to find.

In the early 1900s, Kukla and her husband decided to pack up their children and move to the United States. The family made the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean aboard ship and eventually settled in a new home in Genesee County, Michigan. In 1912, the couple's oldest daughter, Anna Kopin, gave birth to her first child, a son named Chester. Sadly, Anna died four years later, so Chester and his younger siblings were taken in by their grandparents. Since the time he was knee-high to a grasshopper, Chester accompanied his grandmother during her searches for fungi in the forests of Michigan. For young Chester Kopin, it was the beginning of his training as a mycologist, or fungus expert.

As the seasons passed, Kopin left the adventures of childhood and married Irene Sophie Prośniak, whose family had emigrated from the German part of Poland. On October 1, 1938, they became the proud parents of their first child, a baby girl born in Flint, whom they named Marie. Following in their family's tradition, little Marie was taken out into the woods along the banks of the Flint River as soon as she was old enough to start learning about mushrooms, just as her father had done with his grandmother all those years ago.

Kopin developed some heart issues when he entered his twilight years and decided to use mushroom hunting to fulfill his doctor's wish that he get more exercise. In the early 1970s, he joined the North American Mycological Association (NAMA) and participated in many of the association's forays around the country so that he could learn from the top-notch mycologists. He also gained a good deal of knowledge from the revered Michigan mycologists Drs. Alexander Smith and Robert Shaffer, both from the University of Michigan. It wasn't long before Kopin, himself, became an expert.

Kopin's only daughter, Marie, who had joined the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Dayton, Ohio, returned to Michigan in 1972 to teach at Central Michigan University. For the next 20 years, the Kopin family traveled many weekends to their cottage at Higgins Lake to go mushroom hunting. It was during those trips that Sister Marie garnered much of her knowledge of Michigan's fungi. Her parents also took her on a number of national forays, and she became a life member of NAMA. In

From left to right: 1) Poland-born Mary Kukla holding her great-granddaughter, Marie Kopin. 2) Sister Marie Kopin, a mushroom expert and teacher. 3) Sister Marie Kopin and her class at Central Michigan University's Neithercut Woodland. (All photos courtesy of Sister Marie Kopin.)



Extreme care should be taken to correctly identify mushrooms before consuming. Any beginners to mushroom growing or foraging should consult a professional to identify possible poisonous look-alikes.

(Photo of morel courtesy of Shutterstock/ClubhouseArts.)



1984, all three joined the new Michigan Mushroom Hunters Club.

Chester Kopin's declining health eventually ended his mushroom forays when he passed away in 1992. But his vast wisdom about mushrooms and his insatiable quest for learning did not die with him. Sister Marie has kept her family's tradition alive, sharing the teachings of her great-grandmother who hunted mushrooms over a hundred years ago in the forests of Poland. Now 80 years old, Sister Marie travels throughout Michigan to lead forays and give talks at a variety of venues. Her calendar has 15 or 16 programs on it each year, many of them field trips.

Sister Marie attributes her good health to mushroom hunting—indeed, folks many years her junior can't keep up with her in the woods. All that fresh air and walking keeps her in good spirits too. Her favorite part of mushroom hunting? Working and networking with people and the many organizations that invite her to share her wisdom. And, of course, walking in the woods and being surrounded by the natural beauty of Michigan.

The journey of Sister Marie's family illustrates the pathway of how a family of European-American immigrants brought their traditions of mushroom hunting to Michigan. Their descendants—like those of the Great Lakes region's Indigenous peoples—have shared that knowledge with thousands, helping create a beloved Michigan tradition.

Becoming Familiar With Michigan Mushrooms

The road to the cultural acceptance and use of Michigan's mushrooms was ultimately a long one. Up until the late nineteenth century, mushrooms were a source of fear in many immigrant communities, even though they had been a staple in the diet of European and Asian countries for centuries. Stories of mushroom poisoning made good reading in newspapers and instilled terror at the thought of eating one. That tide of disdain began to turn at the beginning of the twentieth century with the publication of books and brochures that helped people identify mushrooms and know which species were edible. Mycological and toadstool clubs began springing up in many cities around the country.

However, mushroom poisoning was still a very important issue. Many newly arrived immigrants to Michigan found poisonous species that looked like the edible ones from their home countries. The outcome was not good. According to Dr. O.E. Fischer in a 1918 article on mushroom poisoning, 77 people were poisoned and 16 died in Southeastern Michigan due to eating the wrong mushrooms between 1898 and 1918. Fisher felt

the estimates were low and that many poisonings went unreported. Nearly all the reported cases were traced to a few specific species of mushrooms—the "look-alikes."

As more Michiganders began hunting mushrooms, experts saw the need to educate the general public. They published articles in journals and newspapers encouraging people to learn which mushrooms were safe and which were not. Some experts, such as Mrs. C.B. Kelsey, president of the St. Cecilia Society in Grand Rapids, shared their knowledge at local events. Kelsey gave a presentation titled "Mushrooms" in 1901 to the Ladies' Literary Club of Grand Rapids and highlighted her presentation with a luncheon featuring edible fungi.

Mushroom hunters were still a fairly rare breed in the early twentieth century. However, a new focus that developed on the use of mushrooms as food, due to the



Some lucky hunters with baskets full of morels. (Photo courtesy of the National Mushroom Festival.)

rationing of meat during World War II, spurred more interest. During that era, Dr. E.A. Bessy, head of the Department of Botany at Michigan State College, now Michigan State University, thought to replace some of the meat in people's diets with mushrooms. According to Bessy, one had to eat three pounds of mushrooms to obtain the same nourishment as one pound of beef, since a much smaller percentage of mushrooms is digestible. He graciously offered to identify specimens for the public—all one had to do was properly package them and mail them in.

It wasn't long before Michigan began to develop a low-grade mushroom "fever," particularly in the northern parts of the state. More newspaper stories were printed on how to identify different kinds of mushrooms, where to find them, and delicious recipes for cooking them. The *Clare Sentinel* reported in 1955 that an army of mushroom hunters were poking in the Northern Michigan woods looking for morels, shaggy manes, and other "luscious growths." The *Farwell News* echoed those sentiments, proclaiming that thousands of hopefuls

were hitting the woods. General interest in mushrooms was further fueled by the Michigan Department of Conservation, which widely distributed a brochure titled “Mushrooms and Toadstools.” As time went on, newspaper stories on how to identify morels became much more detailed and scientific.

Mushroom Fever, Here to Stay

The idea of a mushroom festival was first tossed around at a meeting held on the Michigan State University Oakland campus in 1952. The idea sprang to life in 1959 with the first annual Mesick Mushroom Festival, followed the next year by Boyne City’s National Morel Festival. In 1961, the champion morel hunter at the National Morel Festival picked 229 morels in just an hour and 15 minutes! Television stations, magazines, and even *National Geographic* were there to cover the event. Festival producers boasted that there were registrations from 18 cities and 3 states. Not to be left out, Michigan’s Missaukee County held its own festival in 1962, with more than 1,500 people in attendance and a morel harvest estimated at 1,000 bushels.

Michigan’s morel fever was rising fast. Sightings of elusive fungi became a hot feature in many local papers. In addition to reporting where the best local hunting grounds were, newspapers also ran stories on regional hotspots that consequently boosted tourism in those areas. Moreover, morels began sharing the fungal stage with other species. The “Foolproof Four”—a title coined by the *Clare Sentinel* in 1960 to describe morels, shaggy manes, puffballs, and sulfur shelf fungus—are all species that have no poisonous look-alikes. Their identification encouraged hunters to diversify their mushroom palate to include other edible species in their collecting baskets. People were invited to visit the state and national forests but warned against trespassing on private property. It was not uncommon to see photos of local hunters proudly showing off their morel bounty in the local papers. Yes, mushroom fever was here to stay.

The economic potential of mushroom hunting did not escape the minds of those looking for business opportunities. Mushroom festivals began to pop up across Michigan, including those mentioned above in Mesick, Boyne City, and Missaukee; the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph Mushroom Festival in 1970; the Mid-Michigan Mushroom Festival in Harrison in 1971; the Lewiston Morel Festival in 1979; and Mushroom Mania in Grayling in the mid-1980s. The last mushroom festival to begin in Michigan was the Humongous Fungus Festival in Crystal Falls, which started in 1992 to honor an *Armillaria gallica* fungus colony that stretches across 37 acres, weighs in at 21,000 pounds, and is around 1,500 years old.



Clockwise, beginning at top left: The chicken-of-the-woods (*Laetiporus sulphureus*). The author’s grandfather Douglas Barton showing off a large puffball. The shaggy mane (*Coprinus comatus*). A morel mushroom (*Morchella esculenta*). (All photos courtesy of the author.)

The Michigan Mushroom Hunters Club found its humble beginnings through the efforts of Yugoslavia-born mushroom expert Betty Ivanovich. Just like Chester Kopin, she was schooled in mushroom hunting in her native Yugoslavia by family members, including her grandmother and aunt. Ivanovich immigrated to the United States in 1964 and became heavily involved in mushroom cultivation, opening her own shop in 1978. Her reputation as the “mushroom lady” was widespread, and she was often called upon to identify specimens. In 1981, Ivanovich held the first organizational meeting of the Michigan Mushroom Hunters Club. She handwrote 100 postcards to send out to people who had expressed interest, inviting them to gather in Detroit to talk about mushrooms. Only ten people showed up, but that didn’t matter, for the club nevertheless took off and now has more than 1,000 members.

The sharing of traditional knowledge by people like Grandma Lucy and Grandma Mary, as well as the heavy promotion of mushroom festivals by Michigan’s tourism bureaus, produced the widespread epidemic of mushroom fever that still sweeps the state each spring. It is highly unlikely a cure will ever be found—or desired. 🍄

Barbara J. Barton is a Lansing-based wild foods forager, author, and singer-songwriter who loves teaching folks about traditional foods and having adventures in the beauty of Michigan.