BB: All right, I pressed record. First I have to read you this statement. It’s just part of the--

CEB: All right.

BB: --the deal I have to do. So, I have to say: The key objective of this interview is to serve as a research tool to document memories of the American chestnut in the southern Appalachian region. Information obtained in these interviews will be retained and made available for further use in efforts to promote a better understanding of the role of American chestnut in Appalachian culture.

So then I have to ask you: C.E., have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

CEB: I’m glad to say I do.

BB: Okay, so will you just start off by telling me your name, where you grew up, and how old you are?

CEB: All right. Now, my name is Cletus E., for Errol, Blevins. Unusual name. So, I’m happy to report to you that I was six years old when we moved from Robbins, Tennessee, which is near the Kentucky line to a tenant farm at Jasper, Tennessee. That’s in the lower part of Tennessee twenty-five miles west of Chattanooga, to a two hundred acre farm, tenant farm that the owner lived here on twenty fourth avenue--no, at an avenue in Chattanooga, and they were so good to us, they were like kinfolks. They said they hadn’t made anything off the farm for maybe twenty years. People just been using it, and it was bad condition. But we were shocked as a six year old child, and I had a brother, a nine year old and one four year--three years old. But we found chestnut trees dead. We never saw a live chestnut tree on that farm, but if they had been counted carefully, there might have been as many as a hundred and fifty to two hundred trees, and we saw them jutting out of the green woodland or where the regular--it was in January of 1931 when we moved to the farm. It was in sorry shape with old cars, bodies everywhere, so my mother did not want to raise us at Robbins, Tennessee because then the depression had set in, the only money to be made--

Woman 1: Excuse me, what is Laura’s date of birth?

CEB: [whispers] Turn it off.

--and, so when arrived late at night, we didn’t have time to see anything, but we did see a big tree cut down in front of the house that was at least four feet through had been cut down for fence posts by parents. It was standing when we arrived, and it was a dead chestnut tree, and it was huge. The biggest trees we’ve ever seen, and it was cut down for fence posts because it made good fence posts and fence rails, and that’s about all we had in the depression days. So, we
finally used it up, but the woods were full of them, and they were so prominent, you could see them, “What in the world has happened to the trees?” And we found out that underneath them were the last years that bore, and they were all sour, and we picked them up awhile before we discovered they were too old and weren’t good to eat. We had to pour them back out in the woods, and we knew there was something terribly wrong. There were not any other chestnut trees that we found alive on that high place. And so, obviously they had been a great source of food for stock--pigs, other animals, obviously anything that hadn’t heard of them but they ate them as long as they could, and they produced the thickest hops on the ground, and we thought we were in heaven it was so wonderful to see all those nuts. They would have been such a help during the depression. Oh, we would have made all kinds of chestnut dishes. They were so good for you and so tasty. We had had some up there in Robbins, but we hadn’t no need for them, because there were other things to eat. My mother did the farm handling while we were there. She said, “We don’t want to raise our family here, because we had six boys” and said “we’ll have a six fat member family of boot leggers.” That’s the only place there was every any money in those days. So, she said, “Dad, we’ve got to go somewhere and get these boys on a farm.”

So we rode--answered an ad, and they were the grandest people. We were so blessed to have them. They couldn’t do enough for us because we paid them the rent, and oh, they were just pals. Bring us food we never had before like oranges, and apples, and candies, and nuts, and all that sort of thing at Christmas time. You don’t have an idea how good that was for us tenants. And I had enough to eat. School was right there nearby, so we became interested and were told that there was some kind of virus and it hit the national chestnut trees. I mean, it was a tragedy it was that passed off, but that’s clear in my memory as anything ever is. I can see those trees in my mind right now and how sad it was so we would chase over the mountain and almost count them there was so many of them. They were so sad, because there the nuts were. The hogs wouldn’t eat them, nobody would eat them, and they had just spoiled, and that was a great tragedy. We knew others had the same thing.

Eight years old, because now my birthday, and it takes somebody that old, and it’s hard to find somebody that old that would remember now. See, if I wasn’t a great one for memory, that’s the reason I want to preserve my memories for my family. I wouldn’t--but I was glad to run into you, and it struck me, “Hey, I know about that personally.” And so, within five years we had all of the trees cut up and dead, and the forest kept on growing, but we never found any live ones on the farm that we know about. And so, about half of the farm was woodland, half was bottom land on the Sequatchie river, and we tended those river bottoms, and we knew what it was to live through the depression.

And so, I went to the Navy in ’43, and so they were able to pay off the fifty-five hundred dollar debt that we owed to government, and we were the first in the world to pay that off, and I realized my mother wrote me said, “We put that on the farm and paid it off.” And they let her make a speech in Chattanooga, and she was on the front page of the Chattanooga Times. I had a
picture around, but I lost it. So, I’m proud of my mother and father, and they raised five Baptist ministers, and one who didn’t want to be one, and he could have done it if he wanted to. But anyway, he’s still living.

BB: So, you were a Baptist minister?

CEB: I was a Baptist minister, yeah. And so, I admit to a pastor’s church, and I did for the first ten years of my life, so I said, “I’ve got five children to raise, and my churches are not paying enough.” I had one, I won’t name it, but they had 440 members or more--oh, no it was 600 members, and we would have 450 people in Sunday school in church, but that wasn’t getting enough to raise those children. My wife had to go to work, and I said, “Well, I’ve got my masters degree, I’ll just go higher end.” They took me right off, and they gave me a black group of fifth graders, and I learned to teach kids. Within a year and a half I was getting out of it what nobody could get, and then they made a traveling art teacher of me, and I became a television teacher. Taught three years, every Monday--I mean Tuesday and Thursday on Channel WRCB, Channel 3.

BB: Wow!

CEB: And it was live, and I never had a fearful moment, and I enjoyed it so much that we made other shows, and we had fifteen--no, twelve artists and artisans and people who just loved to do art and interviewed one of them for every thirty minute period, and they went into all southern states. Some states--sixteen states, and so they wanted to make more, and they wanted to make me--called me. [telephone rings] They wanted to call me [telephone rings] on the night I had not divulged the fact that the foreign mission board wanted me to go to Africa and do a special job, so they wanted to make me the manger of the local education television station providing programs for them and several courses, but I went to Africa instead.

I had five beautiful, wonderful years. I helped one church get on its feet. Beautiful building, it was down so low and so dirty and unkempt they didn’t know what to do with it, and I took it over. Painted a Baptist--thirteen feet tall to seven feet wide, all the animals were in the millennium they were biting and fighting and killing each other, living off each other. We just stand there look like with a grin on our face. Standing in the water and out of the water, and they couldn’t believe I did it, and it looked like it was set back in the wall about a foot. And it did look good, and we put a banister against the floor, and I baptized fifty two people while I was pastor.

Had to come home because I developed a problem, a health problem, got back, got it fixed, and went to nationals. Finally signed the first petition asking us to bring the Blevines back, they didn’t care what they did. My wife said, “We can’t go back.” I asked the doctor, I received a telephone call. I’m was sitting in the doctor undressed to my waist waiting for a decision what they were going to do with me. Went downstairs finally I says, “What’s the matter? I thought
you would come back.” Said, “No, we just thought you’d be down eventually.” I said, “Well, I’ve had a development,” and I told them the story, and the doctor said, “Well, you can go back.”

So, we went back, and that was the best three years of my life, and I was sorry I had to come back at sixty-two. See, I stayed five–six years. Six year numbered, but five and a half years. Never did anything more satisfying in my life than that, so glad I went. We keep in touch with them. Bless their hearts, they needed us so bad.

BB: That’s so great.

CEB: And nothing like being needed by somebody.

BB: I would believe that, too.

CEB: So, I’ve had a colorful career, and now I’ve made these eggs. I’m the only one in the world, so far as they know, who’s learned how to do it, and people want to see my machine, I’ll let them see it. But Zach my grandson is thirty-four, and he’s taking it over. And in time, my son has made a museum, and it’s got, I guess, five thousand different kind of eggs--different individual eggs down there. So, we’ve still got to go on about two thousand and do them all. Got it cut out for us. I can’t find books with eggs in them with the size, and I don’t know if I can find the sizes. Just not out there. I’ve been to all the stores and asked them to get them and got some to get and bring in others, and I’ve sold them all down as far as I could go, and people wanted them bad. So, I sold them. They cost--excuse me--

Now, we moved here to our last piece of ground that never had any houses on it, and a thick forest of--it’s an eleven acre place. Now, we’ve added to it a farm. That’s what I wanted to do, and so I discovered right by the road that goes through the garden and within thirty feet of highway road, it goes through here and the road is named--

BB: Camp.

CEB: Camp Road. This is thirty-three twenty seven Camp Road. And so, I spotted this within a year or two after we moved, and we came near running it over with a road, but I saw, “There is a chestnut tree! Now, there’s no way it could have been here this long.” And so, I watched it, and it hasn’t grown one millimeter around the waist, but it leafs out every year, no blooms, and we have tame chestnuts out there, and we thought, Well, maybe it will do something. And so, we thought about after this interview and so forth, if we could move it, if you did move it you see, it will grow bark, and it wouldn’t last long. That’s what you tell me, and I believe it. And I can see why.

Well, I know it’s one because I can remember how sad we were when I was six years old before we moved here and we had sacks of them put up, but they turned out to be rotten, destroyed. But I remember that the woods were carpeted underneath the trees that last year with those spoiled chestnuts, so it was bound to have been 1930 or maybe a year earlier than that when they became
infested because all the trees were stripped, no tiny limbs just the muscle of the trees. Some were so huge, and the one there that they cut down for fence posts was at least four feet through, and we’d get up and walk on it way down before the limbs came. It was a big tree, and there was a--nearby there was a--pecan tree. That being, they had to cut it down because that was where we wanted to have a garden. Couldn’t have a garden, but it had pecans that long, just full of them, and so we didn’t have anything much to eat during the depression but hickory nuts. We got all the hickory nuts we found good ones, and we found lots of bad ones, and in those depression days, I remember them so well, but we got to buy that farm, and I got to pay the last thousand on it, and so they paid me back later and that helped me in college.

And so, we had the G.I. bill. I got a master’s, went to New Orleans and got my New Orleans seminary, and got that, and then went to Mississippi State and got a master’s degree in the teaching of English, and I taught school for four years. Taught English four years at Clark College in Mississippi, and after Tennessee Temple College in Chattanooga, and I was chairman of the department. And I realized I needed to get back to where I could minister, and then I got back, got a big church, and went to pastoring and preaching too. So, I have around sixty two years of ministering behind me, and that’s a record. That’s more than any of my brothers got.

BB: Wow. Well, C.E. I have some questions just about--

CEB: Oh, please do.

BB: Okay. So, do you remember anybody ever selling or trading chestnuts? Do you remember anybody, your mom or dad, telling you about people doing that?

CEB: No, we didn’t get there in time to see people trading them, but I’ll tell you one thing: I’ve been to many-a-tree where you could step from one chestnut to another and there were very many around as you went, but they were all rotten.

BB: So, do you remember ever eating chestnuts?

CEB: Not them. I did as a kid. Oh yeah, we had--we lived in upper Tennessee and had a little place, and we’d go hunting chestnuts every year. I’ve got no other reason those died the same way as they made their way around, but they were in vogue when we were there. That’s the reason we knew them, what it was. We thought, Oh joy! Look at the chestnut trees. But they were all dead, no leaves. Never saw any come out anywhere. Those--no chestnuts gave birth to a baby chestnut tree. Never. That was the last. It was as clear as day and night about the loss. We all grieved over it.

Hon, come here. This lady is interviewing me. How are you doing?

LB: What about?
CEB: About the chestnut trees. We’re going out there directly, and she’s going to shoot a picture of it and I’ll stand by it if I can get around there. Slide in about like that.

And, what else do I remember about it? I know everybody else was hurt. Everybody had the same--

LB: I heard my daddy tell me--

CEB: So, that’s my wife, Laura.

BB: Hi, Laura. My name is Bethany. It’s nice to meet you. I heard you were sick. I’m sorry you’re not feeling well.

CEB: I wanted her to meet Zach.

BB: [laughs] He’s trying to set me up.

CEB: What did your people do?

BB: My dad is a professor at UK.

CEB: Okay.

BB: He does computer science.

CEB: Oh, how great. Zach is such a good conversationalist. Where’s Zach’s picture, hon?

LB: Huh?

CEB: I had it over here. Oh, it’s in her room. I’ll go get it. I want to get you to have a date with him. I’ll tell him about you, and he don’t mind--well, I want you to see him. He doesn’t look like bad people all together. We just think he blessed us in a way we never thought we’d be blessed.

BB: That’s so wonderful. He sounds like a wonderful person.

CEB: He’s such a fine young man. Not afraid of work, either.

BB: That’s good.

CEB: He got a bachelor’s, he could be teaching school, and he’d be a great teacher, too.

BB: Yeah, he sounds like--

CEB: I taught elementary, went on through everything, went on to taught through college. I’ve taught every grade level.

Well, what else?
BB: Well, how did people eat chestnuts? Do you remember your mom preparing them any way or telling--

CEB: Well no, we just ate them raw, roasted them. You can roast them, and they were so good, so delicious. They were a food staple. They were faithful every year. I think lots of people were saved by eating those chestnuts, because they had so many good vitamins in them, and there just wasn’t anything any better. So, it was a terrible loss, and we knew it.

Now, I think everybody used them for fence posts. I knew we did, because it wasn’t long you didn’t see any snags or any dead trees down or anything else. I’d say in ten years they were cleared away, and people used those carcasses. They came in very handy. So, they would make houses out of them. They were just wonderful wood. They made good lumber out of them.

BB: Did ya’ll build your house out of those dead chestnuts?

CEB: Oh yeah, people would build houses out of the dead ones.

BB: Do you remember yourself ever lumbering--

CEB: No, we didn’t. We built all kinds of fence posts. We didn’t lumber any. Everybody had them. There wasn’t any market much for them, but people who had them used them. They’d use them for firewood if nothing else, good kindling. In those days, not many people had lights. We didn’t have any lights as long as I lived there, and I lived there in ’43. My mother and father didn’t have any lights. They later got them.

But anyway, the whole farm has been divided up now. There’s no sign of these chestnuts anywhere, not any at all. But other trees took their place, and my father got enough lumber off of the place, and I may have some lumber in that barn, I don’t know.

Hey, Joel! Hey, come here and meet this lady interviewing me about the--

BB: Did ya’ll ever feed chestnuts to livestock or any other--what kinds of animals?

CEB: We didn’t have to. They got them. That was one of the things they’d go pick them up and eat them. By springtime there weren’t many left, but the forest was so populated with chestnut trees, there was a great loss, a great economic loss to us. And that food stuff was the main thing, and we’d roast them and boil them and eat them raw. All we kids got fat every--meant a lot to us. We’d go out and have our favorite place, take a hammer or a rock and bust them to get them out of the hull. You know what the hull looks like. And that was the first thing, and they split and often times fall out of the tree and then that bud would fall off and barefeet we didn’t fare too well underneath the tree. [laughs] Be careful and catch you some kind of shoes, or you’d get pricked plenty--bring blood. But they were beautiful. I thought they were just pretty, and it was, to me, it was like a human death almost. We miss them, and we
suffered from them--from the lack of them, because we would have had good food. My mother would have made all kinds of stuff out of them.

BB: Do you know what kinds of stuff?

CEB: Well, she would have baked them in the stove, and she would have put them in cakes and pies. She would have--we would have just served them on the table. They would have been great boiled or baked, and they would have been great food, healthy food, nourishing food. Of course, us six boys we needed them, you know. But anyway, we made out; we were tough Scotch-Irish people. So, I’m doing a history of my family like I mentioned, and I’m going to include this in my memoirs, your coming to see us.

And so, what else can I tell you?

BB: Okay, what about--so, do you remember how your mom or--did ya’ll ever store or harvest--or how did you store the nuts? Did you store them up or did you not have enough to store?

CEB: Well, we didn’t get--they were all gone. They were already sour.

BB: Even when you lived up in Robbins?

CEB: Oh, well we didn’t have many there. I don’t think we had many. We had other things hickory nuts there, but down here we had an abundance of hickory nuts, so we just had to go to hickory nuts, and we’d pick them up by the sack full. And we would eat them. Mom would put them in cakes and pies, and we’d eat them at the table many times. We had to scrap for something to eat. My mother went and picked poke salad. You ever remember that?

BB: Uh-huh.

CEB: So, she always cut several messes of poke salad. We lived off the land. For some the depression was so bad, everybody registered for commodities, but they wouldn’t let Dad have them because he had a job. He’d go try to get some, we needed them as bad as anybody else did, because that first year we hadn’t grown anything. We did get corn before the year was out, and we raised watermelons, and we hadn’t started raising cotton yet, and we raised beans, and peas, and those were food staples, and can corn--cut it off and canned it. She had a steam pressure cooker, and she knew how to do that, so we didn’t starve, and I’m the tallest in my family, they’re all tall people. They raised her family. Mother died of cancer at sixty, and I went home and held her hand while she died. I came home from school from where I was teaching and realized she wasn’t going to be here long, and she died for my convenience, I couldn’t believe it. She said, “Son, tell your wife that you can’t come back till some time next week.” And it didn’t dawn on me that she was dying for my convenience. I couldn’t believe what a character she was, and I contribute more from my mother than anyone else that has ever lived, and I think that’s the reason we made preachers--she wanted six son preachers, and we had one--from the first child was true through the last one was a sister. Sister lives over here about four miles, she comes to
see us every now and then. She works for the government and her husband farms. And so, she drives in every day.

Now, what else can I tell you relative to that? But everywhere I think in the south suffered the same experience. We’d hear them talk about it, and there were chestnut trees everywhere. And the animals—I mean, hogs would pick them up, chomp them, and stomp them out, chomp them, and the hogs were fat that ran out. But after that there was nothing to fatten them like that. So, the farmers realized what a loss it was to them to miss the chestnuts. We did hear that it was a virus, but that was all.

BB: What about were there any games that you would play with chestnuts?

CEB: Oh, we would play keeps for them sometimes, a game children had. We had plenty of them, so it didn’t make any difference.

BB: Tell me how you played that game.

CEB: Well, you know, he’d have some, you’d have some, and we’d guess how many is in a hand and things like that. We had to make up our own games, and we lived about a half mile from anybody else way up there on that big farm on the hill. We’d climb up to the top of the hill and see miles all across Tennessee, the Sequatchie valley. The Sequatchie valley is an unusual place. It goes from Alabama clean into Kentucky. Have you seen it on a map?

BB: Uh-huh.

CEB: Well, we lived on the part in the middle and the little Sequatchie, big Sequatchie joined at the northern end. We had no use to go over to the little Sequatchie; it was small. The river would get up and flood the land, so if there’s any chestnuts down there, of course, the cows hadn’t had them—the cow’s went through and ate Johnson grass roots, and I think they still would. Do you know what Johnson grass is? It’s a grass with roots as big as your hand, and they’re usually white with some brown sheaths on them, and the cows could just take them by the head and shake that mud off or dirt off and eat them and fatten them, so we learned to let the cows eat them. So, that cut down on the Johnson grass, because they’d eat the big ol’ roots.

Let’s see, what else? I didn’t remember anybody calling any of the chestnuts off for lumber. Now, I’m sure they did. I’m sure they did, but they lasted too small—too short a time, I know that. It was a great deprivation to us, us renters too, but we were blessed we had renters that loved us just like neighbors and friends. First money they’d made off the place in years. I believe I told you that.

Now what else can I tell you?

BB: Were there any old time sayings or songs that you remember that would have mentioned chestnuts?
CEB: **Stands?**

BB: Old time sayings or songs?

CEB: Let’s see, seemed like there was. Seemed like there were songs about chestnuts. No, I don’t recall any. Maybe I wasn’t old enough to get it. I don’t recall any.

BB: Okay. Well, do you think that chestnuts are an important cultural symbol for people in the south?

CEB: Ma’am?

BB: Do you think it’s an important cultural kind of symbol?

CEB: For the south?

BB: Yeah.

CEB: For the people you mean?

BB: Yeah. Symbolic of the culture? The lifestyle?

CEB: We’ve often been called rebels. I remember that, but no. Now, I went to a country school there. They had two rooms, and they had six areas in one room. No, we went to Jasper. You know where Jasper is? For the secondary school.

Let’s see. No, the chestnuts just vanished because they used them for firewood, they were great kindling, fence rails, posts, for wire they lasted longer. So, then they finally rotted out and there weren’t any more chestnuts around anywhere. That’s the reason I felt so wonderful finding that little one, and I haven’t found any others on the place. It’s odd that I found it beside the road by one of my rhododendron bushes out there. I planted, brought in all things—it grew in the forest, and I’ve got them around here, and we have all things—I’ve got Japanese iris down at the foot of the hill. I think they’re—don’t know anybody else with them. They grew about that high in a cluster, and they should be in about now if they haven’t already, but I haven’t been down there. Can’t go down on account of this leg, and I don’t know if there are other trees. But this place will go under, this one over here I’m pretty sure, because they’re building here and people—we’ve got a school system here. Elementary, Senior High school, Junior High down there.

BB: I saw that.

CEB: This road—this place is virtually—the land is shot out. We paid fifty-five hundred dollars here—no wait a minute—it wasn’t a thousand. How many thousand did I pay for these ten acres? It was just about—less than ten thousand dollars. Now, it’d be ten times that much.

BB: That’s amazing.
CEB: Maybe twenty. It’s going high here. They’re wanting land to build on. Well, what else can I tell you about that? You ask me more questions.

BB: Okay, do you want to talk about the blight for a little while? Do you remember hearing anybody--?

CEB: [to someone else] Is she doing all right? Is she doing all right--

BB: What do you remember people saying about the blight? Do you remember how your mom or dad felt, or were they scared?

CEB: Oh, well they were sad. They were really sad about it. They knew what they had lost. In fact, the newspapers carried some of it. Have you been to the Chattanooga Times and looked through their category? Go do that. It’s a great resource.

BB: Did anybody try to-- [door bell rings]

CEB: Why hello there.

Woman 2: Hi!

CEB: Hi, how are you?

[recording paused]

CEB: --and Zach he can make them, and you love them. If you need one of them--okay, now what else?

BB: Okay, so do you know anything about the chestnut restoration efforts?

CEB: Restoration? No, well I heard that they’re trying to get a resistant--and I’ll show you my trees out there that are resistant. So, you may want to mention them. They’re close by enough by to pollinate.

BB: Do you think that it’s important to try to restore the tree?

CEB: The tree itself, they’re going to have to learn to get it through the blight. I don’t know if the blight would come back, I really don’t know. That’s one thing that agricultural people ought to--you might contact them and see if they have any plans--what their plans are to bring them back.

BB: Do you think it’s important to try, though. Do you think that’s worth the effort to try to bring that tree back and put it back into the wild?

CEB: Well, if it was so hearty, but it wasn’t hearty enough to stand that virus. They’ve got other ones. They’ve got them that are not blight, but you know what would be good to have
hybrids. I think it would be a good thing to have hybrids that would resist that because who
knows what viruses come by sooner. Now I don’t get many chestnuts because the worms get
into them. When they get down, I try to find enough to do me and pick them up off the ground
and they get that big around out there now. I planted them twenty years ago.

BB: Are they Chinese chestnuts?

CEB: What?

BB: Are they Chinese chestnuts?

CEB: Yeah, I think that’s what they are. I think that’s what they are.

BB: So, do you think--imagine that they got the hybrid chestnut, American chestnut and got it
back into the wild, how do you think people would use the chestnut? Would they use it in the
same ways that your parents used it?

CEB: I think so. They make great fence posts, and lots of people like them for rails. They’re
picturesque. They might want to see that. They are symbolic of pioneerism. That’s all they had
to make fences with, and they made fences this way, and they didn’t use any nails, and it would
cross them--you’ve seen them. You might shoot a picture of fence rails. It could have been
made of these.

BB: What did you mean when you said that they’re symbolic of pioneerism?

CEB: Well, they had them. They made fence rails, fences, made that kind of fence for years.
They made them, they were great for that. So, I think that saved a lot of fence wire and a lot of--
well, they made fence posts out of the dead ones. They’d cut them down to make it out of them.
I think that they were just so common and such a blessing for food, nuts, and feed for animals.
Oh, they were great.

Your cattle ran out in those days. Hogs ran out in those days, and they picked them all up, so
everybody expects their hogs to go eat them, and they did. You might put down that. They were
great animal feed. You want to be sure to get that in there somewhere. And the days when
people had no fences much, they’d let them run out to the hills, and the hills were full of them,
and that’s all I know, because I’d go to town and see them.

Everybody had dead chestnut trees, and so everybody ate chestnuts. Everybody knew how to
boil them and roast them. They’d put them around Thanksgiving dishes. That’s another thing.
They dressed up the table with chestnut roasts, and people just kind of dipped them out. Any
way they could find to use them, they used them. And the whole world was blessed with them.
So, our southern people, I think we felt the loss. I’m sure there were northern people too. We
moved from north Tennessee, but that’s still the south.

Now, may I look over this and just see what you got?
BB: Sure. Those are just my questions.

CEB: Okay, just questions you’ve asked?

BB: Uh-huh. One other question: do you think it’s important to record the stories about chestnuts?

CEB: Oh, yes. I think it’s good. People need to know about it. How else are they going to learn about it? About all you’ve got now it folk tales. You may mention that.

Yeah, I remember the blight first hand. I didn’t see the tree whither and die. It must not have been all that bad up there, I don’t remember my father hearing about it. We had forty acres, and most of it was in [unintelligible], and I’m sure he cut the trees off. We hadn’t noticed it up there.

[reads] When did the blight pass through this area?

It had to be about 1929 through about 1931. Well, they were all dead by ’31.

[reads] Do you remember hearing people talk about it?

Yes, I do and reading about it. Don’t remember reading.

[reads] How did people respond to the blight?

They were sad. Any accident--nothing they could do. Their response: grief.

[reads] Did they loss of the American chestnut have a direct economic effect on you and your family?

Of course, of course it did. Yeah, we made--for food, for people, and the animals. It was great.

[reads] What replaced the chestnut economically after the blight?

Well, we used them for building material. Didn’t use them for livestock anymore. They weren’t any food source any more, because they were dead.

[reads] Restoration efforts. Are you aware of or involved in restoration?

No.

[reads] What motivated you to get involved?

That I loved the chestnut tree. That’s the reason I was glad to tell you, and I didn’t have anybody to talk about it.

[reads] Is it important for the tree in the southern Appalachia?
It’s good to put them out there, though there going to have to be planted. These here ought to be planted for more. I ought to put them out, but I’ve got such thick roses around here, I had to cut off enough just to have a place to live.

[reads] What role might the American chestnut have in the 21st century economy?

I think they ought to sell them. I think you ought to be able to buy them from nurseries, and maybe they do. I bought mine from a nursery. They could be brought back, they could be great for farmers, great for many ways. They make great lumber. Oh, there was a piece of lumber I saw some place, I think, that was old chestnut. Now, where could it have been? They lasted so good as lumber. They saw them up in one inch planks as much as ten, twelve, fifteen inches wide. So, tables, they made furniture out of them, and they were beautiful. I hadn’t thought about the furniture and stuff, but I know they did. I’ve got some old, old chairs. I’ve got two of them. I guess they must be a hundred and fifty years old. Would you like to see them? I don’t know--out yonder is one. If you ever go and bring it here, we’ll look at it together. See that with the little ol’ chair? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if that were a chestnut chair?

BB: This chair right here?

CEB: Yeah, right there.

BB: It’s beautiful.

CEB: Isn’t that something? That’s hand made all the way, and I haven’t seen a one of them go down. We’ve given others to people related to my wife. We didn’t have them ourselves.

BB: Those are really beautiful. Gosh, that’s beautiful.

CEB: That looks a little chestnutty.

BB: Uh-huh. Yeah, they very well could be. I don’t know how--

CEB: I don’t know how to prove it.

BB: I don’t know either.

[talking at the same time]

CEB: But it made good--see that’s a hand make lathe. They made it to get that straight. Look how short it is. I don’t think it’s because it was worn off. That was the way people made it. We wouldn’t take anything for them. I guess they are bound to be a hundred and fifty years old.

BB: That’s a beautiful chair.

CEB: This is split oak here. I know that. Now that, I don’t know what it is, but it would be--why don’t you shoot a picture for further reference.
BB: Okay.

CEB: Let me give you here. Just tell them that that could be chestnut. Look how it’s worn off here. Handmade, and that’s hand stuff right there. A local man did that part. So, you see that lathe ring right there. There, there. See, they held that little instrument to that and made that thing ring. So, that’s got a great bit of history by it. At least you can say trees have lent themselves for furnishing, for furniture, building material. And they saved the trees that went down are not a total loss except for the future.

You need a light change somehow? You want to take it outside?

BB: Here we go, I got it. Now, it’s saying my memory is full, but it shouldn’t be.

CEB: Yeah, I think it would be good if you could talk to other people, but you’re going to have to get people over seventy-six years old, or eighty years old, and there’s a man up on top of the hill that would like to tell you what he knows of local chestnut.

BB: Yeah, if you know of any other people around here who would remember--

CEB: Yeah, he’s been up there all of his life. He’s my age. His name is O-G-L-E, they came out of North Carolina, I believe. And he’s remembered that little church up here which I pastored.

Woman 3: You can write this number down, the lady we were talking about who’s seventy-nine, and you give her a call. I’m sure she’d would be--

BB: Is her name “Tina”?

Woman 3: It’s T-Y, Tyna. Isn’t that the way you say it, “Tanya”, Mr. Blevins?

CEB: Ma’am?

Woman 3: Tyna Blaylock. Don’t you pronounce her name “Tanya.”

CEB: Tanya, no.

Woman 3: Isn’t that who was here yesterday? How do you pronounce her name?


I haven’t seen a little thing like that. How many pictures you get on that?

BB: Well, I don’t know. Something is funny with it, because it’s not got anything saved on it.

CEB: Do you want to put my arm out this way?

BB: I don’t think my camera is going to work.
CEB: Get somebody how round it is, how big it is.
BB: Maybe I can come back later and take a picture.
CEB: Oh, okay.
BB: Because my camera is not working for some reason.
CEB: Well, that’s too bad. Come any time you want to.
BB: Let me try something really quick. There should be a memory card in here somewhere.
CEB: [reads] Were chestnuts in economics and culture?
I told you about all that.
[reads] Second hand memories?
BB: Yeah, you pretty much got them all.
CEB: Well, I’ve experienced that myself. We all suffered because of that. You tell them that it was the food stuff that we would have used, and we were sorry to see that they were already spoiled.
[reads] Do you remember ever seeing any chestnut growing in the woods?
I did.
[reads] How was chestnut used?
It was a favorite tree, and tell them how huge they were. They weren’t small ones.
[reads] You mentioned homestead built with chestnut?
Oh, I think I’ve got a piece of chestnut in my back room. That back room was made into a barn at first on that farm a hundred and fifty years ago. That’s the reason I moved here from a farm up here.
BB: I don’t think this is going to work. I don’t know why, but I don’t think it will. I’ll have to come back later maybe and take a picture if that’s okay. Maybe when I come back and interview Tyna, maybe I’ll stop by here and take a picture.
CEB: What was that now?
BB: Maybe if I can get a hold of Tyna, and she’ll let me interview her--she lives close to you?
CEB: She lives about four miles this way.
BB: Okay, well maybe if she’ll let me interview her--

CEB: Now she was raised on Sand Mountain, and she’s eighty-nine years of age.

BB: Wow.

CEB: She should remember them.

BB: Good. Yeah, she sounds great.

CEB: Why don’t you just talk with her on the phone?

BB: Really?

CEB: Yeah, see if you need to go there.

BB: Okay. Yeah, I’ll call her first.

BB: I won’t do it today, I’ll just--

CEB: Tyna Blaylock. She’s eighty-five, and she’s been on a farm all of her life on Sand Mountain. Sweet, sweet person and frank like we southern people are.

BB: All right, I think--

CEB: Oh, they made great hoe handles. Oh yeah, all handles were made--axe handles, hoe handles, sledge hammer handles. They were just about useful for everything. Anything that needed a handle, they could make it from chestnut.

BB: [sneezes] Excuse me.

CEB: No one ever cut any down for lumber, but tanning, yes. I think they were used for that. That would turn wood different color.

BB: When you tan leather?

CEB: [reads] Were there any lumbering practices particular to chestnut?

I know one reason they lumbered them. After they were dead, they would still made lumber out of them, and some of these old houses I’ll bet have it. It’d be good if there’d be a piece that you could put with you thesis, wouldn’t it?

BB: Yeah.

CEB: There’s something personal or something you get some shavings off of. Put that down if you run into any. We’ll look at this back log and see if [unintelligible]

[reads] Was the American chestnut an important cultural symbol for southern Appalachia?
I think it was. People made churns, they made everything out of it, it was so good. The grains were pretty straight. And I--let’s look at some things on my back porch as you leave that I have here.

BB: I think we’ve pretty much got the questions. Thank you so much.

CEB: If I could show you that beam on that plow, it would be wonderful if it was--they make plow handles, they’d make them out of it. You’d probably like plow handles. And handles for tools, tool boxes, everything they needed around the house. That’s the reason I was thinking, “I don’t know what kind of wood that is.” How would you know?

BB: I don’t have the eye for it. Dr. Craddock--

CEB: That looks oak here. But see, now that was made by hand. See this part here. Isn’t that quaint?

BB: It’s beautiful.

CEB: Look where they’re worn on the bottom of my shoes. That’s an old thing. That came by way of Dunlap. Laura’s father’s people. If some of them were alive, they’d tell you because they had chestnuts up there, too. But you’re wise to catch the memories of it to get what a loss it was to Appalachia.

And, okay now. Let’s see what else I’ve got that I can show you before we go. I think that’s about it.