Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

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Interviewer: Bethany Baxter
Interviewee: Eugene Day
Interview Location: Cowan, KY
Transcriber: Bethany Baxter
Audio File: EugeneDay_1.wav
BB: But first what I have to do is make this statement, and tell you about my project, so, 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 have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

ED: yeah.

BB: ok great. Yeah that was good.

ED: ok

BB: well the first thing I would like is would you just tell me your name, and where you live and when you were born.

ED: My name is Eugene Day and I was born in the town of Cumberland, in 1926, and I live at the present address already stated here.

BB: Ok, great. I guess the first question, do you have any first hand memories of the chestnut yourself, and what do you remember?

ED: When I was growing up, 8 or 10 years old, we lived in Lynch, my Daddy worked in the coal mines, and on the weekends he’d take us to the mountains, up in the Black Mountain, and we’d pick chestnut up, sometimes we’d get half a bushel, and just to boil and eat and bake with them. But they were, the chestnuts were on their way out at the time when I was picking them up. But I have seen people where I live now on Cowan Creek, go by horseback and mules to the mountains to pick chestnuts up, and they used what we referred to as meal sacks, and, sometimes I guess they’d get them 100 pounds, and they’d throw them on the mules and carried them out and they used them for different ways in cooking. A lot of times they fed their hogs and horses chestnut to substitute for corn. At that time there was never a stock law and everyone just marked or branded their animals and turned them loose and they stayed healthy and fat always eating the wild nuts in the woods. And, but this chestnut blight stated sometime after world war one, and the chestnuts were just about completely gone in the early 40s, but you do find one occasionally if you’re out here in the woods, you’ll find it, a young sapling, and it takes quite some time for them to get old enough to bear. I found 3 trees on Pine Mountain in 2000 and I collected nuts off of it twice but the tree are completely dead now, so they’re short lived, and I reckon as far as I know the blight just stayed on and continued to kill it. But you do find a lot of new sprouts coming up in the Mountains.
BB: Do you remember your Dad or Mom telling you about how, did they use the chestnuts more when they were growing up than when you were growing up, or did they ever tell you any stories about how they used chestnuts?

ED: No, we never did discuss it. It was just a natural thing, just get them when you wanted them and use them for whatever. But at this time the trees, you seldom ever see one that’s bigger than 6 inches in diameter, the ones I found in 2000 were about 4 inches, and they had burrs on them when I found them, and then I went back in the fall and collected them. And I sent a bunch of nuts to the University of Kentucky Forestry Division, and then sent me back an answer that the chestnuts I sent were definitely native chestnuts, they weren’t these Chinese, Italian, Japanese brands, but I’ve not heard anything else from it. But I did do that.

BB: Why did you do that?

ED: I just wanted to confirm that I was harvesting natural native chestnuts. But they sent me a reply back that they were definitely native chestnuts. There’s several different organizations around that has stories and magazines and stuff and they’re all working trying to get something back close to natural.

BB: Did anybody ever sell or trade chestnuts, or did people just collect them for themselves?

ED: To my knowledge I don’t know of anyone selling them. They were just so plentiful that anybody could just go out, 100 yards from the house and pick up as many as they’d want, there was really no sale for them. But then after the trees began to die everybody wanted to keep some, and they might have sold some but not to my knowledge.

BB: How did people store the nuts? Do you remember how you stored them?

ED: All that we ever done was put them in a basket or a cardboard box, and set them out somewhere in the room out of the way. we never really did refridgerate them or anything like that, we just stored them dry.

_D: the thing about a chestnut it’s not good til they dry, it doesn’t have the taste, so they like to set them set out. I let them set before I put them in my turkey dressing.

ED: They helps to cure, it changes the taste of them when they’re new, just from falling off the tree. They’ve got a sort of bitter taste. But after they dry for 8 to 10 days they’re more pleasant to eat than they are when they just fall off the trees.

BB: Did people eat chestnuts as just sort of a snack, or as a meal, or part of a meal?
D: well it was a snack but, but your mother though, used them in her cooking, she put them in her dressing and something else she said she used them for, I don’t remember. But she done a lot of cooking and baking and she put that in it you know.

BB: would they chop them up, or grate them into bread?

D: Well the way you fix them is you boil them, and then add salt, and just mash them up and put them in your dressing or whatever you put it in.

BB: Do you remember anybody ever cutting down chestnut trees to build anything?

ED: oh yeah. Chestnut was a real durable wood, and people made a lot of furniture and would plant it just for the wood. Some of the trees I’m satisfied would grow 100 feet in height, and they were just huge at the ground. Some of them as much as 7 feet in diameter. They cut all the timber and put it on the market, and then they converted it into furniture and paneling.

D: Back then though, they didn’t know much use for the chestnut lumber they didn’t know about that did they?

ED: Chestnut trees, I guess one of the most useable things was rail fences. You could just go out in the woods anywhere and you didn’t have to worry about hauling posts, you could just cut you a tree down and lay your fence up until you run out of rails and right in the same area, why there’d be another tree and you’d just cut it and work it up. They split it into rails by hand with a wedge and hammers.

BB: Do you think chestnut was the preferred kind of wood to use, or was it just because it was the most plentiful?

D: I think they counted it as preferred because they burnt it. They’d take big chestnut trees and they’d take them out and burn them. They didn’t have much value to them then, but now they’re about the most valuable lumber you can get.

ED: After the blight killed all of the trees there were logging companies come in and set up and they cut every dead tree in the mountains that they could find, and they put it into wood. And of course there was more demand for it then than when the wood was real plentiful. People would cut the trees, split them, and called them punchings. Be that wide and 4 or 5 inches thick, and they built walls to their houses, notched them and built their houses out of that. I guess that was the most common use for chestnuts beside fences, rail fences.

BB: Did you ever hear of people using the chestnuts, like way back in the old days, using chestnuts for medicine, putting it into tea or anything?

ED: no I never heard anything about medical reasons from chestnuts.

BB: Have you ever heard anything about medicine being made out of chestnuts?
D: no.

BB: Ok. You got something there?

D: This saw is the way they used to saw their lumber.

BB: Wow. That is a long saw

D: That is my Dad.

BB: oh wow. Ok, where did this come from?

D: le owned that saw at one time.

BB: Matt Fields. A whip saw, ok.

..... Frank Majority...

BB: was any part of yall’s house, was your house made out of chestnut, or did you know? Or barns?

D: yeah houses, and the roofs, boards, they made chestnut boards to cover a house with.

BB: why would they use chestnut?

D: well it was just a good lumber, lasting.

BB: did you ever hear of people using chestnut bark to tan leather? Some people have said it was good for tanning.

ED: I don’t think I’ve ever heard of any tanning

D: they come in there one time, a bunch of loggers did, and they got a lot of bark.

ED: But they strictly got Oak. By the time they were getting oak for tanning the chestnut had already quit producing bark.

BB: How did you get interested in chestnut? Do you have a special interest in chestnut?

ED: Well, I ... we just spent a lot of time in the woods, out hunting and cutting timber for mining timber and stuff and, just took a liking to the taste. I don’t know what our ancestors, what their reason was, it was just something to fill their system with.

D: chestnut was pretty lumber, pretty wood wasn’t it.

ED: yeah.

D: Him and my son were in this mountain here, few years ago, and got some of these dead chestnut trees. You know, about gone, but they got enough to build a gun cabinet. Prettiest
thing that ever was. But his wife took it when they divorced and we’ve not seen it since. It was so pretty.

ED: I don’t have any knowledge of any medicine or anything being derived from chestnuts.

_D: My mom made a lot of medicine from different things, but I never heard her say anything about chestnut. That was all we doctored, we never went to a doctor, she’d always doctor with still she got out and gathered. I don’t know, I guess they could use it for a dye, to dye clothes. I know I went over to Pine Mountain Settlement School and they were doing that.

BB: Do you... some people have told stories about remembering when they were little and they remember stomping chestnut burrs with their bare feet or throwing chestnut burrs at one another, do you have any memories like that?

ED: no, I don’t have no memory of that. I’ve used corncobs to throw, and apples, but I’ve never used chestnut burrs.

_D: you’ve stomped on them ain’t you?

ED: not bare footed. You could step on them and bust the burr off of the nuts and most of the time they fall out of the nuts and you don’t have to, but sometimes they’ll just hit the ground and you have to step on them, or use a rock or something to break that husk off of them.

BB: do you remember any, were there any celebrations of chestnut, or gatherings of people who’d go gather chestnuts together, anything like that?

ED: no, I don’t have no knowledge of anything like that. Chestnuts were just so plentiful you could just go out and 100 yards of the house....

_D: It doesn’t mean nothing about having a celebration or nothing about that, there was just so much of it.

ED: they were just so plentiful there was no reason to have competition in the deal. There wasn’t no market for the sale of them. I guess there was a bit of string trading done for a maybe a _____ or a pig or something

_D: All they’d have to do is get up there fast enough to beat the hogs.

BB: yeah what about that. Did a hog fattened on chestnuts taste different than a hog raised on corn?

ED: Well it would make some difference in the taste, I don’t whether it would be that noticeable of not. But the hogs that were running wild, people clipped the mark in their eats, but they stayed fat and they’d go out and find one with their mark on it and bring it home and slaughter it. They didn’t have to worry about feeding it and caring for it.
BB: If they were so plentiful, could you even buy them in a store, or no one would even buy them?

ED: I don’t think anyone in business would even stock them to sell. I don’t know as anybody ever bargains or tried to sell us chestnuts, we’d always go out and pick up our own and everybody else did the same thing. Of course, after this started disappearing I guess that’s when it started to be commercialized. There was a big sale of Italian chestnuts when they started importing them, but they have dwindled and you don’t see them in stores anymore.

BB: so tell me about the chestnut tree that you were saying earlier that’s in town. Tell me something about that tree.

ED: what?

_D: that tree over there where Francis goes and gets them.

ED: Oh, I don’t know who planted the tree, but it’s in that festival area. And its just a tree that’s growing below the home, I don’t know who own the property that its on, I’ve seen nobody pick the nuts up, but me and my son goes over there ever year...

_D: hey picked up a dishpan full

ED: Pick chestnuts up, and we boil them and take the husk off of them and put them in the freezer, and she uses them for dressing at Christmas and Thanksgiving. But as far as any valuable market for them, I don’t think one exists, not in this area anyway.

BB: How do those nuts taste different that the American or Chinese?

ED: there’s so much difference in the taste of Chinese or Italian chestnuts to the American. The American taste is just more pleasant, it doesn’t have the bitter-y taste like the Chinese and Italian chestnuts.

BB: What about size? Are they bigger or smaller?

ED: Our native chestnuts, you hardly ever see one that’s an inch in diameter. These Italian chestnuts, a lot of them go to an inch and a quarter in diameter. The Chinese chestnuts are smaller, something like three quarters of an inch.

BB: ok, well do you remember when you first heard about the bight, or what did people say about the blight?

ED: There really wasn’t a whole lot said, somebody just said that’s what was happening, there was a blight that was killing the chestnut trees and apparently that’s what it was. But they’ve never found nothing to stop it from being active.

BB: How did you think people would feel when they knew that the chestnut was going to be extinct?
ED: Well I don’t have no idea how they felt about it. They probably didn’t realize it would be as severe as it was, maybe its just a once in a while things that happens, but its been a constant thing ever since that blight come to this country.

BB: About what time do you think the blight started coming through your area, and when were all the trees gone?

ED: Well I think the older people said it started sometime after World War One, and it still remains today. But you can’t see no visible effects of a tree, it just stands there and suddenly it dies.

_D: that one you’ve got out in the yard there, has it died yet?

ED: no, its not died yet but its getting to that age when they usually die after they bear for one or two years.

BB: Did you plant that one out there?

ED: yeah, I went up here in the Mountain, and dug it up when it was small and set it out there. And this will be the third year that it’s had nuts on it. I got one nut off of it last year, and the year before that I had collected some and I sent them down to UK and I had them analyzed.

BB: Wow. So why did you decide to take that sprout out of the woods and plant it in your yard.

ED: Just curiosity to see if you might conquer the blight.

_D: you’ve also got a, what they call a chinkapin, from off the mountain and he’s got 3 out there growing. But you know they were, the Mountain was full of them back when w were kids, but they’ve gotten kind of scarce too, haven’t they?

ED: Your chinkapin’s just a dwarf chestnut. Your chestnuts has a round side and a flat side, the flats side’s created by pressing together, and you’ll find 2 or 3 in one burr. The chinkapin grows in a burr but it’s much smaller than a chestnut burr, and it just has a single nut in it. But its got the same taste as the regular native chestnut. And I just took a liking to the history that’s in it and I went out in the Mountains and dug me up some and set them out and let them grow. We had a thing, down here at the school house, we had a white oak tree. All of the children referred to that tree as being a chinkapin tree, but its not related to the chestnut, it’s a white oak and it grows in the cup, acorns grow in a little cup. The chinkapin grows in a little burr like a chestnut. But they, all of the children that growed up on this creek and went to school down there said that that was a chinkapin tree, it was a chinkapin tree, but its an Oak not a chestnut. I just dug them up to have something to talk about once in a while when someone come around.

BB: Were there any chestnut trees on your way to school that you’d pass ever?

ED: Yeah, there were trees, chestnut trees, along the roads. There’s one that grows out here at the Old Cowan School, right on the shoulder of the road inside of the school house. But they
were common, all of these ridges and the mountains were covered with chestnut trees. Old people had a saying that when chestnuts bloomed, they were so tall that they stood up above the other trees, and they’d say the snow is in the Mountain. They could see those white blooms on those trees from anywhere around here.

BB: wow. I’d not heard that before, that’s really neat. I’m glad you told me that. Are there any other kinds of saying or stories people had to do with chestnuts?

ED: I don’t know who put those words together but there is a saying that the snow in the Pine Mountain in June, and it was the chestnut trees because you could see because they were the tallest trees around. They grewed so thick it looked like a field of corn or something. They were real plentiful.

BB: Do you remember hearing any of your neighbors talking about the chestnut trees dying? Or, anything that, how it would effect them, did it effect people much or not really?

ED: I don’t think that the majority of people has any thought of it, because they’re not accustomed to having excess to use anyway you want them. Because right now, with all of the modern machinery, if we had an ample supply of chestnut wood it would be tremendous how many different uses you could make out of it. But at the time that the chestnuts were here, people didn’t have no mechanization, they had done it physically, with most of them hand made tools. Cutting, hewing, and sawing. But if we had an abundant supply of chestnut wood, it would be terrible the demand for it. The grain....

BB: So, you know a little bit about the restoration effort, how they’re trying to bring the tree back. You’ve heard a little bit about that? With the back cross breeding, and what they’re trying to do is get a tree that’s 15/16th American, and that 1/16th Chinese, and that 1/16th Chinese is the blight resistance. So the American Chestnut Foundation has a tree that they’ve bred for the last 20 years or so, and they think will be blight resistant, and they want to put it back up on Pine Mountain and all through the Appalachian Mountains. So I’m wondering, do you think that that’s a good idea? Do you want to see they chestnut come back, and why?

BB: well, it was just a thing. In life we grow up having free exposure to them, we could go gather them anytime we wanted them, and it was just relaxing to get out in the woods and pick the nuts off of the ground.

_D: it was a good tasting nut too, people really liked them.

ED: yeah, and but they’re been people here that lived here, and in the winter months they’d run out of chestnuts or something, and two men would take a cross cut saw and go to the Mountains, cut a dead tree down, and steal the nuts from the squirrels, that was pretty bad. [laughs]

BB: How would they steal the nuts from the squirrels?
ED: They cut the tree where they were holding them up in the holler of a tree. Squirrels stored them in the trees in their dens for winter use, and people took a notion they wanted some chestnuts, and they’d just take a saw and go up there, and take their supply of food away from them.

BB: wow. I’ve not heard about that, that’s interesting too.

_D: I hadn’t heard that either, but I know I love chestnuts.

ED: well, we’ve done the same thing with honey bees, wild honey bees. They build a nest for a comb in a hollow tree, people take saws and cut them down, take the honey out, let the bees go free.

BB: wow. well, when you think about ... so Scuttle Hole Gap and Cowan, they’ve changed a lot probably from when you guys were growing up to now, so do you think people would use the chestnut trees in the same ways you did when you were growing up, or how would the use of the chestnut trees change?

ED: I don’t hardly know how to answer that. But now, that Scuttle Hole Gap is an old county road, and there was one pass in it that was shear cliffs. At one time you had a walk path you could, a person or an animal could walk around the edge of that cliff. In the later years they had a work program and they sent men up there and they used machinery to drill and blast that cliff off, you can drive a car through it now. But at one time this little ledge that you could walk on, there was no way to get to it, and they took chestnut logs and split them about 4 inches thick, some of them was 2 feet wide, they done all that by hand, and they laid a beam around this outside edge where the post it, and they floored that and they called it the punching bridge, and that’s the way they got to and from Virginia with groceries. They drove their sleds across this punching bridge, and drove their teams and wagons, and other than that they had no way to cross this mountain.

BB: How do you spell this peochon? How

ED: P-e-o-c-h-o-n, peochon.

BB: what does that mean, I don’t know that word?

ED: Well, its just more or less a slab of wood. It’s called peochon. I don’t know where they got the name or anything about it. But, over here in Knott County there a creek named after it, Peochon County

BB: Wow. So you think people around here would like to see the chestnut come back?

_D: yeah.

ED: well I think they would. I think everybody that had any desire for the old native chestnuts, I think they would really be admired by a return.
BB: do you think people would want to get involved in trying to bring it back by planting it on their property and stuff like that?

ED: well, you’ve got two classes of people. One of them’s interested in trees and so on, and the others not. So it’d be hard to say... Anybody that’s my age that ever had the experience of seeing the trees and eating the fruit would be really thrilled to see them come back.

BB: what about the people who never did see them or never did eat a chestnut?

ED: most of the people, the younger generation, has no knowledge of the trees. They can hear these tales like I’m a telling, but they have no actual experience. To go in the store and find a chestnut, there’s just a chestnut, there’s only one kind, but that’s not right, three’s a lot of different kinds.

BB: what would be a good way to get that other generation interested in chestnuts? Any idea of how to do that?

_D: that’s a hard thing to do. They just don’t care about them like we would. I’ve got two children and when I make that turkey dressing, my son, he won’t eat it unless it’s got the chestnuts in it, and my daughter she wouldn’t eat it if it had it in it. But then when she finally got a taste of it she said yeah, I want the chestnuts in it. They like it. But unless they get a taste of it, they won’t pay no attention to it.

BB: yeah, that’s why I think its important to collect all these stories from people like you, because it will take a long time to bring that tree back, probably 100 years, and by that time you folks with all of these stories, and memories of what this tree is all about won’t be able to share those with the people in the future. So that’s what I’ve been trying to, or that’s my thoughts. Do you think there are any concerns about bringing the chestnut tree back, or do you have any advice for people trying to do it.

ED: well, I’d sure like to see it come back. But, I don’t know, seems like people today don’t have any interest in things like that. I guess if you want to try to do something it would have to be put in the Division of Forestry or something, and the people that studies forestry and so on, they might help to get it done. But just outside, to get a petition up to sign it to bring it back, there’s not many people who would bother to waste their time. But it would be good if they could establish something and put it in the school system.

BB: That’s a good idea. Have you heard about the chestnut festival they had over on Line Fork, at the Kingdom Come Settlement School?

_D: I don’t think so.

BB: They have had a chestnut festival over there, I’m trying to find something more about it.

ED: that’s probably what Robert Watts is working on.
BB: Maybe so. I know that the school shut down, but I think they still have the festival, I’m not sure.

_D: yeah I think it was in the festival where they have a medical plant, where you go out in the woods and find plants to make your medicine. I went to one of them and I think they’re still having them.

ED: I called, had my daughter to call Robert when I found those trees out here in the Mountain, and he told her that he’d get in contact with me but he never did come over here and talk to me about it. But I do know that according to the papers, through him and this Kingdom Come School, he’d taking students out in the woods and digging up plants, and taking them back over and setting them out around the School, and when they get a certain age they take them to strip jobs and transplant them. But that’s what you were talking about while ago with that cross between the Chinese.

_D: I sure do wish they could find something to kill that blight.

BB: yeah. well, that was great. Are there any more thoughts you have, that’s all the questions I have, do you have any more thoughts on it, or advice?

ED: no, I just hope they continue to work with it, and maybe it will come back.

_D: if they ever wanted to start it, you’d be willing to help wouldn’t you.

ED: oh yeah, I’d help any way I could.

BB: well they say they’re pretty close to getting it

_D: I sure hope so, RC Day sure talks a lot about it

BB: yeah I need to talk to RC. Is there anyone else you can think of that I should talk to?...