BB: Okay. So, I have to do this little statement, ok, 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 future use in an effort to promote a better understanding of the role of the American chestnut in Appalachian culture.

So I have to say, Have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

AW: yeah, I’ve signed them all.

BB: ok great. So, will you start out just by saying your name, how old you are, when you were born, where you grew up.

AW: I was born in 1922, tenth of June 1922. But I was born in Gadsden Alabama, my father left Kentucky and went down there and worked at a steel mill, and later on, why we, after I was born we went to Dundock, close to Baltimore Maryland, still he just got a better job with the steel mill. Then when I was almost 5 years old we came to Clay Pool, and that was where I started school, and when I saw the chestnuts, began to get acquainted with the chestnuts, and I remember them very well.

BB: So where is Clay Pool, its in what county?

AW: Clay Pool is right across Bays Fork Creek in Warren County. There used to be post office, my father bought a store there and he was post master there for 30 years, it was ’27 when we went there and they discontinued the post office in ’57. He was postmaster all that period of time. Of course that was where I lived when I remembered the chestnuts. I was going to school at Rocky Springs School, about a mile and a half from Clay Pool to the school, I went barefooted, and there were chestnut trees on the way from home to school, and I remember that very well, because in walking you didn’t want to get a chestnut in the tender part of your foot. But I got so that I could stomp chestnut burrs with my heel, because my feet got so tough and that, and of course it was partly showing off at school, we had chestnut trees on the school ground. Not everybody could do that and I could, burst a burr open with my heel. But on the way to my school there was a huge chestnut tree and I remember there, of course, when they got really ripe they’d but a lot of us kids would throw rocks before they were ready to fall, and knock the burrs down and get them, of course I didn’t always stomp them with my heel, I did that at school that’s about the only time

BB: I guess that was in the fall of the year?
AW: Oh yeah, that was in the fall of the year. And I also remember chestnut trees out the road from Clay Pool, there was a large wood there, Ms. Georgia Williby owned the woods. Of course my Daddy, he farmed part time, they had a plant bed over there with tobacco plants in it, and I remember seeing the chestnut trees in the woods but you never did get any chestnuts, because squirrels and all, as soon as they’d open up, why they’d get the chestnuts, so you never did get any chestnuts to eat out of the woods, but now along the edge of the woods over there you might get a few, but not like along the road there where there weren’t a lot of squirrels and all. And the big chestnut tree on the way to school was in the churchyard, as you turn in to go to church, at Rocky Springs church by the way, that was the big one, and there were other, I remember other smaller chestnut trees that had chestnuts on them, we’d look at them once in a while, but the big ones were there. And then also, I remember my grandfather, he always had a lot of trees, orchards you know, but on the back of his garden on the other side, it wasn’t in the garden but on the other side, he had a huge chestnut tree there, and it had one big limb that I could get up and climb out on this limb, and reach up and of course get chestnuts before they fell. You just couldn’t get to them quick enough I guess, but, I’d get out there and get a hold of a limb shake it above, and shake the burs, especially when they were about ready to fall anyway, and you could get a lot of chestnuts on the ground that way.

BB: So what would you do with them once you had them down, just eat them right there on the spot?

AW: I remember getting a big shoebox full of chestnuts, and we eat them. And back then not just chestnuts but hickory nuts. I know my grandfather on my mother’s side, I don’t remember many chestnut trees there but he had hickory nut trees that were real good. And we could sit around and meet, and listen. Well, we had a radio, we could listen to the radio, and daddy would crack a bunch of them and we’d sit around, pick, eat. But of course chestnuts, with them you could just crack them with your teeth and eat them, they were good.

BB: So you just ate them raw, or cooked them, what was the most popular way to eat them?

AW: I would say that was the most popular way there, because it did help to let them cure a little bit.

BB: Get hard of something? Dry out?
AW: they weren’t too hard. They would finally get pretty hard, but as I remember it was better to let them dry a little, and they had a sweeter and better taste than getting them right from the tree.

BB: How long would you let them dry?

AW: Oh, I’d say a week or something, I don’t remember exactly. I’d say a week to let them, they’d be good then. We had plenty of chestnuts at the time but then the blight hit and I remember there’d be on the trees, there’d be one side that would be nice, and the other side would be dead.

BB: how old were you when the blight... do you remember how old you were?

AW: The blight as I remember hit while I was young. It would have been probably when I was about in the third grade or something, I was about 8, 9 years old.

BB: So that would have been 35 ish? I forget how old a third grader is! (laughs)

AW: I’d say I was about 7 or 8 years old, and ... It was sad. I mean we all liked chestnut trees. It was real sad. I know one place up there, this was in Allen County across Bay’s Fork Creek in Allen County, I remember they had new ground, where they cleared out you know, that they wanted to fix up for future farming, but they didn’t want to cut the chestnut trees, and they left all the chestnut trees standing. When the blight hit them it seemed like it just got them all at once, and it was just like tombstones, you know in the summer time there was all those dead trees through there, and it was really sad you know, just to look at that place.

BB: Do you think people were sad in some sort of an economic sense or was it just...?

AW: I’m sure economic, those people in economic, yeah. Because you know chestnut logs were good, and I’m pretty sure they eventually cut those and sawed them up, that and the chestnuts themselves, either way it was valuable, really valuable wood. People liked chestnuts, they didn’t care for them in their yard. One fact is I’ve got a nephew who’s got a Chinese chestnut in his yard, and he cut them down because the kids get along barefooted, and he cut his Chinese chestnuts down. The boys grew up with these out here and I never thought about cutting them down because you don’t have to walk around barefoot, but I do pick up the burrs each year to keep there from being burrs out there all the time.

BB: can you just pick those burrs out of your hand or how do you get them out?
AW: I never did get many burrs, but yeah generally, yeah just pick them out, not a big job, of course you certainly wouldn’t … (laughs) I don’t remember picking any out of my foot, I was talking about bursting them with my heel, I’m sure I did pick some out maybe that got on the side there, but it wasn’t anything that bothered me very much, and I just got to where I could do it, and I thought it was pretty….

BB: You’re tough Arles.

AW: Yeah…. We had a ball field out there, and that was in left field was where the chestnut trees were and that was generally where I played because a lot of those kids didn’t, you know, around those chestnut trees, they never were picked up there on the school grounds, you know, why one year to the next, why there’s always burrs down there, and if somebody come around and look at me I might stomp out to show off. (laughs)

BB: So, your dad ran a store at Clay Pool?

AW: Yes.

BB: Would anybody ever trade chestnuts for anything from the store?

AW: I don’t think so. Now he bought walnuts, I know he bought walnuts. But hickory nuts and chestnuts I never did remember him buying them. I think most people that got chestnuts they just eat them themselves. But Walnuts, there was enough walnuts, he had a market for that. And they’d bring, come in there, they had to be dry by the way, for him to buy them, and he’d buy them by the pound and I’m sure sent to New York or up in that section up that way because produce men they made trips up that way. And he bought, lets see, walnuts, and he bought mayapple, no, lets see, I forgot what all…

JW: gensing

AW: yeah, Gensing, and mayapple root

BB: I’ve never heard of Mayapple root, what did they use that for?

AW: I think some kind of medicine and all back then

JW: Home remedy

AW: but he bought gensing, mayapple root, for a while he would buy butter. And, of course, chickens and eggs, I know turkeys. He didn’t buy many turkeys. Lets see, goose eggs, they were big enough that 1 goose eggs would equal 2 hen eggs, they’d get twice as much money out of that.
BB: Where would they send the eggs and the butter, just up to Bowling Green?

AW: No, I don’t know, they took them up there, I guess they made a run about every week to New York, these people that dealt in that. And, they lets see, well, they bought all of our produce there. But, eggs and chickens was the big thing that they’d buy. Then they’d come along and have what they’d call a chicken day and pay a cent or two more. By the way, eggs, he bought them and paid a penny a piece for them, 12 cents a dozen. And, but, they’d have a chicken day and they’d raise the price maybe one or two cents over what they’d ordinarily pay and people from all over the country would bring chickens in there, and had all their legs tied together, of course you carried them with the legs, they’d hang down, but you could have chickens hanging on both sides and we had one lady that had Laying chickens, they didn’t get as big as other chickens, of course we sold by the pound. But she had a habit, if a chicken looked sick or something, she’d grab the chicken and run up, and sometimes it wouldn’t make it to the store before it would die, and we used to laugh at her, see her a coming, and wonder if it was going to make it or not. But she didn’t sell a lot of chickens to daddy, but she sold a lot of eggs. She had a route in Bowling Green, she sold her eggs around, made her route in Bowling Green, sold them directly to the consumer.

BB: So how far away was Clay Pool from Bowling Green?

AW: It’s about half way between Bowling Green and Scottsville. Back then, we thought of it as being 14 miles either way. And as a result daddy did most of his business in Bowling Green because they had more stores and things like that, and they had a nice ice plant down there, that he’d buy ice in 300 pound chunks, and he’d get about 4 chunks, he had ice blocks, of course we sold ice, people made ice cream out in the country, and they’d come to the store and get their ice. But, he was, for that whole country out there, there wasn’t any other stores. I’d say about the closest one would have been 6 miles and it was right on the river.

I’ll show you a picture here. Here’s my father, and this is my mother, here I am, and (laughs, mic falls) Ok, and this is Joyce, and this is my older sister and her husband, they’ve both passed away. And,

BB: This guy’s hiding out

AW: yeah, that is her two children, Imogene. And this is Virginia, and Martha, that’s my youngest sister there. Believe it of not he’s older than her but he looks pretty small. So, of that bunch there, us two, and her and her and these two are the only ones living. But that was made I guess down at Clay Pool when we all had a get together.
BB: That’s neat. So you said that you mostly just ate them raw, but what were some of the other ways that you remember chestnuts being prepared.

AW: I don’t remember mother, I know in cakes and all she’d put walnuts and hickory nuts, but I don’t remember her putting them any chestnuts there, and I actually don’t remember any other way of her using them except just eating them.

BB: So was it something that would be served as a meal of just a snack?

AW: It was somthings, that I’d say as a snack or something like that. Like I mentioned, my daddy at that time I first remembered, he had the only radio in the neighborhood and people would come there, and times like that was when we’d eat them. But I don’t remember mother, and she was a good cook. And she made, well one of my favorites was raisin cookies, where it had ground up raisin in the middle of these cookies, and I really likes that, and she used walnuts and I helped pick out walnuts for different things but I don’t remember her using chestnuts in her baking or anything like that.

BB: Some people talk about it being ground down into a flour.

AW: I don’t remember them ever doing that now. If she did I don’t remember it.

JW: They use them in dressing now.

AW: Huh?

JW: They use them in dressing, for turkey and dressing. But back then, they were just so good, that they just ate them. Ate every one.

AW: Yeah, that was it, I mentioned about the shoebox. You know, that’s quiet a few chestnuts, and you get a bunch eating they don’t last very long. With everyone picking them up, of course, if they set and aged about a week or so I think they were better, but we didn’t always do that. They were good anyway, but I think they were better...and, I was talking about the woods out from the store that way, (phone rings) I know would go along looking for chestnuts and finding a few along but generally the squirrels would beat you to them.

BB: What about livestock, what animals would eat chestnuts and how many?

AW: Any animal would eat a chestnut, but hogs, now that would be the main one. I don’t think cows or chickens, I don’t think they would... they’d have to crack that... you know pick it up with a bill, you know they couldn’t handle it. But, so, anything would eat chestnuts, any animal if it’d been cracked and all that, but I’d say hogs were about the only thing. And daddy, he had a bunch of hogs but we didn’t have any chestnuts on our
place, we had an orchard in the back, and we had a grape arbor that run a pretty good piece that was real nice, and he’d set out the tree, we had several apple trees and peach trees and pear trees and he had a water tank and he had running water in the house from this tank, most people... well we had a cistern we used for drinking water, it was my job by the way, I was small, and it was my job to clean the cistern out, they’d let me down a little rope and I’d clean the cistern out

BB: Oh gosh,

AW: But that was out drinking water and I know in the past there, we, if it’d come a big rain you’d let it run a while to wash the roof off, and then after it washed off you’d run out there and put the gutter going in from the roof of the house, or the store, the store had the biggest, deepest, cistern, and that’s where we got out fresh water and we always had drinking water in the house. Everybody drank out of the same dipper, we all used the same dipper never thought.... And then he put up this tank down there at the barn, it was a huge tank, and that was what we washed with, we didn’t drink that water. But we used that to was, and it worked... We were in better shape than most out in the country because we had coal oil lamps for light, and later on we got a system, I forget what the name of it....

JW: Delco

AW: a Delco system, and so, he’d have to charge... it had batteries up on the wall and he’d have to charge them ever so often, with a motor, but we had electric lights and he put bulbs in everything, the chicken houses, the toilet, we had an outdoor toilet, not a buried toilet... but he had lights in that, and the chicken houses and the garage and the barn, barn loft and down, and people enjoyed coming because it had them turned on and was bright everywhere you went around that place, and it just stood out in the country, cause everybody else in that whole neighborhood just had Karoseen lamps. So you can imagine the store, of course the front porch, and back porch. It really did stand out, we were real proud of our lighting system there.

BB: What was the store called?

AW: It was just Clay Pool, Clay Pool

JW: E.C. Weaver

AW: Yeah, E.C. Weaver was my father

JW: and it was E.C. Weaver Grocery
JW: It was just, well, yeah. He finally got a drawing there, where you’d buy so much you’d get a ticket, and every Saturday he’d have a drawing and I don’t remember now what he’d give away but he had a prize for every week for drawing. And that got a lot of people in, every week.

BB: Yeah, that’s neat. It there any certain ways you would harvest the nuts and store them that was different from how you would harvest of store other kinds of nuts?

AW: no, I can’t think of anything there. In fact, we didn’t keep them very long, it wasn’t something you kept all, we just didn’t get enough to do that, and we’d just gather all we could, they were good and we’d gather them. and I mentioned the shoebox and sometimes we wouldn’t even have that we’d just fill our pockets full and bring them in, but it wouldn’t be long until we’d be eating them, and as I remember even though there were a lot of nuts those places they didn’t last very long because ... everybody liked chestnuts, and everybody would share in eating them. Not everybody would get out there... Like my mother, I don’t remember her ever getting out there and gathering chestnuts, but everybody else did.

BB: was it mostly boys that would do it, more than girls?

AW: no, I don’t think so. Going to school it was everybody. Yeah, girls too, and it was easy, you know, the chestnuts were... you know grass and all, they weren’t easy to see a lot of times, and people with patience and all I guess you would say would be the ones who’d get the most chestnuts. And walking, the walking wouldn’t help you out much, if you got the right place and did some good looking you’d find chestnuts. I know that big tree there, the biggest one we had was that one in the church, it was huge, spread out all the way around, wasn’t no shade, it was just really a pretty tree.

BB: So you were saying that there were some chestnuts around your school, and some around your church

AW: Down at school I’d say that the biggest one would be about like this but there were

BB: Do you think people liked to...

AW: there were several of them, I don’t know how many we had, and there were several on the schoolhouse hill I know. Of course, naturally you’d be a looking but you wouldn’t get nothing compared to that big tree

BB: Do you think that people liked to build houses or community buildings ear chestnut trees, or was it just coincidence because they were everywhere?
AW: I don’t think you’d just pick the fact of putting a house there, because that one up my grandfather’s way there was a house, and then the garden, and then on the other side of the house was the chestnut tree. And then he had some smaller chestnut trees around the other place but that was the big one that we’d go to to pick. Naturally you’d go to where the most chestnuts were, and that was the big one we’d go to there.

JW: May I interject something?

BB: Oh yes, please.

JW: We have.. I do more of this than Arles does, checking back into the old newspaper, back into 1890s and 1880s, well, he’s done checking back even farther than that because we didn’t always have a newspaper in Allen County, and we have clippings that we have given to Greg. As you were asking about barter, they’d say ‘things are good now that the chestnuts are in’. They did barter them. Also you think about how good it would be to have a big chestnut tree if you had hogs, because that fed them. They called it the mast. And that’s why Kentucky was so good to be settled, we had the nut trees for the mast for the hogs. What else would you feed hogs in the winter? That was before they had it cleared enough to grow corn or anything like that. The chestnuts fed not only the people but it fed the animals that the people had.

But it was a very social thing here. They had chestnut hunts, that what they’d call them. And boys and girls would get together and they would go on chestnut hunts on a Sunday afternoon. It was a way of socializing like that. Arles is a graduate of Western Kentucky University and his grandfather also, you know, attended an earlier version of Western. Same place, but different name. And their big thing in the fall was a chestnut hunt, that was their big event -

BB: For the school?

JW: For the college, yes.

BB: Like as a social meet and greet thing?

JW: Like in the spring, I don’t know what you did in the spring, but I have copied, it’s called the Elevator, which means, you know that they were raising the students up, you know. And in this Elevator every year for, I would say 30 years, I’ve copied them and given it to Greg. And and it was the chestnut hunt, the big affair of the fall. Some would ride wagons if they couldn’t walk very far. And others would walk and they would walk... Cherrys founded Western, Cherry Brothers, T.C. Cherry and I don’t know the other Cherry, but they had a farm out, well, I guess on the same road as you father’s... Didn’t you tell me that the Cherry farm was on the same road? They just say a short distance out from Bowling Green
AW: It was out toward Alberton more than on Cemetary Road...

JW: Where you went to school also, they had a farm, and that’s where the chestnut hunt took place, they would fix food for them, the University would. And they would take wagons along, and you could ride or walk, probably do both, and they would go all day.

BB: What would they do with the chestnuts, just roast them all up and eat them all?

JW: I would say with a big bunch of young people it wouldn’t last long. And they would have a bonfire before they got back to town, and they would pronounce it the best chestnut hunt they’d ever had. It was a big, it was a way of getting together and it was fun.

BB: Was it coed at that point?

JW: Oh yeah, it was coed. Some would ride the wagons, and I would imagine that they couldn’t take enough wagons for the whole school, it was a school then, it was a University, it wasn’t a University it was a College at that time. And they couldn’t take enough wagons for that many so some would walk. And it was terrible when they had to postpone it if it was raining. And then you would see where, well, we got to do the chestnut hunt today. I was looking up chestnut stuff over there, and they have a library for historical purposes, not the student’s library, it’s not that one its separate, what do they call it? The Kentucky Library don’t they.

BB: In Bowling Green?

JW: Yes. And I looked up all those, and made copies of all those booklets, you know, describing those activities, and it was the social event of the fall.

AW: That’s in the Kentucky Building.

JW: Uh-huh, Kentucky Building. And Arles graduated from there, and his grandfather attended. So I thought it was really interesting that the big thing there ... of course, after cars, that changed things. It was a really great thing for them to leave school and get out in the country and spend the day. They played games, and hunted chestnuts, and that’s what they did.

BB: That’s a really neat story, I’ve never heard of that.

JW: And they did that here, you can see social events in the early papers. And chestnut hunt was held by, and it will have all the names of those that participated. But that was before Arles knew, before he could do that, because the chestnuts were...

AW: That’s before cars.
JW: The chestnuts were, yeah, and the trees were already failing. When did your trees start failing?

AW: Well, it was in the ‘30s and of course by the end of the ‘30s they were just about gone.

JW: It was a quick thing for the chestnuts.

BB: Yeah.

JW: Well I just wanted to add that, because to think about taking a whole school out to gather chestnuts

BB: Yeah, no, I like that. Yeah, that is really amazing. I guess the other parts of it about it is I want to talk about the wood more, so we talked some about the nuts, but was there any part of your dad’s store or house, or your grandfather’s house that was chestnut, or anything like that, or tools?

AW: That I don’t know, but I would imagine there was a lot of chestnut in that wood. I would think so, because chestnut it a long lasting wood, and its easy to work so why not. Of course naturally Oak is, but chestnut and oak are sort of together in lasting ability. So I’m sure there were but I don’t know that.

JW: and Barns.

AW: Oh yeah, barns, yeah, anything that was exposed to the weather. I mean it made good sense that they would use chestnut wood. Of course, I’m sure they used it, well like I showed you that article on the rails, that big tree that they got 700 rails that was 250 years that was 9 feet across. The reason they got that and made rails is because it will last a long time. And I’ve got rails out there, we bought this place in 19 and 50 . . . 56

JW: No, 1950

AW: Yeah, 1950, and when we bought the place we had rail fences going up to the barn, we had rail fences going up here. Now, I don’t know how old the fence was when we bought it, but and we’ve still got part of the rail fence out there now, that’s that old. And there was a pailing fence out here, woven, that was made out of chestnut, and the reason its all out of chestnut is because it’s real easy to work and it lasted real well.

BB: were there any tools or other household items that would have been made out of chestnut that you wouldn’t think of, anything like that that you can remember, like furniture?

AW: Yeah, they made furniture out of it, I think it was mostly buildings that were exposed to the weather, but chestnut was a pretty wood. Yeah, there’s a lot of furniture made out of
chestnut. One thing about it is you can get some big wide boards out of chestnut cause it got.... In fact we came across one, sent it to Greg, let him have it didn’t we? It was about this wide.

BB: wow.

JW: Probably got it at auction

AW: yeah, that’s right, we did

JW: there is a house, it’s called the Chestnut House, at Harrodsburg. And everything in it, mattress, everying is made out of chestnut. I ran into that over at Western when you look under chestnut, look under chestnut, and it’s called the chestnut house.

BB: I’ll have to check that out, is it owned by the state, like historic home now?

JW: yes, it’s a museum type place.

AW: well, chestnuts famous for names a lot. We’ve got a Chestnut Point and...

JW: there’s a chestnut street in nearly any town

AW: Chestnut Street in Bowling Green, there’s a chestnut street. A lot of names refer to chestnut around. There’s a church up here that’s chestnut, what is it?

JW: that ‘s the Chestnut point

AW: yeah, Chestnut Point Church

BB: let’s see. Do you have any memories, I guess maybe you were too young, but do you remember ever cutting down a chestnut tree for timber, and are there any... I’m wondering if there are any lumbering practices that are specific to chestnut that would be different?

AW: nothing, that I can remember.

JW: People ought just chestnut wood. Gain, I’ve passed all of this along to Greg, he’s got a bulletin board type thing that he puts up all of these little things that we send him, but and, there is one in there where, see, at first they thought that the dead chestnut wasn’t any good but then they realized it was keeping so long in good shape, because a lot of times after you cut wood it starts to deteriorate

AW: and stays out in the weather, most of it, but chestnut will go on for years

BB: It had a lot of Tannin in it, or something like that
JW: So they advertised buying dead chestnut here. This is one of the biggest lumber capitals in Kentucky, Allen County was.

AW: and I pride myself, I’ve got, I think one of the better forests in Allen County. In fact got a card today, a person up here at Munfordville wanting to talk to me about my timber.

BB: So most people just had their timber cut already.

JW: yeah, there’s nothing much left. At one time we had 5 big sawmills here and now there’s only one...

AW: we just got this today, Yoder Logging, Of course up the road in Munfordville, and he’s sent me a card

BB: Wow, that’s interesting.

JW: They like to cut the trees in winter, when the saps gone, because its easier on them to cut them when they’re full of water. I don’t know what its worth, but

AW: we enjoy our trees, of course, and we really, I’m sure it would make sense to cut some of them down but we just haven’t decided to do it yet, we hate to... we like trees and timber. And when we get through I’ll show you a few things that we have established that you just don’t see anywhere else.

BB: Is there anything that you can point to, like I guess the gathering parties in the fall, in the Elevator was a good example, but any other sort of things that exemplify or show how chestnut was an important cultural symbol for communities. Like you’re talking about the streets.

JW: Like subdivisions now are called chestnut.

BB; yeah, that’s ironic. Yeah, was there any other things, you’ve mentioned a few, but are there any other sort of thing you can point to. It’s an open-ended sort of question.

AW: well, there’s a lot of them but I can’t ... [laughs]

BB: yeah, it’s harder to point to those...

JW: There’s all kinds of things I’ve saved. Things of people falling, Kids falling out of chestnut trees, but I saved, and that’s not a good thing for you to talk about

AW: well, like that limb, I was pretty high up, to get this big limb going out. I didn’t fall but I can see how that could happen.
JW: He got reported for climbing trees on the way home, he was supposed to stay on the ground and walk home from school, and some of the neighbors told his parents that he was climbing trees.

AW: Well, I used to do a lot of tree climbing, that was one of my things I guess, and they laughed about it.

BB: why do you think you liked to climb trees so much?

AW: I don’t know, showing off I suppose, like busting chestnut burrs [laughs] that’s the only reason I can think.

JW: He’s not a musician, he can’t sing.

BB: that was your talent? [laughs]

JW: you just get your bare feet and go..

AW: It’s because people, I know there’s a big sycamore tree on the way home, and its so bug its hard to get started but once you get up so high you can just go right on up, and the thing about that is when you get up in a sycamore tree you really stand out you know, the white bark and all that. And there were some people coming that knew my folks, of course they traded at the store and was coming home from school, and they spotted me up there at the top of that sycamore tree, and they couldn’t believe it I’d be up there so high! And they told my Daddy and Mother about it, of course nothing ever happened. But I’ve been warned a few times about how dangerous it is to be up so high in a tree. Of course once you get higher up you can hold on better than you can down low. I’ve climbed a lot of tall trees in my time. [laughs]

We used to have a game playing where you, we’d call it ‘squirrel’. And you’d throw a ball, and the idea was to find a tree that had a lot of limbs and leaves you know, to hide. And, we played it Sunday afternoon, played squirrel and stuff like that, everybody climbed trees then.

BB: so you’ throw a ball up in the tree and have to go get it?

AW: You’d have to almost climb the tree to hit someone with the ball but then they would be it and you could get down and get hid before, just like that...

JW: didn’t have motorcycles or 4-wheelers.

AW: no, that was just a game we established, I don’t think anybody else that I know of did that. Well, it was mostly just to climb trees was what it amounted to.
BB: that’s great. Well, just one more little question in this part, was there any sort of saying, songs, or folklore, celebrations or gatherings, you talked about a gathering, but are there any songs or sayings.

JW: I told you that little poem would be good. And you didn’t think so.

[laughs]

AW: well, there was chestnuts roasting by an open fire, or something, what is that?

JW: well, that’s Longfellow isn’t it? Under the spreading chestnut tree.

BB: Yeah, there’s that one.

JW: This one is describing a bootlegger, and it says, the skin

AW: do you have that?

JW: If I can find it, yeah, I told you.

AW: Yeah I know...

JW: says, with skin as rough as chestnut leaves...

AW: well go get that, that is a good one come to think of it since you asked that.

BB: well, I guess most of what you’ve told me so far has been memories that you had of being a little boy?

AW: it is

BB: so you said you were about 3rd grade when the blight came through?

AW: I’d say that would be about right, of course we weren’t really aware of it, we got chestnuts after it hit, but it killed them pretty quickly it seemed like. I’d say by 1940 there weren’t hardly any left.

BB: what was kind of the attitude of sentiment?

AW: it was sad, it was sad, because everybody liked chestnut. I think back and it really was sad, because we had so much fun in those chestnuts. It couldn’t have hit a tree that would have been any worse than the chestnut tree, I don’t think if it had hit any other species, it was the one that really hurt worst.

BB: was there any efforts, community efforts or individual efforts to save it or anything?
AW: Well, I tell you what, after we bought the place we had chestnuts growing, several growing places over in the woods, sprouting up, and down around Clay Pool where I was raised, they were already dead and all. So I mentioned to you about the grape arbor that my Dad had, I know I took out next to the grape arbor, I'd dig them up up here ad I set out some pretty good sized chestnuts down through there thinking maybe getting them away from ... the disease, had hit up here but they'd sprouted out and down there they were all gone. So I set out several trees down there under that grape arbor in hopes of establishing, or saving them. Of course they all grew a while and then died.

BB: will you just tell me what this is and read it for me?

AW: the title of this is Bootleg.

If you meet a fellow who’s lips are raw,  
who has a parched throat and a sunken jaw,  
who’s form is bent like question mark,  
and who’s skin is wrinkled like chestnut bark,  
and you wonder what put him in the fix he’s in,  
ask him and he’ll tell you it was bootleg gin.
If you meet a kid who’s clothes are torn,  
Who has no stockings and his shoes are well worn,  
who’ trousers are too large and of an antique type,  
and his shirt scarce covers his appetite.  
If his face is peaked and his countenance is glum  
give credit to his father and bootleg rum.

JW: I bet that’s countenance.

AW: yeah countenance.

BB: that’s funny. Where’d you find this? It’s from 1922

AW: Imagine having a complexion like...

JW: it’s from the local paper. See, I save stuff on a lot of different subjects, and bootlegging during the depression was a very important business here, it was all over Kentucky. I don’t know how they had any customers because so many of them did make moonshine. It was in my bootleg file, and I was just straightening it up because I had it out to give the Sherriff some information and I caught that. We have a new sheriff and he’s wanting, just some past history so I’d gotten hat bootleg file out.
BB: Do you think someone local wrote that I guess?

JW: yeah, R.W., I don’t know who it was. But I just caught that chestnut thing and showed it to Arles and he said they’re not interested in that [laughs] so you can have that.

BB: are you sure?

JW: But I think there would be if we had them, there are songs like that about almost anything like that in Kentucky.

AW: We see it every once in a while. I don’t have anything but.

JW: The really big thing for the early settlers was the mast, and it was, you know, the nuts that they could eat. There are acorns, lots of acorns, see hogs eat the acorns. In fact that’s fattening them up for the winter, and that’s, you usually kill, well, you had to kill them in the winter because that’s when the meat would keep longer. And the mast, which would be the chestnut mast and the acorn mast, they couldn’t eat the walnuts because its hard shell. And that was what was depended on very much by the early settlers. We have many streams in Allen County, many creeks, and then we have Barren River. And they came here because of the springs which make the creeks. But almost every, in fact they settled beside a stream or a spring so they’d have everlasting water, and they settled, they kept coming until they got to this wooded area with the trees because they could cut down the trees and build the log houses, and then they had the mast for the animals to eat. There was cane growing, wild cane of the cows, you know they had milk cows and cane growing for that, and then the hogs and things ate the mast. But they crossed Barren County, Barren County is called barren because it was used as a hunting ground and all of that section was burned off by the Indians so the deer and things would come to graze and it was their hunting ground. So they came across that and dreaded crossing that because there’s no streams hardly in Barren County, but they get to Allen County and there’s all the water and the trees, big trees for their logs, and not much cleared lands so they had to clear it.

BB: yeah, that’s interesting. That just reminded me, I wonder if hogs raised on chestnut tasted any different than hogs raised on anything else, do you remember anything like that.

AW: I don’t think so...

JW: It would be a rich nut, a rich nut. It was probably richer, see people don’t eat acorns. So, it would be certainly more edible and I would think richer.

AW: I’ve never heard of it, but it’s possible.

JW: I would think that hogs would rather eat something that tasted good.
BB: But I mean, once you slaughtered a hog that had been raised on chestnut versus a hog that had been raised on slop.

AW; I would say I’d rather eat one myself, it would make sense.

JW: well you know cattle, if they eat things like onions the milk, it, it ruins the milk. Also the feed affects. That’s why they’re having to watch it so closely, see, cause they were mixing back in things that shouldn’t.... see, cattle are supposed to graze ruminants, and we’re making them more like hogs that ate meat and mixed feed and all and that’s why they’re having to watch

BB: with the corn fed?

JW: Well, they’re feeding the cattle, instead of letting them graze they’re putting them in a feed lot and mixing up feed for them with vitamins and stuff, not like cattle are meant to be.

BB: right. So, do you remember reading anything, thinking about the time when the blight was coming through, do you remember reading or hearing anything from people? what was sort of the sentiment of people?

AW: I don’t remember reading anything, but it was a sad thing to, of course at the store, people gather at the store and talk about things. I don’t remember a conversation about it but I’m sure it was discussed a lot. And the sad part was you couldn’t do anything about it. I mean, it was just, you’d think maybe a tree out by itself somewhere wouldn’t be attacked by it but it didn’t matter

JW: they thought they’d always be there, they’d line their driveways with chestnut trees, you’ve talked about that. of course he was so little during that time, to have absorbed anything like that. But he did... you told her about the avenue of dead trees?

AW: I told her about that New Ground. That’s...

JW: well, I remember you saying that the driveway up to the house was lined with those big trees and it was just like statues.

AW: well, that’s what I’m thinking about

BB: who’s house was that, was that your parent’s house?

AW: I don’t remember what you’re talking about

JW: its down there, you showed me where it was, down there by the creek. Bailey, down in there

AW: that’s where that new ground was.
BB: what’s New Ground?

AW: well, its where the original forest, they cut out everything and they’d planted this in corn and they didn’t want to cut the chestnut trees and, so they left all the chestnut trees, and had corn. Of course everything was done by mule teams then, and its hard plowing with all the roots and things, but they plowed and had all of the chestnut trees just left, you know, you’d mow and come to a chestnut tree and go around, continue on like that. And I know how sad it looked, I remember, I can just see it in my mind right now, how sad it looked all those chestnuts trees just died at one time. I mean, there wasn’t any green in them at all in them, they just died all at once. Most of those big ones like I talked about, where we got so many chestnuts and all, one side generally died before the other side, you know, they didn’t just die all at once, you’d have a little green sticking out here, or a little over here, of course finally it’d get it all the way around. But the way it works, why it circles you know, and, so you’d have one grain that’s survive a short time where it was all dead.

BB: that would be something to see. Well, did the loss of the American chestnut have any direct economic impact on you family?

AW: Not that I can think of. My father, he burnt plant beds over in that woods I was talking about in front of the store because he raised tobacco, and they burnt plant beds over there, and I know part of the logs he’d burn would be chestnut, they’d be dead. I know, that....Of course back then a lot of the fences were made out of chestnut rails and I remember burning one of the plant beds, why, I was small, and my Daddy and this other feller were throwing rails on the fire and burning this plant bed and I was going... I got on top of the truck there, and big high cattle rack was what it was, and I got a chestnut rail over, they’s burning these on the plant bed, and I got a chestnut rail over the side and I got the big end over and the strattle of it and it got me, and I grabbed it and turned a flip, and broke some ribs. Daddy took me to the local doctor up there and he taped me up and all. Of course I still have a dent right there where I broke some ribs throwing chestnut rails out of the truck. But I guess that’s about the only effect.

JW: think about us buying those rails for Tom.

AW: huh?

JW: We bought Tom chestnut rails for Christmas.

AW: we ran into, lets see, we ran into this, who was that? Yeah, it was up here in Allen County, found out that he had some in the shelter up there, chestnut rails. So, for a present, Tom, our youngest son, we bought him, well we found out about it and bought him a whole bunch, I forgot how many it was, all he had, and Tom’s still got them by the way. He’s got them
out there, he’s got them ... Well, he first put them along the road, but he was afraid somebody would steal them so he’d got him a fence back from the road now with chestnut rails on it. He really values his chestnut rails.

JW: He came up here and split some rails. And he had them in the back and then he got these new ones, well, not new ones...

AW: He’s wanting a rail fence, was what he was wanting, so we got him some rails to go with his rail fence

JW: and he put that in front, and then he decided that they were too valuable for that, so the onee that he had split from other trees like hickory and oak, he put them out front and he put his chestnut rails along the back so no one would see them.

BB: so are all your boys interested in chestnut?

AW: I would say so, yeah.

JW: get out in the mountains I don’t think there’s any chestnuts around, you can ask anybody, if there was there’d be

AW: No, well he’s got a rail fence going beside his drive as you turn in, its one of the better but then its not chestnuts. I sure he’d like to have some chestnut.

BB: How did they all get so interested in it? Did y’all raise them to, or did tell them about it?

AW: well around here with all the trees around here, they were raised with trees and they all liked it, and they all had something to do with building something out of wood.

JW: we took them on trips, and it was usually an outdoor adventure of some kind. And, we took them to a jungle garden one time in Florida, and it had chains and marked the trails and trees all along, and each turn would be kind of hidden. And Arles just turned this area up here over to them, that would be Greg and Anthony, because Tom was too young for that, and they made this elaborate jungle trail and had a cabin, and

AW: identified a lot of the trees

JW: yeah, they made little signs just like you’d have in a pubic thing. So when, Greg got his farm down there, and his sons got old enough, they have built a trail down there. I don’t think they put signs up. But see, they all have good-sized farms. Tom has over 200 acres.

BB: Do you think that most people that grew up in Allen County of in a rural are have that that…?
JW: no, there’s no one who has a farm like that.

BB: wonder why your boys all took to that?

JW: we let them do whatever they want.

AW: we had some good-sized timber and it’s interesting just to walk and see some of the timber we’ve got.

JW: and they could do anything with the dead stuff that they wanted to. So they used to, up in that trail they would cut logs, do this all by hand, with handsaws, they would cut seats out of the logs to rest on, and it was ... Arles told them, anything through there.

AW: it was just theirs to do what they wanted to.

BB: that’s so neat.

JW: they built dams and trails. They grew up doing that and they would have groups of people out here and skate on the pond and snow sled down the hills, we have cow piles [laughs] Tom would come out here with the church group

AW: oh yeah, they found out it was a place for recreation, and things like that

JW: our Minister of music, he says he still remembers hitting the cow piles on the sled, they sled down, the church, the whole church, they parked all up and down the road

AW: it’s amazing, its hard to imagine now

JW: on each side of the road, very dangerous thing, but we didn’t have anywhere to put all those cars. And they would do that at different times with the snow, they’d come to sled with Tom. Tom was an organizer of different things. They’d play ice hockey over there on the pond with sticks and get them a puck of some kind.

BB: that sounds so great

AW: its something you don’t find anywhere else, I mean the woods like we’ve got here. There’s a lot of grown up places, but to have big trees.

JW: And they all 3 have woods, there are hills or, in Anthony’s case, near the Mountains in Morehead around there, and he’s got a good-sized farm, a little less than 100. But Greg down there in Franklin Tennessee, steep hills down there, it’s ringed by hills, and oh he really protects his timber and his place.
BB: So Greg’s involved in the Chestnut Foundation, are any of your other boys involved in any way?

Aw: No, Greg’s the only one

JW: Greg’s sons are members too.

AW: yeah, 3 generations.

BB: that’s great. So yeah, the last part of this is I just want to talk about the restoration stuff and how you feel about that restoration and all that. So first question is are you aware of the restoration projects through the American Chestnut Foundation, and if you’re aware are you involved in any way?

AW: I’m not involved as far as setting out the chestnuts. I am a member of it. But that’s about the only thing that... in other words I am sympathetic maybe but I’m not into it like Greg is, because he’s really worked at it. I guess I’m passed age to do that.

BB: so why do you think Greg got so involved?

AW; well, I think since he was raised here with all the trees around, and all, and he remembers, and he got trees that we got back over there, and he remembers the chestnuts sprouting out and all that, he got interested I’m sure then. And the fact that he’s raised around here, and I’ve always been interested in trees. Well, its just like this, I had a little something to do with this getting this started, I don’t think many counties in Tennessee or Kentucky has a tree committee to find the largest trees in the county, but I think I had something to do there, and just things like that I think got Greg interested in it.

BB: so do you think its important to restore the tree to this area, native, in the wild, why or why not?

AW: yes, it’s very important because we’re cutting them down and we’ll soon be.... What are we going to use if we lose out trees, to build? Of course, I know you can go with rocks and concrete and stuff like that, but still you’ve got to have the insides and cabinets and things like that, so yeah, its definitely very very important.

BB: do you think it’s important to restore the chestnut in particular, or do you think its more important to restore the chestnut versus other things.

AW: Well, if we can... if we get the chestnut back like it was... it was the most valuable tree that we had that we’ve lost in my opinion. If we can just get it back, which none of us living now can know because it takes so many years to do, but I think we’re making good progress with it, and I think it will happen. In fact, I don’t see why it wouldn’t happen because we’re
getting so close to having some blight resistant trees that are going to be good timber trees and chestnuts. So, yeah

BB: so you think the restoration efforts will be successful?

AW: oh yes, I think so, definitely think it will.

BB: ok, so this is what I’m interested in, so talking with you about your father and what you remember growing up eating chestnut ad building with chestnut. Do you think that the chestnut could have a similar role economically, and culturally, and ecologically in Allen County Kentucky here in the 21st century as it did back in the early 1900s, or how might its role change?

AW: I think it could have, because you know, its going to be noted that the chestnuts... back then we didn’t know how valuable, not we know it was because we’ve been without it. Since its causing so much work and trouble and thought and all, I think if they ever get it going again it will really be valuable ad people will recognize it as being valuable. I think the time will come when it will be the.... Well, unlike before it will be noted that it is, I mean, they will appreciate it more, definitely appreciate it more. I mean, they appreciated it then but they didn’t really realize what it would be having to do without it.

BB: do you have any concerns, or hopes or fears about the restoration effort?

AW: well I can’t think of any effort and all that they could do more than they’re doing. I just think its great what so many people are doing to revive it. And I’m just really pleased that it’s going the way its going on that score.

BB: well that’s about all I’ve got as far as questions go. Thank you so much for sitting down with me

AW: well you’re welcome, I wish I could remember more,

BB: yeah, this is one of my first times to do this, so hopefully I’ll get better at the questions, I think that’s it, thank you Arles, I appreciate it.