Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Interview date: May 16th, 2008

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Interviewee: Sam and Linda McInturff, Ross and Elbera Broadway
Interview Location: Ten Mile, TN
Transcriber: Bethany Baxter
Audio File: Sam Etc._1.wav & Sam_Etc.2.wav
BB: ok, we’re recording.

RB: Well, I’m Ross Broadway and I’m 78 years and I grew up in East Ridge, and that was a country at that time, and we lived up on a big hill out there. You get out in the yard and one side of this hill was woods and the other side was farmland. We had chestnut trees growing there at that time, this is the middle thirties I’m talking about, and I remember them dying. But I remember also going out in the woods and being bare footed. I don’t know if they’d take us or send us or what, and pick up chestnuts. Now you get an old burr in your feet and boy, that was bad. Maybe that’s why I remember them so well. But anyway, I do, I remember people lamenting the fact that they were dying, and that’s when they died, I’ve been And, I’ve seen the grow, or try to grow, in the woods ever since then, I’ve spent a lot of time in the woods all my life. They get up so big, maybe put on so burrs, and I’d think I’ll get me some chestnuts this fall you know. But then you’d go to the tree at harvest time and there’d just be little dried up kernels, there wouldn’t be no nut. So I didn’t understand that, but since I’ve met up with these people doing the research, why, one tree won’t pollinate itself that tells you it was just one tree and there has to be two trees to…

BB: when there’s just one all dried up that means they didn’t get pollinated?

RB: right. And in recent years we just… my wife’s a wildflower nut, and I’m kinda a woods nut, and I like wildflowers too, and we go on wildflower hikes all the time. And in the course of this I would find chestnut trees and knew what they looked like you know. And one day we was up there in Tellico and right in front of me was this mature tree with burrs all over it. It was just really exciting. And I’d been reading about the Chestnut Foundation just when they started, and I corresponded with someone there in Chattanooga, I don’t know if it was at UTC or what, at that time the experiment was over at Opryland in Nashville. They wrote back and had me to get them some leaves and gather some burrs and measure the tree and all different stuff like that, and I sent that to them. And nobody ever come to see about the tree, and they wrote back wanting to do something, and I went, and the bark was busted and it had died. This is about 12, 15 years ago.

BB: so it was an American?

RB: yes it was. Then I got to reading more about it. I guess Hill Craddock was one article I read. And the Forest Service here at Tellico Plains were doing some work with it. I knew where several trees were but they were diseased and I didn’t know they were interested in diseased trees. Until I met Sam, and I found a beautiful tree over there up from Beech Gap, that was probably 60 foot tall and about a foot in diameter, just perfect tree, not a blemish on it. So I sent an email. I had read an article by Joe Schibig, Tennessee Conservationist about it, so I had a friend email him and he done about the same thing, he wanted leaves and burrs. So we went through all that. Mean time he’s over at Lebanon and he said its just too far for him to come see about it. So Sam caught wind of it. And I met him over at Tellico and we went
up and looked at the tree and he kinda liked it (laughs). I still didn’t tell him about the diseased trees I knew about. Somewhere the next year I ran into him. I said I didn’t know you were interested in diseased trees, and he said ‘oh yeah, just as long as they produce burrs and stuff’, so I told him I knew where some’s at and I told him about the ones on top of Flatts Mountain. So since then I didn’t really get up and look for chestnut trees, but just in the course of being in the woods I see them and, just, you know, kind of disappointing to watch a tree grow and then all of the sudden its just dead, you know they don’t have a chance. But I’m real excited about what they’re doing and have found quite a few more that’s producing fruit and stuff.

BB: That are all pretty old?

RB: well, they’re old enough… I don’t have any idea what that tree would be there at Beech Gap, maybe 30 or 40?

SM: I would say 30 to 45 maybe, years old.

RB: You’ll have to take her to show her where that ladder is (all laugh)

SM: Well, you know Ross found some trees on the side of the mountain, of course, looking for wild flowers you know. They’re a lot harder to pollinate on the side of the mountain than they are along the road. So we had to carry ladders, in one place we carried a ladder for 2 and a half miles, and then we have several more that we have to carry a ladder there for. So I told him, I said, the next tree you find I’d like you to find it near the road.

EB: and he did.

SM: so within a week he had me a nice tree, full of burrs, right by the side of the road.

BB: how often will y’all go wildflower hunting?

RB: well, we go probably at least once a week, depending on, when they’re blooming that’s when you have to go, because they won’t wait on you

EB: we start in April, May, June

RB: early April I guess, that’s when the first ones bloom

EB: that one on top of the Mountain, Stratton Bald, its how old? Its an old…

SM: it’s old, its diseased but still living. So we pollinated it last year and our intention is to pollinate it again this year.

RB: And you’ll have to ask Hill Craddock how he got the ladder up there. He drove that old car he drives up there, he about tore it up I believe
SM: so we don’t know how we’re going to get it back, that ladder’s still up there

(all laughing)

EB: I don’t think anyone will carry it off of there.

BB: I guess part of what I’m wondering is do y’all have any first hand memories of chestnut, I guess you (Ross) said you said you kind of remembered. When were you born if you don’t mind me asking?

RB: 1929

BB: ok, so that would have been right around when they started going out.

RB: yes, they were in the process of dying, I think they started dying in the earlier part of the century. Down here I’ve heard them say there were still chestnuts in the Tellico Mountains up into the 50s, or..

SM: that’s right. I’ve found.. My Father was… I’m Sam McInturff, and my father was, he would be 101 years old next month, and he told me about chestnuts. The only chestnuts that I could see would be the re-sprouts, from the roots. But I did do a lot of hiking in the mountains when I was younger, so I would find the stumps and where… or even the truck would be 70 or 80 feet tall and 4 feet in diameter, and not a limb on it, but dead and hollow. But now most of those have fallen. What we find now is re-sprouts from the disease.

BB: Do you remember anything that your father told you about chestnuts?

SM: Oh yes. They gathered the nuts every fall, and it was a food source for their animals, for them, and of course for the wildlife. My mother as well, she’s passed away several years ago, she was 96, and she gathered, they all gathered nuts, that was part of the routine in the fall of the year, for them selves. And they kept all winter, unlike the Chinese nut which gets hard and don’t save as well as the American nut. So they kept those all winter.

BB: Did they ever sell or trade them anywhere?

SM: Not my family. They just used them themselves.

BB: but people in the community would?

RB: Well, I don’t remember… they didn’t get enough where I lived to market them to sell them. They just got them for their own use, and they’re a pretty good nut. I guess the timber was really, they call it the Redwood of the east, it just pretty much….. They just wouldn’t hardly rot at all. Built split rail fences out of them, and just anything, any kind of…

SM: Barns
RB: Barns, or whatever was exposed to the weather. And they just wouldn’t hardly rot at all. And they used the bark for tanning leather. I believe it was quite a blow.

SM: right

EB: well they used it for lumber and building.

RB: well now it was good for anything but firewood. Now you couldn’t put it on a fire it’d just pop

SM: Pop and crack. And they had open fireplaces back then.

BB: Anderson, the fellow I was talking to earlier, he was saying the same thing. that’s what he was saying the embers would come out and...

SM: burn the house down, right.

EB: There was a hotel, up the Tellico, up the river. That was built out of chestnuts, the floors, I mean all of it was built out of chestnut.

BB: yeah Anderson mentioned that too. I think it was called White something? I forget what he said it was called. He said all the furniture, everything was made out of chestnut.

RB: White Cliffs maybe? Ok that’s up on Starrs Mountain.

BB: yeah. oh, ok.

RB: Up in the Green Cove community there up Tellico River right across from a little store there, there was a big... Called it the Lodge, Tellico Lodge or something and it was built out of chestnut lumber.

BB: and its still there?

RB: no, it burned.

EB: the floor, the boards in the floor and everything, it was beautiful.

BB: I bet. Did anybody ever tell you anything about how they prepared it. Did they eat them just raw out of the hull, or...?

SM: they ate them raw and roasted chestnuts. And you had to make sure you cut a check in it or the nut exploded when you roasted it. They also boiled, boiled a chestnut. They’d boil them, ate them boiled and raw as well. And you didn’t have to worry about the weivel, the worm in it at that time because there weren’t any.

BB: when did that come along?
SM: you know, when I was growing up we had Chinese chestnuts and we got out every morning and picked those nuts up, and they never had a worm in them. And after a period of time we quit picking them up everyday, and they started having worms in them. Right now I’m unsure of whether they had worms in them when we ate them or not.

[all laugh]

RB: that’s what gets the protein

SM: but at least, I think it was probably the weavels getting in the nuts in the 60s, probably in the 60s around where I live.

BB: and the whole wormy chestnut thing?

SM: that refers to the wood. And really it’s after the chestnuts started dying that

RB: is that when the worms got in them?

SM: well, you know its in the wood, the dead chestnut wood, and they were still using the wood after the blight had killed them, and they were wormy, so that’s where the wormy chestnut came from.

RB: Don’t know if the worms in there before the blight?

SM: well, you know I guess it would be if a chestnut died, it was just that so many were dead at that time

RB: I think I told you, we met a guy over in North Carolina here.

EB: On Mac’s Patch

RB: On Mac’s Patch road. He makes furniture out of old chestnut. He got a friend that goes out in the woods and finds these old chestnut logs, might be covered in moss. And he carries this sharp probe, and if its solid he knows its chestnut. And if its where they can get it out of the woods they harvest it.

BB: Is Mac’s Patch up in Madison County?

EB: its in North Carolina

BB: yeah, Madison County North Carolina. Is it up near Hot Springs?

RB: yes it is.

BB: that is so weird that you just said that, because I was just up in Hot Springs a couple of weeks ago, and my friend was talking about how her grandparents were from Mac’s Patch,
she kept talking about Mac’s Patch and I said, is this a famous place or something? Mac’s Patch. And she was like, it kind of is, and now you’re talking about.

EB: It’s a bald, up on a Mountain and they call it Mac’s Patch

BB: Ok. Is that person still alive up there?

RB: I don’t know what the place is named after. nobody lives actually up on the Bald.

EB: who do you mean?

BB: the furniture maker?

RB: oh yeah, he’s still up there.

BB: I should talk to him.

RB: Go get that picture and show her. This lady, we met her up and down the Tellico Mountains here, a few years ago, two years ago or three years ago. She’s a photographer, and she lives on Mac’s Patch Road. In fact about a quarter of a mile from the bald itself.

BB: its beautiful, golly.

RB: It looks likes a cultivated garden, but its not that’s just the top of the Mountain. I call her a wild woman, she just goes out and backpacks, camps in the woods by herself.

BB: how old is she?

RB: she’s probably 50.

BB: wow

EB: yeah, this is a plant winner of the nature’s best photography. In 2006 she won that. But it’s in Nantahala National Park and its in North Carolina and its on top of a Mountain up there.

BB: that’s beautiful.

SM: and she’s the one you showed the chestnut to?

RB: she was on her hands and knees there under that chestnut up on Stratton Ridge, taking pictures of some Turk’s Cap Lillies. That was when we met her. We said have you over seen a chestnut tree? and she said ‘oh I see them all the time, just little saplings, they always die’, And we said you’re sitting right under one. [laughs] That’s one we’re pollenating

EB: Blooming, and.
LM: My grandparents were from the Smoky Mountains before the park took over. And they’ve told me a little bit about the chestnuts.

BB: Yeah, what did they have to say?

LM: Well, the Husky side of my family lived up on Meig’s Mountain, it’s a long hike in there, and they let their animals run wild and they ate the chestnuts. And, my mother’s told me about gathering them when they were young with her and her brothers and that they would all get together, and the community would come in and they would boil them in a big pot and stuff. And these people that is with this big tree in this brochure, are the Sheltons. She grew up with them, and knew them personally and several of them are buried in the Maddock’s Cemetery in Weirs Valley, on Weirs Valley road, and my Dad’s buried there. He grew up there in the Mountains too.

BB: that is a really amazing picture. I can’t imagine a tree that big. So, I’m trying to think… This is one thing I’ve been curious about but I haven’t found anyone with a good answer yet. I wonder how hogs raised on chestnuts might have tasted different from hogs --- Have y’all heard anything?

SM: no

RB: no

BB: I feel like they’d have to taste different in some way

SM: they were probably good

RB: but I don’t remember feeding any hogs, they weren’t that plentiful where I grew up.

SM: but we fed them the Chinese chestnuts after they were, got too wormy.

BB: Sam, where did you grow up?

SM: I grew up in Blount County, but now I live in Loudon County. But, I grew up in Blount County so I was right in the heart of the chestnut- well, chestnuts grew everywhere, out scattered everywhere. But where Ross and Elberta goes hiking, in places, you’ll see enough sprouts where probably the whole forest was probably chestnuts.

RB: Must have been because they’re just, they’re about everywhere you look up there

SM: But it wasn’t that way where we lived, but there were chestnuts everywhere and I would see the sprouts growing up in the wooded areas. If you ever pasture it and put cattle on it they kill that sprout. Keeps biting it off and it will kill the sprout. But any area that hasn’t had cattle running on it you can find chestnuts scattered.
EB: What year was it that we went to the Mountains with Mr. Phillpot and we went up on the
wig and we met up, well we didn’t go all the way up there--

RB: Probably 1958

EB: ’58, ’59. But, we were hunting in this area up there and he was pointing out all the old
chestnuts that had died and there were some big trees that were still standing at that time.

SM: At that time the stumps were still standing, and they were probably hollow. And they’ll
fall, and as soon as they hit the ground they disintegrate now.

EB: I know that was the first time that I had ever saw them, because I hadn’t been in the
Mountains and there wasn’t any around here that I know of

BB: Where did you grow up?

EB: Well I grew up in Indiana. I was born here and when I was 5 we moved up to Indiana for
almost 14 years and then we moved back.

BB: Ok. Do you remember, I guess it probably would have been your parents or grandparents,
but do you remember any people’s reaction to the blight, obviously it was sad, but do you
remember anything people would do in response to the blight, or prevention techniques
people would use, or anything along those lines?

RB: I don’t think there was a defense.

SM: no. Most of our family was, you know, they used the products from the chestnuts, but as
far as having any defensive methods they wouldn’t be aware of any.

BB: they just realized they had to let them go, there wasn’t anything they would do?

SM: right, right, right.

RB: Wasn’t anything you could do I don’t guess.

LM: One time didn’t, somebody said they tried to cut them down because they didn’t realize
the blight was airborne. So they did try

SM: They tried to, in different places. But not our family, not my family.

LM: By the time it was here they probably knew

SM: They realized it was nothing they could do. Because it was in the ‘30s and 40s that it got
here, and by that time they realized there wasn’t any defense.

EB: well, what’s amazing to me is that all of these years its airborne and its still in the air.
SM: It has different host too, besides the chestnut. I think it lives on the oaks as well. And I think we’re stuck with the blight, its here forever.

RB: it’s here to stay isn’t it.

SM: right.

EB: But you’re working on it.

SM: well, we’re going to work on something… we’re trying to find one that’s blight resistant.

RB: well I’d like to see it happen. If you ask Hill Craddock, he’ll say it is. But I don’t know, from Missouri, they’re going to have to show me. I’m really excited about the possibilities, hope I live to see it.

SM: But you know I don’t think a chestnut will ever be as economically important as it was.

RB: oh no.

SM: You know because people don’t have the livestock. We lived and farmed, Linda’s mother lived in Cades Cove, and

RB: in the Mountains they just about lived off the land.

SM: Lived off the land, so, we’re not that kind of culture anymore, so we won’t be as dependent on it, so it will still be a valuable tree.

BB: Yeah, that’s something that I’m really interested in, and tell me if I’m not right here, but it seems like people have this sentiment, or nostalgia about the or remember them as a child, and I feel like that’s what draws a lot of people into the restoration effort, and I’m wondering what people expect, or what people’s vision is for this restoration project. Because, yeah, it seems like things have changed a lot, just because the chestnuts are back in the forest doesn’t mean we’re all going to buy hogs and turning them loose out there.

SM: no, no.

BB: But I wonder what kind of role could it have, economic role or ecological role or cultural identity kind of role. I know that’s a really hard question to answer, but that’s what I’m really curious about.

SM: well I’m sure as a lumber product it would be valuable. And as far as the wildlife it would be valuable. And other than that it will just be for the beauty of the tree. And of course we’ll be out there harvesting the nuts and if we’re successful our grandchildren might be out there harvesting nuts. In the future they might harvest nuts from what we’re doing.
LM: We go to church with a woman that, Sharon, that said that her dad used to gather them up by the truckloads and sell them, but he lived in North Carolina in the Yellow Creek area.

SM: and about every yellow that’s in the name of a community is due to the chestnut bloom. Yellow Top, Yellow Creek, you know.

LM: and she said that they would do that all the time. He would put them in the back of a pick up truck, she could remember it and she’s just a little bit older than me.

RB: well I guess I’m kind of sentimental about them, like I’ve said I’ve seen them try to grow and try to grow and try to grow, and you find one and you watch it for 4 or 5 years and then the next time you go back and its dead, and that’s just kind of sad to me. But a lot of our other timber trees are under attack by different insects, mostly insects, you’ve got the gypsy moth that’s working on the hardwoods, or the acorn trees, and this wooly adelgid working on the hemlocks, just about got all of them killed in Tellico Mountains up to three thousand feet or thirty five hundred feet, something like that, so we really need a tree for timber purposes and the chestnut tree would be a great source of timber.

SM: well chestnut grows so fast, so it could definitely be a lumber product, because it grows so fast.

BB: do you think instead of pine plantations we could have chestnut plantations?

SM: I’d like it better (laughs)

EB: well, now aren’t they… the boy that was working with you up in Virginia when we come up there, and he was from University of or, went to the University of Kentucky, and he was going to the, where they had mined

SM: strip mined

EB: the strip mines, wasn’t he going to the orchards out on that?

SM: He was trying to set those out on the strip mines and we did that this spring here, in Tennessee.

BB: Yeah, that article went out everywhere. My parents, because, yeah, my parents are from Kentucky, from Lexington, my Dad works at the University, and they said they saw that

SM: But, we’re planting the pure American up there, and that’s just to test the soil to see if it will accept the chestnut, see if chestnut will grow there good. And, Mike French from Kentucky was the one who planted those.

EB: I couldn’t remember his name.

SM: He’s inspirational, probably in what we’re doing here too.
RB: I’ve heard you talk about putting mud patches on the blight stricken tree, and it works kind of, doesn’t it?

SM: It will work, but its kind of labor intensive. You’ve got to continue putting mud packs on it, and that’s just for one tree. We’re hunting something that we can plant back in the forest and not have to worry about, that’s the breeding program, what were trying to do.

RB: Hill Craddock says that the European forests are full of chestnut trees. They have the blight but they don’t die. I hope he knows what he’s talking about.

(all laugh)

EB: Is he going to listen to this?

SM: don’t edit that.

[all laugh]

BB: well, I have one more question about the cultural stuff. Are there any traditions or sayings, or old songs, old stories, celebrations, gatherings that y’all can remember?

SM: well, I used to read that poem, Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree, and I come to find out it wasn’t an American chestnut though [laugh]

BB: I think I heard that too. My grandmother has all of these old sayings, like Strong as the Law, or this or that, you know all these old sayings that I love, and I keep wanting to find one about chestnuts, I’m going to keep asking that question.

SM: well, you know the color of the horses, they called it chestnut. You know, that was the brown color of a horse, they called it chestnut.

LM: Well, they did have this thing where boys would get out and to see who’s the toughest by trying to stomp out the-

SM: burrs, with their heels

RB: oh god. Barefooted?

LM: yeah.

RB: oh god [laughs]

BB: yeah, I’ve heard that before, I guess do yall know Greg Weaver?

SM: we do.

BB: yeah, I went up on Monday and talked to his parents, up in Allen County Kentucky
SM: yeah, we’ve met him.

BB: oh, yeah, they’re so sweet. Yeah, he was saying, Arles is his name, but he was saying he used to do that, because I guess they wouldn’t wear shoes in the summer time and their heels would get so tough. Yeah, I can’t imagine that.

LM: tough as a chestnut burr. But I always wondered if that was really proving how tough they were, or just how dumb they were. [all laugh]

SM: how smart they were.

BB: yeah, Arles’ wife, Joyce, she was telling me that up in Bowling Green they used to have, in the Fall, at the University there, they had a big social gathering thing where they’d all go out and hunt chestnuts for a day. Have yall ever heard anything like that?

SM: My family always went out and hunted chestnuts in the fall of the year, and muscadine.

LM: well, they didn’t have to hunt them, they knew where they were.

SM: well, they knew where they were, but they went out and gathered those in bags

BB: it was kind of a family event

SM: yeah, sure.

LM: well, his mother would tell us where they grew. Here she grew up was in the Mountains, and she said that in one little hollow they raised, and they called it Popcorn Hollow, because that’s where planted their popcorn. So it was steep on both sides, so she said that what she did was she would just go to Chestnut Hollow and all of the chestnuts would roll down off of the mountain in a pile and they would just scoop them up.

BB: that’s a great story.

SM: just scoop them up, right. You have to separate the popcorn from the other corn or it will cross, so she had that one little hollow they raised their popcorn in, and it had several chestnuts around it. So they’d go to the popcorn hollow and scoop them up right next to the bank.

RB: there’s a hiking trail up in the Smokies, Huskie Gap Trail, is that named after your family there. Goes across the mountain into Elkmont?

LM: that’s where my family is from, before the park took it.

RB: supposed to be a lot of Yellow Lady Slippers.

LM: Does that trail go up to Meigs Mountain?
RB: I don’t know I’ve never done it, but my cousin was telling me about it. We were talking about Lady Slippers, him and another feller talking about it. You go up 441 to Sugarland Visitors Center, and somewhere on that trail there’s supposed to be all kinds of Yellow Lady Slippers, which is a pretty rare flower.

LM: how far is that from where I’m talking about?

SM: not far at all

LM: yeah, it probably is, because my grandparents grew up on Meigs Mountain which is..

RB: I’ve never made that connection before, just made me thing about it.

SM: yeah, that’s where her family is from. And her mother’s from Cades Cove.

RB: she’s a real hillbilly then.

EB: ad proud of it too.

LM: yeah.

BB: So, after the blight when through and the chestnut was gone, I’m wondering what kind of things replaces the chestnut, as a building material, as a food source, as a livestock feed. Maybe you’ve already hit on this a bit, but, if you couldn’t build your barn out of chestnut what did you build it out of, if you couldn’t feed your hogs chestnuts, what did you raise them on?

RB: a lot of people moved out of the mountains pretty close to that time. I don’t know if the chestnut demise had anything to do with it or not, most of them moved to town about that time. Of course the park…

SM: there was a lot of economic change at that time, and whether its related to chestnut or not -- but, the acorn is what they used too, white oak acorn. The building pretty much went to pine. It wasn’t rot resistant, but they just protect it.

EB: and oak.

SM: yeah, oak is for strength, not as easy to work with as chestnut.

RB: probably not, it probably didn’t split as good, I guess that’s why they have so many split rail fences made out of it.

EB: did they make the roof chestnut?
SM: made the roof from chestnut, but oak also made a good roof, shingles. White oak shingles, yeah. Your people used to split those, and mine did too. In fact, the barn where I grew up had shingles on it. I helped take them off and replaced them with tin.

EB: did you keep them?

SM: no.

BB: I think that’s an interesting thing too. Do you think that’s perhaps that part of the reason why people are so passionate or nostalgic, because it came along at the same time as this shift. And so….

SM: I’m sure that’s some of it, but those people, most of them are dead and gone now.

EB: but they’ve passed it on.

SM: right, they’ve passed it on to us.

BB: how long have y’all been involved with the chestnut foundation?

SM: well, I’ve been involved since 2001, you know I found out there was an American Chestnut Foundation, and I knew where the chestnut was flowering here in Tennessee, so their first meeting, why, I took a sample down there and they were hunting the flowering chestnuts, and I took a sample down there and we pollinated the first tree in Tennessee in Blount County, and the same year we pollinated one in Lincoln County. So there were our first two trees in Tennessee, Blount County and Lincoln County.

RB: well, I was invited to join, I told you about finding a tree about 12 or 15 years about, and I was invited to join then, and I would but they wouldn’t come see about my tree I found, and then when I saw it dying I just kind of threw my hands up and forgot about it. I kept reading about it, and then I found the one in Beech Gap and that’s when I got with Sam, I guess it would be 3 years this coming fall.

SM: I’ll say that Ross and Elberta have found about 75 to 80 percent of the chestnuts that have been pollinated in Tennessee.

RB: well, it just pleases me to have a small part, or anything, in this restoration process. It ain’t much, but I’m real excited about it

LM: well, it’s a big part, because if you don’t find the trees, you don’t pollinate the trees.

BB: do you think that most of the people you’ve met who are in the Tennessee chapter, or people you’ve met who are involved in the Foundation – or, why do you think people join the Chestnut Foundation, and why do they care?
SM: well, they know what a beautiful tree it was. And I’d say most of the people would just like to restore that tree, be a part of restoring that tree. And of course, we’ve met some scientists, and from a scientific standpoint they’re working on it. But most of the people that join have never seen a chestnuts, a lot of folks didn’t even know that the chestnut was still around. But, they knew what they were and they’d like to see it just for the beauty of the tree. I think most of the people like to restore it.

RB: And the value of it as a timber tree. I don’t know, there’s a lot of people involved that’s a lot smarter than I am who say they’re going to get it done, I can’t hardly wait to see it happen.

EB: well, they were counting the chestnuts on the Appalachian Trail, did you ever hear what that, are they still doing it, still counting?

SM: yeah, that’s going to take place this summer. They’re designating a certain stretch of the trail to hike and count. I don’t know how far off of the trail, are you familiar with that?

BB: I’ve heard of it yeah, I’ve heard that they have got badges or button for people to wear. At the Georgia chapter meeting they were talking it and they were proud because their chapter had hiked the most miles along it. But I’m not sure…

SM: but its not complete yet is it?

BB: not that I know of

SM: see, they’re not leafed out so you would miss a lot right now.

RB: they would be tough to find right now.

SM: Surely would, and I think they’re supposed to take readings and size on each tree. Might take you a long time to hike, in some of the places we’ve been.

RB: probably a lot younger folks in a lot better shape than I am doing it. It takes me a while. Maybe that’s why I’m so lucky at finding them, I have to walk so slow. Plenty of time to look! [laughs]

SM: One thing about it, when Ross finds one there’s a burr there, that’s what makes it so valuable. We know that’s the tree we want.

BB: how long do you think, and y’all are somewhat involved in the process, but I know you probably don’t know everything, whatever, but how long do you think it will take for the tree to be restored, successfully restored, in this wild area? Any projection?

SM: I don’t think for a long time it will be in the wild, it will be in plots and in people’s orchards. And right now we’re at least ten years from the final product that we want, and after
that it will be a while before they start spreading out into just everyone’s little plot of ground that can plant a chestnut. I would say before they spread out much it will be 25 years.

RB: we won’t be here [laughs]

SM: we might see one though.

EB: don’t say you won’t be here.

RB: I saw where this guy out in Virginia, he had a few he was thinking about putting it out.

BB: yeah, that’s what people have been saying, some people have said as much as 100 years. So if its going to be a ways off in the future until the tree is out, and reproducing on its own, what are some good ways that we can get more people involved in the effort, I guess more younger people, what are good ways to get people involved do you think?

RB: There are a lot of hiking clubs around this country, and I know people who stay in the woods more than they stay at home. If you could get them involved. We know this one guy, he just volunteers, he’s done a lot of work on this Benton McChi trail, in fact he just about, the whole part of the state of Tennessee, he was overseer of the whole kit and kaboodle. He got it done and they dedicated it and opened it up. Now he can’t stand to stay home, so he volunteers three days a week for the Forest Service just doing trail work, mostly on the Benton McChi. And that comes through the Tellico Mountains over there. He just, we run into him last year. Ran into him over there at Beech Gap, by himself, hiked three hours, and worked three hours, and hiked back out by himself.

BB: wow. What does he do over there?

EB: trail maintenance, builds trails.

RB: Trail maintenance, whatever needs doing. Cutting brush off a trail, and water.

EB: I think when he was up there he was working on a horse trail wasn’t he?

SM: But you know, that’s the kind of guy we need right not. But the younger people, because it will be much more valuable to their future than ours, all the benefit we get from it is what we’re doing right now. We might get to see some growing, but we won’t get to see them in their full beauty.

LM: well, Sam was working with Elk Valley Elementary. I think that’s a good way if you have young people

RB: developing interest, and then he’s got this…. Heartland Series, TV outfit out of Knoxville did little 5 minute skits 3 times a day on TV, channel 10. And I believe they did a session
over in his orchard last week. That sort of stuff, just any kind of publicity we can get to get interest in it I think is...

SM: but you know, even before we’re successful we need to try to involve the elementary schools and students from that level.

BB: how do you get their interest though?

SM: They seem to be quite interested up there. We went to the school and planted pure Americans, and they’re going to monitor those and see how they grow, and see if they’ll grow there in the school ground. Hands on, is what they like, they like some hands on where they can plant a tree. Also they went to the Mountain, Zeb Mountain, to the strip mines and planted some trees. They’re going to go back up there and look at their trees, I gave them a little tag to put on each tree with their name.

EB: if you could go to each elementary school.

SM: right, make it… you know, that’s one school. Needs to be a broader reach, reach more schools.

BB: sounds like for y’all, and a lot of people I’ve talked to who are interested in chestnut now had these childhoods where they were running through the woods all the time and had the opportunity to interact and just be in the woods. And it seems like that would be important.

SM: I think we need to get the younger generations more involved in our natural resources.

RB: yep.

BB: it’s easy to be disconnected.

SM: then you don’t have that interest, if you’re not involved hands on, that’s what it takes.

BB: That’s what I’ve found, you just need personal connection. Its one thing to have, I feel like for a lot of people, and for me too, my grandmother, to have her tell me this or that, that’s one kind of connection we can have. But I feel like those connections, with chestnut anyway, are going to get harder and harder to have, because they’re getting further and further away.

SM: fewer people to relate the stories, and less interest. So right now, I think that with our program that we’ve got, our restoration program, we need to reach the next generation as quickly as we can, as widespread as we can.

BB: yeah, that’s interesting to me. That’s one of the main things I’m interested in in this whole project. In general in life, I’m get curious about why people do the things that they do, what do people care about, that’s interesting to me. Especially as it relates to interacting with
the environment and the forests. How did you develop your interests in wildflowers that you have?

EB: I’ve always… well, I guess when we sold the boat dock and started going to the mountains and seeing the flame azaleas and all that, and then it just started. Had a cousin in Cookeville who had a hiking club, and they’re all wildflower enthusiasts. I always like them but never knew the names of them or anything and they would get me into the…

RB: a lot of the hiking clubs I guess is where we really got into the wildflowers. There’s a lot of them out there, I guarantee you. You just wouldn’t believe how many there are.

EB: thousands.

SM: I always grew up in the woods, outside, and that’s my interest and I still like to be there. That’s why I’m there.

RB: Me too Sam. I can feel more peace in the world out in the woods than any place I can think of. Unless it out there fishing or something.

SM: And well you know, like my sons they’re not as interested in being outside as I am.

EB: when we grew up we didn’t have television, we didn’t have cell phones, we didn’t have the Pac-Man, all this electronic stuff that they have now a days. And they’d rather be sitting in doing that than they would be out. Of course, I grew up on a farm and I made mother take me to the woods every Sunday afternoon, we had to got to the woods and walk the whole woods around, I’ve always...

RB: if there was ever a perfect plan Mother Nature had it and man’s been tearing it down ever since he invented his first machine. I don’t know when its going to stop, but the chestnuts would be one reversal and I’d like to see it happen. Something good. I heard one time that the biggest threat to our civilization was insects, and it may be, I don’t know. They sure were doing a number on our timber anyway.

SM: might be man himself.

RB: Man, well there you go. [all laugh]

EB: going in on top of these mountains and building all these big old houses, that’s…

SM: and bringing these insects and diseases and stuff…

RB: from foreign countries and stuff, the world’s got too small.

SM: right.

BB: I had a thought a minute ago, I can’t think of it now.
RB: well we ramble.

BB: yeah, its good. Do you have any concerns, hopes or fears for the restoration process?

SM: sure. [all laugh] we’ve got hopes, but we’ve got fears and concerns. Everything loves the chestnut. Every predator, and weather, and you know, I believe in the program, but I’d like to see it. [all laugh] I’d like to see it happen.

RB: yeah, me too. You got to just try it and see where you come out don’t you.

SM: I’ve got faith, but its just a little. [laugh]

EB: you’ve got more than that, or you wouldn’t be doing what you’re doing.

BB: yeah, what made you decide to put an orchard up at your farm?

SM: well, there was a need. We had the nuts and the farm where the orchard is, is a quarter of a mile from the Blount County tree, just the inside of the tree, joins the property that the tree was on. So that’s why we put the orchard out right there. Had the nuts, and had gotten involved so. But now we have several orchards in the state, several different people involved.

BB: was your orchard one of the first?

SM: yeah, it was the first.

BB: cool. I didn’t know that.

SM: But first now Hill had orchards that he was growing of the pure American. There was, I think it was the first back cross orchard.

RB: at Bendabout? Yours was the first backcross?

SM: I think it was. I think that’s right.

BB: will you describe it for me, like, how many trees do you have?

SM: well one orchard that we put out this spring and last spring has 560 locations in it. And it’s a little over an acre. And the other one has, its almost 2 acres, and it has like 750 locations in it. Some of those are empty now, you know, cause the trees have died.

RB: well, you’ve seen his orchard.

BB: yeah, that was a cold day.

SM: yeah, it snowed a little didn’t it.

BB: yeah, I think it was the first snow of the year.
RB: you say you’ve got all of that filled in now

SM: all but maybe 10 sites, where we didn’t have the right thing to put in it.

RB: so you just left them vacant. you’ve got how many?

SM: well there’s 560 in that location, in that new orchard.

RB: yeah, you said you left some of them

SM: yeah, I think there’s maybe 10 or so that are vacant, didn’t have the right kind of tree to put in it.

RB: right.

BB: well I’ve about gone through my questions. Is there anything that y’all can think of to add?

RB: when I said hello to you I told you most of what I know, when you come in. So, I’m not in the high tech part of it, I’m just excited to have a small part. That being finding a few trees and helping Sam in his orchard when I can.

LM: Digging 560 holes is not a little bit though! [all laugh]

SM: he did punch every one of those too.

EB: you’ve still got that stoop?

SM: I’ve got it, I’ve got it.

BB: well that’s about all I’ve got I guess. I’ll go ahead and turn this off.