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Interview with James Howes

Molly Sharp

James Howes

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Researchers Present: Molly Sharp

Event: Interview with James Howes

Location: Mr. Howes home on Upper Gilchrist Rd., Mt. Vernon

Mr. Howes (from now on referred to as "JH") was recommended to me by Mike Miller as someone who knew quite a bit about mushroom hunting. He was more than happy to talk to me and we arranged to meet at this home after he got back from church on Sunday (around 1:30pm). The house is a log cabin on the left about a mile from where Upper Gilchrist Rd. meets rt. 36. There is a red barn at the end of the driveway with four hunting dogs barking from inside their chain-link pens. He motions me into the house through the garage where he had been buffing his new Dodge pickup. We are greeted by an excited cockerspaniel and we sit down at the kitchen counter opposite each other. He is watching a basketball game on a small TV to my left. The sound is turned off.

MS: So I asked Mike Miller if he knew anyone who did mushroom hunting...and he laughed at me. He said that everybody he knows does mushroom hunting. So how popular is this?

JH: Well around here it's very popular. Have you ever eaten mushrooms?

MS: Yeah, but only the ones you get from the grocery store.

JH: You've never eaten what they call the morrels? Okay, it's like a sponge mushroom and it's totally different from what you would get at they store. Those are called button the mushrooms, the ball mushrooms, and they grow out of grass. The morrels grow in the woods and they look like a sponge, almost all the them. There's a number of different kinds. The yellows, and they get real big. A friend of mine found one that was sixteen inches tall one time. Then there's the grays, and there's the little white one. There's woods mushrooms and I won't tell you what we call them. In the spring its usually starting in about the second week of May. It's when it gets real humid and we have a lot of moisture and they actually grow at night. Now I've been told that they grow in a matter of seconds. That they pop up out of the ground that quick.

MS: Now this is just the morrels that do this/

JH: Just the morrels, yeah. You'll see people all over the county with cars parked, going into the woods after them. A lot of people get in trouble because they're trespassing you know. Do you like the button mushrooms?

MS: Oh yeah.

JH: Well then you would love the morrels. All they are is a fungus. It's kinda weird eating a fungus like that. The way we prepare them is we roll them in flour and we fry them in either butter or cooking oil. When my kids were young I couldn't find enough of them. We'd eat ourselves sick on them.

MS: You just eat them plain? You don't put them in other things?

JH: Oh yeah, you can put them in pizza, you can put them in spaghetti, or omlettes. They're real good in omlettes. Any questions as far as how.....?

MS: Well how did you get started doing it?

JH: Well when I was about ten or eleven I started out hunting the button mushrooms, which is what you eat. My mother would send me out and I would go to areas like golfcourses and churches where they have big areas that they mow frequently. The button mushrooms grow in those areas and I'd keep our freezer full of mushrooms all the time. Of course my mother loved that because she loved mushrooms. Then as I got a little bit older I heard about the morrels and everything and I loved to go out in the woods. So I'd go out and I started finding them. Over the years I learned what type of trees they grow under. The yellow

mushrooms will grow under dead elm trees. The seeds that they actually grow from are called spores. One thing that I have learned over the years is that I'll carry like a potato sack or an onion sack. One of the reasons for this is when I first started doing it I used to carry just a regular lunch bag and I'd go through the woods and I'd pick all the mushrooms. I'd do this for a couple years, then all of sudden there wasn't any mushrooms in those woods. Because I wasn't letting the spores fall as I was walking, so I basically wiped out that woods. I'd had old-timers tell me that you always want to carry an onion sack or a potato sack something that has holes in it, so that when you're carrying the mushrooms through the woods they're actually reseeding. The spores are actually falling out of the bag and reseeding the woods. I thought that was an old wives tale until I found out that some of the real good woods that I hunted were no longer producing mushrooms. So that's important.

The big yellow ones, which are the most fun to find because they're so big and pretty, grow under dead elm trees. Now the gray ones, which get pretty big too, and the little white ones will grow under ash trees. They don't necessarily have to be dead. For some reason they just grow real good under ash trees. Then there's little black ones and little gray ones that grow good under wild cherry trees.

You get to the point where you learn just by looking at the soil and the vegetation around whether it's a good area for the mushrooms to grow. It's be a real dark soil, and a lot of people say that I've gotten to the point where I can smell them. But it's not that, it's just that I've done it for so many years that I can tell. Well I was mushroom hunting one day in the rain. I'll go out in a light rain, and I see a young fella coming up through the woods about seventeen eighteen years old. He was hunting mushrooms, and I asked him if he had found any. And he said, "No. I'm just not having much luck." I said well would you like a lesson. He said yeah, and I said just follow me and I'll show you some things. So I taught him what an ash tree looked like. I said now when you're walking through the woods—the soil's good. I've already shown you what the soil needs to look like, and the vegetation. Once I taught him what an ash tree was, I said look down through the woods and show me an ash tree. And he did and I said okay, let's walk down there. Well we did and he was finding mushrooms. Well he'd probably picked with me for about two hours and by the time he had left me he had a bag full of mushrooms. He was a real nice young fella and he thanked me for teaching him the trees. A lot of people go out mushroom hunting and they don't find much because they don't know the trees, and the trees have a lot to do with it.

MS: So who taught you the trees?

JH: I just learned on my own. Well, I cut firewood okay. I've cut trees for twenty, twenty-five years so I know all the types of trees just by looking at the bark.

MS: So you know all the tricks.

JH: A lot of them. I really enjoy it, it's a lot of fun. Especially when you get into... There was one time when I was hunting and I got into a patch of probably about six-hundred of them. I mean they were just everywhere. You know it's just like finding candy when you were a kid. You see I also hunt ginseng too. Have you heard of that, ginseng root?

MS: I've seen it in pill form, but I've never seen the plant.

JH: Well I actually dig ginseng root too. It's been selling for as high as four-hundred dollars a pound.

MS: How many roots make a pound thought?

JH: A lot. It takes a lot. It's the same type thing. You learn the areas where it grows by the vegetation and everything and certain vegetation grows in amongst it. So you learn the vegetation that is around it, but you know that once you get into that, that the ginseng is in that area.

MS: So where do you usually go?

JH: All over the county.

MS: So you're just driving around and you see the trees and you pull over?

JH: Over the years living here so long, I know a lot of the property owners. I have run of a lot of the woods. Just from knowing everybody and they know that I'm not going to tear their woods up or hurt their property or anything, so they give me permission to go on their property. Once you find certain woods you keep them in your mind over the years. So you know if you go in there's a pretty good chance you're going to find mushrooms. And it's better to get out away from the city because most people will hunt the areas around town where they don't have to drive way out. But if you can get back into the woods that are secluded where somebody wouldn't want to walk way back. I've got a four-wheel drive truck so I can drive way back in areas where they won't go.

MS: Do you run into other people when you're out there?

JH: Sometimes.

MS: Does anyone ever get to your places before you get there?

JH: Yes.

MS: So you're not too territorial about where you go? I was asking Mike about where he hunts...

JH: Some people are and a lot of the land owners like to hunt mushrooms themselves and they get frustrated with people that trespass and go in and take their mushrooms. It's a good idea to get permission, because a lot of people just care and they'll go where they want. The mushrooms in such demand and a lot of people don't care who says what and I'm going in after the mushrooms. Then there are areas that a lot of different people know that they grow in there so it's just a matter of who gets there first to get the mushrooms.

MS: I had never heard of mushroom hunting before. I guess we must have mushrooms where I'm from, but I—

JH: Where are you from?

MS: New Hampshire.

JH: Yeah, they're probably up there. Actually Ohio and Michigan are some of the best mushroom hunting. I think a lot of it has to do with---I think up you way it might not get quite warm enough. Michigan's mushroom season actually runs about a month later than ours because we warm up quicker than they do. Michigan—now I've never actually hunted up there, but I have friends who go on vacation to go up there to mushroom hunt. Now they'll bring back feed sacks full of mushrooms. Then you can freeze them, but you have to cook them first. You know like how you cook vegetables, how you kinda like par boil them before you freeze them. You have to do the same kind of thing with a mushroom or else if you don't, when you thaw them out, they just kinda turn to jelly. So you gotta cook them a little bit, fry them just a little bit, and put them in the freezer and freeze them that way.

MS: So how many do you get?

JH: In a year?

MS: Yeah. Do you just have freezers full of them?

JH: If I had my way about it I would. A lot of it has to do with the season. Not every year is a good year. A good year is when there's a lot of rain and then warm nights. It has to be humid and hot at night. Otherwise they don't grow well. If you have a lot and rain and it's cold, your mushroom season won't be very good. So it has to be warm and humid at night. They grow at night, that's when they grow.

MS: Do you always go by yourself, or do you bring your family with you?

JH: I'll take my family. I don't like to take a lot of people—I guess you asked me if I was territorial? I guess I am when it comes right down to it. Because if you show other people they might go to your places, and there's a lot of people who don't know where they're at. They say they've hunted mushrooms and they can never find them. Well, you get to where you want to keep your places a secret especially if you got some real good places. My wife likes to go with me. She's not real good at finding them, but....

MS: So is it a social time?

JH: It can be. Actually that time I ran into that boy I though I probably shouldn't have shown him that place.

MS: Have you seen him there since?

JH: Actually, that was two or three years ago and the last couple years hasn't been very good for mushrooms. So I didn't spend a lot of time at it. I've got certain areas that I hit and if they're not there I don't go to the other areas because I know they're just not growing. So then I don't waste a lot of time at it. But when it's a good year, every night when I get home—from work I'm going to the woods to mushroom hunt.

MS: If it is a good season, would you go out and walk around for seven or eight hours, or just an hour or two?

JH: I might go for---yeah, I might spend hours. I might right when I got home from work, and I might not come home until it's dark if they're that plentiful.

MS: You said you were a hunter too. Do you combine the two?

JH: Yeah. I run my coon hounds. I run them all year long but you're only allowed to kill them in the fall. But if I'm out and I'm running my hounds I'll look for mushrooms while they're running coons. Until they get treed. It's the same way with ginseng when I'm out ginseng hunting.

MS: So do you keep the ginseng or do you sell it?

JH: I sell it.

MS: Will you sell mushrooms too?

JH: I have. A lot of older people that like mushrooms, if they can't get out to get them, they'll sell for as high as twenty to twenty five dollars a pound. And it doesn't take a whole lot to equal a pound. I keep all my family like my mother and sisters and all them in mushrooms too. Actually it's always been a kind of an annual thing on mother's day because that's when they're growing real good. I'll take her out a number of batches for a mother's day present so she looks forward to that every year.

MS: And the ginseng?

JH: The ginseng's all for me because it's like gold. I enjoy hunting ginseng more because of the money that's involved with it. Four-hundred dollars a pound.

MS: Now what do you do with that?

JH: You can eat it. They claim it gives you energy, and over in Europe they use it as medication. The biggest part of what comes from here is shipped over there because they're just crazy over it. I've heard that for certain roots—the great big roots—they'll pay big dollars for the great big roots. I don't really know that it's as beneficial as they claim that it is. Now I've eaten it myself and it's very bitter. It's just terrible. You know like when you take a pill it'll have a real bitter taste? That's what ginseng tastes like, the root.

MS: So what do you do with it if you can't eat it?

JH: I sell it. If they'll pay that kind of money for anything that tastes that bad I'll sell it to them!

MS: Have you noticed the places where you hunt mushrooms changing at all? Encroaching houses and such?

JH: Yeah, it's harder with the population growing and homes going up.

[The phone rings and he takes the call briefly.]

JH: That was my son.

MS: How old is your son?

JH: My son is twenty-two. He just graduated from Devry last year.

MS: What's he doing now?

JH: I'm not really supposed to say. He installs bank security systems. He travels to Michigan, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Kentucky, I think he goes out to five or six different states. He goes around installing—you've heard of the computer di-packs?—he installs those in banks. That's why I'm not supposed to tell anybody. He's doing real well at it for how long he's been in it except that he's on the road all the time.

MS: I think you've answered all my questions. Well, part of this article that we're going to be doing is that we are going to try to put a recipe on each page. Each of us is writing an article and then there will be a recipe on each page and maybe a sidebar on something else. So I'm trying to gather recipes.

JH: Gee, you'd need my wife for that. Well actually as for as the mushrooms, the way that I like them the best is to just roll them in—Of course you've got to clean them so they don't have little bugs and stuff on them. You soak them in salt water which will kill the bugs off and everything. Then you roll them in flour—you can put them in a baggie and shake them up and get flour all over them. Then just use a cooking oil, and you have to have the fire pretty hot so they'll fry up crisp. With the omlette it would just like how you make scrambled eggs, you make that and then just pour your egg mix in and sprinkle the mushrooms over the top of it and fry it. Then you fold it over. You could add ham or peppers, or whatever you wanted. It really changes the flavor of the omlette. It's amazing, it just kind of makes it...you'd have to experience it I guess.

When do you leave school?

MS: I graduate the third week in May.

JH: Well you won't be around for mushroom season then. I was going to say if you were, you could come over and I'd give you some and you could try them.

MS: Thank you very much, you've been really helpful and I got tons of good information.

JH: You're welcome.

MS: Can you think of anyone else that I should talk to about this sort of stuff?

JH: Yeah, but I'm not sure that I've got his phone number. I've got one friend that I would say is actually better at it than I am. I don't know that he knows that much that he knows the areas to find it like I do, and the trees and stuff like that, but he has such a good eye for it. He can spot them to where I'd have to walk another twenty or thirty feet to see them. He'll stand back and he'll be pointing them out to me and I can't

even see them where he's pointing. He finds thousands a year. Let me see if I've got his phone number. Actually he lives in a little better area for a home. He lives out in Blatensburg in the hills. [He rifles through draws in the kitchen.] I'll tell you what, I can give you another fellows number. His name is Don Lang. His phone number's 392-4618.

MS: Thank you very much. I may give him a call.