BB: Okay, I just pressed record. So, first I have to make this statement to you so you know what I’m doing: 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 the American chestnut in Appalachian culture. So then I have to ask, have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

EW: Yes, I have.

BB: Great. All right, so now we’re ready to roll.

Um, could you start--just tell me your name, when you were born, how old you are, and where you grew up.

EW: I’m James Eulis Walker. Born June the 27th, 1923. I grew up about five miles from where I live here. I was born in Gallot. When I was six months old, we moved to the Brasher place, and we lived there on the Brasher place eleven years, and that’s when we would go over on the mountain and pick up chestnuts when we was kids. Mostly on Sunday afternoon, for we worked in the fields the other time during the week. We’d go over and maybe pick up half a bushel, and then Sunday afternoon or during the week we’d shell them out of their burrs, and we kept them and then we would boil them, most of them. But sometime we roast them on the fireplace, and they were real good. We always enjoyed it. Of course, back then anything was good to us young people who was hungry.

Alright, can you stop me a minute?

BB: Sure.

EW: Well, the early thirties where the chestnut trees began to die out here, and there was very few of them left. In 1940 my dad and I cut chestnut trees on the Brasher place down here for fence posts. We’d cut them and haul them out of the wagon and split them up. I guess we cut five or six hundred. Some of the old posts may still be around here somewhere. And--

BB: Five to six hundred chestnut trees?
EW: Posts.

BB: Oh.

EW: We split them out.

BB: Whoa. Y’all were busy. (laughs)

EW: Yeah, one of these big trees they was fifty, sixty feet tall, you see. And some of them was four and a half, five feet in diameter, and we had a hand saw that we cut them up with. We didn’t have no chainsaw. My dad pulled one side and I pulled the other, and we cut them. Then we’d cut them in about six foot lengths, and then we’d load them on a wagon. Probably two or three and then haul out and we’d split them up. And the Brasher’s got something to be offensive with, and his daughter Leona Copeland lived next door on the Brasher place here. They got some.

BB: Do you remember anything your dad or mom or any of your older relatives told you about chestnuts or any specific stories that they--memories that they would have had?

EW: Well, my dad used to say that there used to be a lot more chestnut trees there were when I was a kid. They’d already begin to die out then, but they was several large trees on the mountain--on Red mountain over here that’s what they call this over here. When we was kids, by the time I was fifteen, sixteen years old they was all gone just about.

BB: That’s another thing I was going to ask about. Were there certain places where a lot of chestnuts would grow?

EW: Yeah, they was certain places that they would be a chestnut grove there. Maybe ten or twelve, fifteen chestnut trees out there. They was some chinquapins too, but they grew in a different place from where the chestnuts did. They grew in a holler right over here across the creek from where I live now up on the mountain, and we used to get the chinquapins, too. They was little nuts.

BB: Did the chestnuts mostly grow up on the ridge?
EW: Yeah, up on the side of the mountain. They was what we call a bluff. Rock along and then up pretty good peaceful. They was level up there. People used to farm some of it, and some of it had the chestnut trees there.

BB: I’ve heard some people say that they remember when their parents would clear a plot of land to plant. They would clear all the tress except for the chestnuts. Did you ever experience anything like that?

EW: Well, I don’t remember that. It probably happened though, for they didn’t want to cut down the chestnut trees for they was important food for them. They was like nuts and things to us, and we would enjoy them.

BB: What about--some people I’ve talked to, they remembered people would gather up enough chestnut to trade or sell. Did people do that around here?

EW: They used to--I think you used to trade them to the peddlers. Used to be peddlers come through here on a bus. They had everything. They’d buy chickens and everything. And I think you could trade them chestnuts for about $0.25 a pound, I think, or something for whatever you needed. Coffee, or sugar, and everything like that.

BB: That’s really interesting. So, the peddler--what was the story with the peddlers?

EW: It was a rolling grocery store. You know, on wheels. And he had just about anything you wanted. If you had chickens to sell, he’d buy you chickens. If you had butter to sell, he’d give you I think ten cents a pound for the butter. He’d put it all in a big ol’ container there. I don’t know what he done with it, but anyway I guess they bought it and sold it again, I guess.

BB: That’s so interesting. Was there like one peddler who would come around a lot, or was it always just different people coming through?

EW: Well, there used to be two peddlers come through; one come on Tuesday, I think, and one come on Thursday, so if we didn’t our goods on Tuesday, we’d catch the one on Thursday.

BB: I’ve not heard anybody talk about peddlers like that. That sounds really interesting. Do you, yourself remember ever gathering up chestnuts to trade to peddlers?
EW: No, we usually just ate them. Kept them and ate them ourselves.

BB: So, you already kind of said this before, but you said you did used to eat chestnuts. I’ve been asking people too, do you remember how the chestnuts were prepared? You said you boiled them or you roasted them, but did you ever--did your mom or anybody ever cook them up any different way?

EW: Not that I know of. We usually--I have to simple maybe—we had an old wood stove, and we’d put a pot on that with chestnuts in them. We’d boil them about thirty minutes, and then we’d eat it. Then we’d—we had popcorn poppers. I think we’d put them chestnuts in there and put them over the coals of the fire and roast them like that. I’ve heard some people say they’d put them in the hot ashes, let them sit there for awhile, and eat them, but we didn’t do that.

BB: Okay. Yeah, that’s interesting. I’ve never heard anybody talk about the popcorn popper and the ashes, so that’s good to hear.

Um, was there any livestock or wildlife that you know of that would eat chestnut around here?

EW: Yeah, cows would eat them. Of course, they had trouble getting them out of the burrs sometimes, I think, but they would eat chestnuts. Deer will eat chestnuts, too, but we didn’t have any deer when I was a kid here. But they come in here, and we’ve got plenty of deer around here now. But we didn’t have any when I was a kid.

BB: Why?

EW: I reckon they killed them all out before I got big enough to hunt, I guess.

BB: Yeah, I have heard people say that during the depression years, in the ‘20s and ‘30s, that there was very few deer because so many people killed them.

EW: Well, people hunted anything they could to eat then. Rabbits, squirrels, we ate them. We used to go squirrel hunting, my dad did.

BB: Yeah, I’ve heard some people tell stories about squirrel hunting, and I’ve heard some people say that squirrels like to store up a bunch of nuts inside old chestnut trees. Did you ever--?
EW: Yeah, they would--squirrels will take chestnuts and acorns and things, and they’d put them in a hollow tree somewhere, and then they go back and get them in the winter time when they needed them.

BB: Um, let’s see. Was any part of the house you grew up in, or any buildings on your property were they made out of chestnut?

EW: No, the only thing I remember they used was fence posts. They’d last twenty five or thirty years. That was something good then; if you put a pine pole up, it’ll last maybe two years. Or oak will last probably two years, but Chestnut, they’d last about twenty years. I may still have an old chestnut post down here. We’ll check and see before I leave.

BB: Okay, that sounds great.

EW: (laughs)

BB: Um, what about any tools or any other household items? Were there anything like that that would have been made out of chestnut?

EW: I think they used to make hammers--hammer handles and axes handles maybe out of them, but we usually made them out of white oak ourselves. My daddy, he made his own handles and everything.

BB: Did ya’ll saw up those trees yourselves or did you take them to a saw mill?

EW: Well, if he was going to make a axe handle, it had to be about thirty two inches long. We’d cut it about thirty two inches long. We’d split it out, and then he’d work it down to the handle. Take a joy knife and work it down. He had a rasp that he could cut it on out. When he got it down, you know, the way he wanted it, he’d take a piece of glass and it would smooth it and make it slick like a handle should be.

BB: Oh cool, I’ve never heard that before. A piece of glass?

EW: Yeah, we’d break a window glass or get an old one. And you could just pull it on that, and it would just roll up just like shavings.

BB: Like sand paper?
EW: Yeah, kind of like you were sharpening a pencil. There would be shavings on it.

BB: Huh. ow.

What about tanning? Did you ever see anyone use chestnut bark to tan leather or anything like that?

EW: No, I didn’t.

BB: Because some people have said that they remember chestnut bark being really good for tanning leather, that tanneries would want chestnut bark a bunch. Were there any tanneries around here?

EW: Not that I know of.

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

EW: Not that I know of. [laughs]

BB: What about, were there any old sayings, or songs, or stories about chestnut? Or that involved chestnut. Maybe there weren’t just about chestnut, but--

EW: I don’t remember any old stories or songs or anything about chestnuts.

BB: Were there any holidays, celebrations, or gathering where you would use chestnuts?

Person 3: [unintelligible] Halloween

BB: Halloween? You don’t have to whisper.

Person 3: But you’re recording.

BB: That’s okay.

Person 3: Tell them about Dunn City. I’m sure they probably served them.

EW: Well, during Christmas time we used to go serenade. Have you ever heard of that? We’d dress up and go. And we’d go in and people sometimes they’d feed us chestnuts, sometimes popcorn, sometimes peanuts, whatever they had. And then, we’d go dumb setting. We’d just
go--the whole family or a whole half a community would go. And we’d go up there to a fellow’s house and set down and never say a word. Just set there for just maybe thirty or forty minutes and then get up and leave. They called it dumb setting. (laughs)

BB: I’ve never heard of that.

EW: Yeah. Let’s see. They used to have something they called a dumb bull. They had a tin and they’d put a string on it, and you take a piece of beeswax. And boy, it would make a racket like a bull or something. And they’d go to people’s houses and do that. (laughs) Wake them up.

BB: That was what ya’ll did for fun back then. Yeah?

EW: I guess we about made the best of them. We done anything we could get by with as long as our dead mother didn’t finding out about it. If we did, we got a tanning--a good tanning. They bled with that tanning.

BB: Do you remember ever--would people play with chestnut burrs anything? Like, have chestnut fights, or do you remember anything like that? Do you remember getting stuck with the burr ever?

EW: Yeah, I’ve been stuck with them. We went barefooted most of the time. We got one pair of shoes a year. That was in the winter time. But a lot of times we’d go up on the mountain, we’d be barefooted, and we’d have to be careful not to get them burrs in our feet. And we’d pick them out. We did have no gloves. We’d take a hammer and crack them out and get them like that. It seems like we’d store them in a fruit jar to preserve them till we got ready to eat them. It seems like that’s where we’d store them.

BB: Yeah, that was one of my questions: How did you gather them and how did you store them? So, that’s interesting.

Do you think that the chestnut is like an important symbol of the way life used to be around here?

EW: Sure, sure.

BB: Why is that?
EW: Well, when I was growing up, they was chestnut trees here, but they’re not here anymore. So that’s a heritage that’s gone until we get some trees that’ll live without the blight. I bought some from a nursery, and they said they was about ninety-nine percent blight-free. I don’t know whether they are or not.

BB: Were they American chestnuts?

EW: Yeah, you can buy American chestnuts. But, Chinese chestnuts they’re blight-free, I think. They don’t bother them I don’t think.

BB: That’s right, that’s right.

Do you remember hearing about the blight, and what do you remember hearing about the blight?

EW: Well, all I remember--my dad would say, “Well, we won’t have no chestnuts this year. All the trees is dying over there.” So, we knew right then that we wouldn’t get any chestnuts, and that’s about all I ever remember about--that’s a long time ago, you see. [laughs] I’m eighty-five years old. I’d say I was maybe ten years old when it was doing that.

BB: Do you remember at all what the mountain would look like before the chestnut got blighted. Like, what those chestnuts trees would look like when they were blooming on the--?

EW: Oh yeah, they kind of got a white bloom on a little ol’ stem like that, and then the burrs would come on each limb there, and most of the time, the burrs had three to four chestnuts inside them. I don’t know whether they all had that many or not, but that what’s we used to figure we’d get, about two or three to four chestnuts out of each burr. I think we used to burn them burrs. They’d burn pretty good in the fireplace, so we’d burn them to help heat the house.

BB: I’ve not heard anybody say that, so that’s interesting to hear.

[interrupts] So--oh, go ahead.

EW: See, that’s partly wood, I guess those burrs is. And, they’d burn good. And those chestnuts, they’d burn too. They got a oil in them. If you put them in there, they’ll blaze up.

BB: Some people would say that in some places, one in every four trees would have been a chestnut. Do you think that chestnuts grew that thick around here?
EW: No, no. They was about--it was two different places down here on the Brasher place. I don’t remember any over here in front of where we lived. Down there, pretty close to the far end of the Brasher place down there. Best I remember they was ten or twelve trees there, and then up a little further on the bluff there, they was four or five trees. That’s the way I remember it now. Of course, at one time they was probably a lot more than that. When I was a kid, we’d go over there, and we’d see the chestnut logs laying there different places. Squirrels used to eat them things too.

BB: So, about what year would the blight have come through?

EW: I’d say about 1930 or 31. Somewhere along in there. I think that’s about right.

BB: You said you remember your dad telling you about it, but do you remember anybody else talking about the blight? And how did people feel? Were they afraid, were they sad, but it’s not that big of a deal? How did people feel?

EW: Well, people didn’t know what was happening. Just certain trees were dying, and they didn’t know what was causing it. I guess the county agent or somebody told them that it was a blight that was probably killing--had the county agents that would come out and check them out, I think. We didn’t know what was killing them until somebody came out and told us.

BB: Do you think people were afraid or not really that scared?

EW: No, I don’t think they was afraid, but I guess it worried the people for people enjoyed the chestnuts, and they didn’t know what was happening to it.

BB: Were there very many people around here that the loss of the chestnut would have affected their--would have had a negative economic impact?

EW: Well, I wouldn’t think so. There wasn’t that many people that gathered the chestnuts. We was all in the same boat; we didn’t have anything. We raised what we eat, everything like that, but nobody had any money hardly.

BB: Why were there only some people that would gather chestnuts?
EW: Well, chestnut trees wasn’t everywhere. These two patches over here was the only two that I ever knew about. Of course, I’m sure there was other places, plenty of them, I’m sure. I think they used to grow back in the ridges--I call ridges off the mountain. There used to be a few back there. I think on the Allen Copland place back there. He had a couple--he might have planted the trees, I don’t know. But I think I remember he had some back there in his field kind of. He was taking care of them, I think.

BB: Could you pick chestnuts that were on somebody else’s property, or would you have to ask that person?

EW: Well, back then it didn’t make much difference. Back then, if somebody come across--we had a watermelon patch. If he wanted a watermelon, he usually got it, and eat it, and went on about his business. Nobody said nothing about it.

BB: That’s kind of surprising.

EW: And if we went across a fellow’s watermelon patch, we got one and got out the end and eat it. We didn’t mess with the rest of them. And if he come along, he just talk to us, of course. But Dad caught somebody stealing a watermelon one time, and he had his shot gun with him. The fellow was eating one when he--Papa watched him get it. He had two of them, two watermelons, so when he sat down and started eating them, my dad walked up with his shot gun on his shoulder and asked him--sort of talked to him. He didn’t know the man. Asked him how the watermelon was. “Oh, it’s good.” He ate half of it, and he got up to leave. Dad said, “Well, that’s pretty good watermelon. Why don’t you just eat that other half?” So, he sat down and eat it, and then he started leaving. He said, “You better get this watermelon. You might want some watermelon tomorrow.” So, he made him take the watermelon on with him. [laughs]

BB: So it wasn’t a big deal. People just shared all that stuff like that. Wow, that’s nice. That’s interesting. That’s not the way it is today.

EW: No, they steal it from you today, yeah.

BB: Did anybody try to do anything to stop the blight around here?

EW: Not that I know of. Not that I know of.
BB: So, they just knew that it was going to be gone and so there was nothing they could do?

EW: I think what they thought [was] they’d probably die out, and they’d come back. But they didn’t. I don’t know where is any place in the United States where they have any original chestnut trees or not.

BB: There’s a few places here and there. There’s trees here and there that, for whatever reason, have the blight, but they can still produce nuts and are still alive. But there are very few.

EW: Seems like I was reading somewhere or heard it up in West Virginia on some mountain up there that they had found a few original chestnut trees.

BB: I don’t doubt it. That’s probably true. I have not heard that myself, but that’s probably true.

EW: A fellow told me, I guess, ten or fifteen years ago that down on Channel mountain down yonder that there was a chestnut tree down there, and he said, “This fall I’ll take you and show it to you.” But the man died between then, and I never did get to go see it.

BB: Do you hear--are there many people that talk about chestnut anymore? Do you ever mention it?

EW: No, most of this generation don’t know a thing about it.

BB: Did you have any kids?

EW: Two boys.

BB: Did you ever tell them anything about chestnut?

EW: I guess I did. I don’t remember what I told them. They know what they are. I used to buy some in the store, and we’d boil them. As far as wild ones, they don’t know anything about them, but they do know that I’ve got some trees growing here on the place. They’ll have the place one of these days when we pass on.

BB: So, do you know anything about the restoration effort--what people are trying to do to bring the tree back?
EW: Well, I talked to that fellow up in Vermont a little bit about it, and Larry Brasher has talked to me a little bit about it. But other than that, I don’t know where they have any around here or where they’re trying to restore them or not.

BB: I don’t know about around here exactly. So, the Chestnut Foundation, which is based up in Vermont, they’re trying to get this tree that’s fifteen sixteenths American and one sixteenth Chinese. And that one sixteenth Chinese is the blight resistance, and so, for the last twenty years, they’ve been putting a lot of energy into creating this blight-resistant tree. And they’re about at the point where they have it, and so they’re ready to start producing these blight-resistant trees and then start thinking about how to get them back across their original landscape, you know.

So, one question I’ve been asking people is: Do you think that it’s important to restore the chestnut tree? Do you think that’s a good idea?

EW: I would like to see it restored. That’s why I bought chestnut trees and tried to restore them here.

BB: Why do you want to see it restored?

EW: I just always enjoyed the chestnut trees and the chestnuts, and I love to boil them and eat them. [laughs]

BB: Do you think people will use the chestnuts and the tree and the wood and all--or the nuts and the wood and everything? Do you think they’ll use them in the same way that they did back when you were a kid?

EW: Well, I don’t know about that. It’ll take a long time to get that enough wood to do anything. Several years. I don’t know how long it takes a chestnut tree to grow. I’ve got one over there. I don’t know how old it is--seven, eight years old. It might be twenty-five, thirty feet tall, and this is the first year it’s got the burrs up on it. I saw it blooming, and I just wondered if it was going to have--I don’t know where there will be any chestnuts in there or not. I don’t know where somebody will pollinate itself or not.
BB: I don’t think they’ll pollinate themselves. There has to be another tree within a certain area--

EW: Well, if it’s a Chinese chestnut, there’s two or three right up and down the road here. There’s Chinese chestnut that I know of.

BB: They can cross with Chinese, so that could happen.

EW: Well, bees will pollinate them.

BB: Uh-huh.

When you think of the people who live on your street here, on your road, do you think people around here know about chestnut and would help bring it back? Or do people not even know about it or care?

EW: I doubt people would even care about it, to tell you the truth about it, but they might. They might be somebody that cared about it.

BB: Do you think they don’t care about it just because they don’t care about trees, or do you think if they knew about it, they might be interested in it?

EW: If they knew about it, they might be interested in it. People not like they used to. People used to take interest in stuff and do the best they could to get it to grow back. But now they’ll order it from the store or something and think nothing about it.

BB: So, would you have any advice or are there any hopes or fears or concerns you would have about trying to bring back the chestnut tree? Any problems you can see them having, or just advice you would give them?

EW: I just hope they can get and restore them. I would like to see that, but I don’t know. It takes several years to get enough to falt the whole United States. [laughs] Of course--don’t they have a Western chestnut tree that grows out west?

BB: They might. I know that the American chestnuts doesn’t have, traditionally have a native habitat out west, but I know that they will grow out there.
EW: I read or heard on TV, one, that some of the western states had chestnuts that they call them Western chestnuts. I don’t know.

BB: I don’t know anything about that. Dr. Craddock might know about that, but I have not heard about that, but it could be true. I don’t doubt it. If you heard it on the news, I bet there’s some truth to it.

Well, that’s about all my questions. Are there any other stories you remember about—or even stories that you’ve heard other people tell you? Your Dad ever told you about any cutting down chestnut trees or anything like that?

EW: Well, no. I don’t remember anything else I don’t reckon. So, I guess that’s about it.

BB: Yeah. Well, that was great. Thank you. That was some good stories, and a lot of new information that I didn’t have already.