Chestnut Memories

Oral History Transcript

Bethany BAXTER

Interviewer: Bethany Baxter

Interviewee: Geneva Ison

Interview Location: Kingdom Come Creek, Letcher County, Kentucky

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Transcriber: Bethany Baxter

Audio File: Geneva Ison, 6.16.08.wav
BB: no, it’s hard to find people who really remember it. So first I have to make this statement and tell you what I’m doing

GI: ok

BB: 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 attained in these interviews will be retained and made available for future use in efforts to promote a better understanding of the role of American chestnut in Appalachian culture. So now I have to ask, have you signed the participant identification and release agreements?

GI: yes

BB: great, ok, so first will you just tell me your name, and when you were born, and where you are from.

GI: I’m Geneva Ison, and I was born at Ice, Kentucky in 1924.

BB: So where is that for someone- like I know where Ice, Kentucky is but what if ... how would you describe it if someone didn’t know where that was. If someone from Tennessee was asking you?

GI: It was a coal camp at that time, my Dad worked in the mines there. And it’s about 8 or 10, maybe not that much, miles from Whitesburg, City of Whitesburg.

BB: ok, good. So what else can I ask. Oh, where did you go to school?

GI: Kingdom Come Creek up here.

BB: ok, and we’re in Letcher County, Letcher County Kentucky.

GI: yeah, Letcher County Kentucky.

BB: ok, so first question I’m going to ask is do you remember the chestnut yourself at all?

GI: yeah, yes.

BB: And what do you remember about it?
GI: I remember when we were small, I was probably, maybe 9 or 10 years old, I’m not sure about that but I was real small, and we’d get out there and get them, and crack the hull off of them, and bring them in, sometimes we’d roast them, sometimes we’d eat them raw.

BB: Describe to me how you would gather them, or, would you walk up the hill or how would you gather them.

GI: yeah, they was all up in the hills, we would just take us a bag or something and put a few it in, we didn’t gather many, but we’d gather a few, what we could.

BB: How did you crack to hull off of it.

GI: With a rock (laughs). Usually if we had them at home we’d take the hammer and crack them out to eat, we’d take a rock and bust that hull off. It had stickers on it, it hurt, you know you couldn’t handle it.

BB: what would happen if you got them stuck in your hand?

GI: Why, it just stuck there and back out, it didn’t stay in.

BB: Do you remember your mom or dad, or aunts or uncles, or any of your family members ever telling you about chestnuts, or talking about them?

GI: Well they was a common thing at that time, nobody paid them much mind. They’d just gather them and eat them, throw them away or whatever. There were several of them then, and later on this disease came through and killed the trees.

BB: So, if we were to look... did they grow more on Kingdom Come than other places? Were there any special spots you’d go?

GI: just, it was a way high on the hill, around the corn field crops where we’d tend corn you know, then’s when we gathered them.

BB: Did anybody ever gather them to sell or trade with people at stores or anything?

GI: not that I know of here, they probably did other places maybe, but not here they didn’t.

BB: was it like, more boys would gather them than girls?

GI: Both of them, they all was...
BB: I’m going to pause this --- now its recording again. So, what did chestnuts taste like, or how would you roast them? Walk me through it from when you would pick them to when you would eat them, describe how that would go.

GI: We usually found them out in the woods, we’d have to go up in the hills and get them. Bring them home and crack the hull, it was stickers on it, it hurt you know, you couldn’t hardly handle them. Get that off and just lay them in the pan, and roast them easy. I don’t remember how long we did roast them. When the inside got heated through we’d eat them, and they were good.

BB: Did ever ... was it just kind of a snack or did you eat them as a meal?

GI: no, we just eat them...never did have them on the table to eat, we just eat them as they got out of the oven.

BB: Did you ever feed them to any livestock that you had?

GI: we didn’t here, no.

BB: some people have talked about how they’d turn their hogs out and let them go.

GI: yeah, I’ve heard of that. We didn’t, I mean, they kept their hogs all up, mom and dad did, here in the pen, until they got ready for slaughtering you know.

BB: So they’d feed them on corn?

GI: yeah.

BB: at that time had a lot of the trees been logged around here or was it still pretty covered in forest.

GI: It was pretty much covered in forest, yeah, it was. Until they cleared it all out and more people began to come in here and build houses, you know. They soon had this creek cleared out, and a lot of families lived on it. Had to put a schoolhouse in up there, and at one time there was about 100 children that went to school there.

BB: that’s amazing.

GI: it is. Because they lived up in these hollers, and all up and down the creek. There were a lot of people along here at that time.
BB: so when you were a kid did most people, were they farming... did most of their food come from what they would grow and farm, or was it food that they would buy from the coal company stores more?

GI: they bought what you couldn't raise, they raised everything, and they'd take corn to the mill. And they raised everything else until there wasn't much for them to buy. And there were hogs, hey had hogs and they slaughtered them for meat, and chickens, had eggs and chickens and (laughs) things like that.

BB: So how did you harvest the nuts and how did you store them? Did you ever store them over winter?

GI: the chestnuts? No, we didn't. I guess some people did but we never. We just eat what we found.

BB: Were there other kinds of forest nuts or anything out of the forest that that you’d ever sell or trade, for money?

GI: no. now we didn't, I don't know of anything.

BB: Didn't you say that you used to pick ginseng?

GI: yeah, now Gensing you didn't eat it you sold it. Sent it off, me and Comis used to gather it up, we'd mail off a matchbox full and get 8 or 10 dollars for it. It's a lot more than that now though. But we thought we was doing good you know.

BB: was there anything else out of the forest that you would actually sell for money besides Ginseng?

GI: I don't think so, I don't think there's anything. Berries, now grewed. We didn't sell them but now a lot of people would gather them and sell them. Now mom would put hers up for winter.

BB: DO you remember any buildings being made out of chestnut.

GI: I've heard of chestnut lumber or wood, but I don't know what they used it for. I don't know what they did.
BB: Do you remember anybody ever cutting down chestnut trees after the blight or before the blight?

GI: no, I don’t remember much about that. I think they just died mostly.

BB: were there any tanneries around town, that you remember. A tannery where they tan leather?

GI: no, they always mailed their packages off. These boys would all, on the creek, would go hunting and catch animals and skin them, and dry the hide, and they'd sell it, send it off.

BB: you know how you have all those sayings granny, your sayings, or the little mountain sayings and stuff. Were there any that were about chestnut trees, or do you remember any mention of chestnut in any old songs or sayings or anything like that?

GI: I don’t think I do. I don’t remember any.

BB: ok. Were there ever any chestnut gatherings, would people go gather them together or was it just something that you did by yourself or with a couple people?

GI: not that I know of. Everybody just got his own. Didn’t pay chestnuts much mind. Just the few we go to eat.

BB: did people ever take chestnuts with them to school to eat

GI: not that I know of. I never did see any up there.

BB: what did you take for lunch?

GI: milk and bread a lot. Sandwiches.

BB: Did you ever hear about the festival that they have over at the Kingdom Come Settlement School? They do a chestnut festival. Do you know anything about it?

GI: no I don’t

BB: I think its pretty small. I’m going to investigate that. So do you remember how old you were when the chestnut blight came through?

GI: not exactly, but I think about 9 or 10 or something like that, because I can remember them. it might have been 7 or 8, I don’t know. I was real young anyhow.
BB: What do you remember?

GI: we’d get out and we’d accidently, if trees was close, find them, even at school, you know. It would tickle us when we found them, we would sit down and cracked them, eat them.

BB: just raw?

GI: yeah, they were good.

BB: Why do you remember about the chestnut blight? What do you remember about it? People talking about it?

GI: Yeah, I just noticed everybody a talking about it and I got to noticing and it was turning black, spots on the bark of them, you know, and they finally died. I don’t know where it come from. Komos said Harding could tell you that.

BB: yeah I’ll ask Harding about it too. Did anybody ever try to do anything to stop the blight, to save the trees?

GI: I think I remember reading something, hearing people talk that they did, but I don’t know what it was or anything.

BB: was there a lot of lumbering that went on, or timber harvesting on Kingdom Come Creek?

GI: Not too much that I can remember. People would clear out a cornfield. Mom and Dad did up the hill over there. A big field, had it cleared and planted corn in it, beans.

BB: were there any spots around, or any places where you would go, or that you knew of, where there were a lot of chestnut trees growing?

GI: no, it’d just be one here and over yonder where we were out playing or something, or up the woods. We’d run and see the chestnuts on the ground and know it was a chestnut tree.

BB: How were the chestnuts... Were they different looking than the other trees?

BI: I can’t hardly remember, I wouldn’t think so. Of course the leaves were different to tell you it was a chestnut tree. Of course, you’d find the chestnuts under it, but it was just among the other trees. So I don’t know.
BB: Ok. Lets see, so... did the loss of the chestnut have any direct economic impact on yall. In terms of how much you depended on in, and then it was gone.

GI: No, it didn’t bother us at all. We missed them, by not finding them out when we was playing, just a few. Everybody hated to see it fade away but that’s all I ever heard of the chestnuts being used or anything.

BB: Did anything replace the chestnuts for yall? After it was gone did you gather anything else?

GI: Hickory nuts, we gathered them.

BB: Did you gather hickory nuts more after the chestnuts were gone?

GI: yeah we picked up every one of them we could get. If we were out and didn't have nothing to put them in we couldn’t carry chestnuts. It hurt.

BB: well have you know anything about the restoration efforts they’re working on to bring the chestnut tree?

GI: I hadn’t heard it mentioned until you told me. I don’t know anything about it.

BB: do you think it’d be important to restore the chestnut tree?

GI: yeah, I’d like to see them come back, but I don’t know anything about it.

BB: why would you like to see it come back?

GI: well, just because its chestnuts I guess. And I’d say its good lumber too. I’ve heard of chestnut lumber but I don't know what they used it for or anything like that.

BB: did you have split rail fences around here?

GI: yeah, some. They didn’t have it like up and down the yard, but maybe the garden spot was fenced off.

BB: do you think people would use chestnut trees the same way today that they did back when you were growing up.

GI: I’d say they’d use it for lumber. And gather chestnuts too, I’d like to do that again.
BB: Do you think it’s an important to the culture? Do you think it’s an important symbol of the culture around here?

GI: Well all these old people remember them well. Yeah, I’d say so.

BB: Are there any other kinds of trees that you’ve seen that have gone away that you think would be important to bring back too?

GI: I don’t know of any, by name now.

BB: just the chestnuts you think?

GI: yeah.

BB: Do you have any concerns or advice for people trying to bring the tree back?

GI: Well I don’t know what they could do, but I’d like to see it come back. It was interesting. But I don’t know what they could do to make it grow here, if it died out, had a disease it might never be any use anymore.

BB: Some people have talked about how boys would stomp burrs with their feet to show how tough they were. Did you ever see anybody do this?

BB: So did you and your brother go out gather them together or would you go by yourself?

GI: Sometimes we’d be out playing and find a tree, we’d gather together, and other than that by ourselves.

BB: so you just took as much as you could carry, or did you put them in a bag?

GI: yeah we didn’t take a bag to put them in. Sometimes we’d take rocks and hull them.

BB: could you describe to me what they looked like, the nuts? Or what they tasted like?

GI: I don’t know what they tasted like, they were different than any other nuts. They were good though. And I don’t know, they were a pretty good-sized nut. A round ball like an apple, and you cracked that open and it fell apart on both sides. That’s about all I remember of them, just cracking them with a rock, was that.

BB: do you think people would, like it could be a cash crop for people?
GI: I never heard of that. It probably somewhere, but I don’t know anything about it. Not around here I don’t think they did, but there wasn’t I don’t think that much of them, as far as gathering up that many.

BB: Do you think people in town would gather up as much as people who lived out here.

GI: I don’t know, I doubt it though. Just mostly people out on the farms and things.

BB: are there any places around here that are named after chestnut like chestnut mountain or chestnut hill?

GI: Not that I know of right here.

BB: Ok, I think that’s about it. Thanks for doing this interview, granny. I appreciate it.

GI: why you're welcome. I didn't know much but I helped....